

At Home in the City by Alan Power

At Home in the City: Domestic Architecture for Challenging Urban Sites
Reviewed by **Félicie Krikler**

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This book reframes the housing crisis not simply as a matter of numbers but as a question of how and where we build within already dense urban environments, Félicie Krikler writes

Before turning to the excellent new book by Alan Power, *At Home in the City: Domestic Architecture for Challenging Urban Sites*, it is worth recalling a short-lived planning experiment in south London.

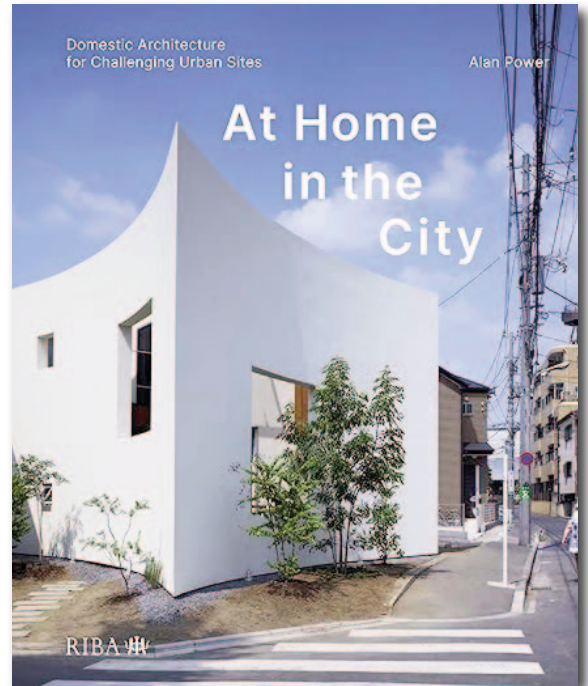
In 2019, Croydon council introduced its Suburban Design Guide (SDG), a set of rules intended to guide homeowners, developers and architects building on and densifying small suburban plots. The initiative did not last long. Following political change and local backlash, the guidance was revoked in 2022.

Yet a recent report by the think-tank Centre for Cities suggests the experiment was far from a failure. Around 2,000 homes were delivered under the guidelines and the organisation estimates that, if similar policies were applied across London, they could enable nearly 6,000 additional homes each year.

In other words, almost 10 per cent of the capital's annual housing target could be met through modest developments of six to 10 homes on sites that currently contribute very little to overall supply. This context makes *At Home in the City* feel particularly timely.

Alan Power's book reframes the housing crisis not simply as a matter of numbers but as a question of how and where we build within already dense urban environments. In the introduction, the author argues that small, difficult sites can "offer a genuine contribution to the housing crisis that is prevalent everywhere".

The point resonates strongly in the UK, where debates around



housing delivery are increasingly entangled with issues of land scarcity, environmental protection, viability and the limits of suburban expansion.

The book focuses on infill plots, backland development, narrow or awkward sites and the reuse of previously developed land. These overlooked fragments of the city are often dismissed as too complicated to develop.

However, through inventive design responses their specific constraints become opportunities that define homes (via this person called "architect") which are spatially inventive, characterful and culturally rooted in their context.

Power illustrates this through 25 detailed international case studies organised across six thematic chapters. The first, *The Threshold*, explores how domestic architecture negotiates the transition between street and home. *Pushing the Boundaries* looks at projects inserted into particularly challenging urban conditions such as tight corners, shared walls and complex relationships with neighbours.

The third chapter, *Leftover Spaces*, feels especially relevant in the current debate around space standards. Here, the projects demonstrate how careful planning and inventive layouts can make every square metre work harder. The result is often homes that feel richer and more engaging than conventional layouts. Constraints in these examples produce not compromise but delight.

In *Finding Nature*, the focus shifts to windows, views and the delicate balance between urban life and its connection to nature; a relationship that often defines the very nature and character of the home. *Retrofit* then highlights projects where buildings once >>>

RIGHT:
Common Ground: Duikklok
Apartments, Tilburg, The
Netherlands
Source: Tim van de Velde



Félicie Krikler is head of residential at Barr Gazetas

>>> considered obsolete or condemned have been transformed into exemplary homes through adaptation and reuse.

The final chapter, Common Ground, broadens the scope to small-scale, multi-dwelling developments, showing how infill projects can achieve meaningful density while still supporting privacy, individuality and neighbourly interaction.

Beyond its policy relevance, *At Home in the City* is also simply a compelling architectural read. The projects, which might be described as "urban one-home wonders", come from around the world and demonstrate an impressive range of spatial ingenuity.

Which brings us back to Croydon's abandoned small sites policy and the wider debate about incremental urban densification. If these kinds of projects can produce thoughtful, contextual and often beautiful homes: what exactly are we afraid of?

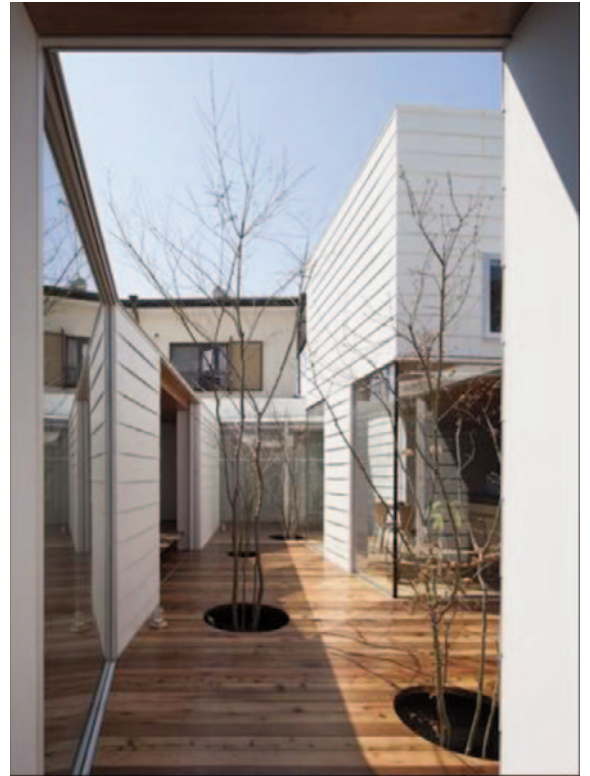
Why are opportunities for homeowners, architects and small-scale developers to build on modest plots not seen as good enough, and therefore not encouraged as a priority? And why do we assume that meaningful housing delivery must always come from large developers and large sites?

My view is that political laziness is massively hindering progress, with the result that thousands of context-friendly, characterful homes are simply not being delivered.

Perhaps, as Alan Power's book suggests, the path to better cities lies partly in the opposite direction, by empowering smaller interventions that stitch communities together one project at a time. The case studies in *At Home in the City* show clearly that, when these small interventions are done well, they can be truly brilliant. ■

First published in Building Design, with kind consent

BELOW:
Finding Nature: VH House,
Hanoi, Vietnam
Source: Hoang Le



ABOVE:
Pushing Boundaries: Sky Catcher House, Atsugi-Shi, Japan
Source: Hiroshi Ueda

BELOW
Thresholds: 10 Redmans Road, London E1
Source: Hufton + Crow



Lost London

From Crystal Palace to Heston Airport, a history in 25 Missing Buildings

Paul Knox traces the history of London from the Great Fire to the present day through some extraordinary buildings. He explores surprising and unusual locations in the city

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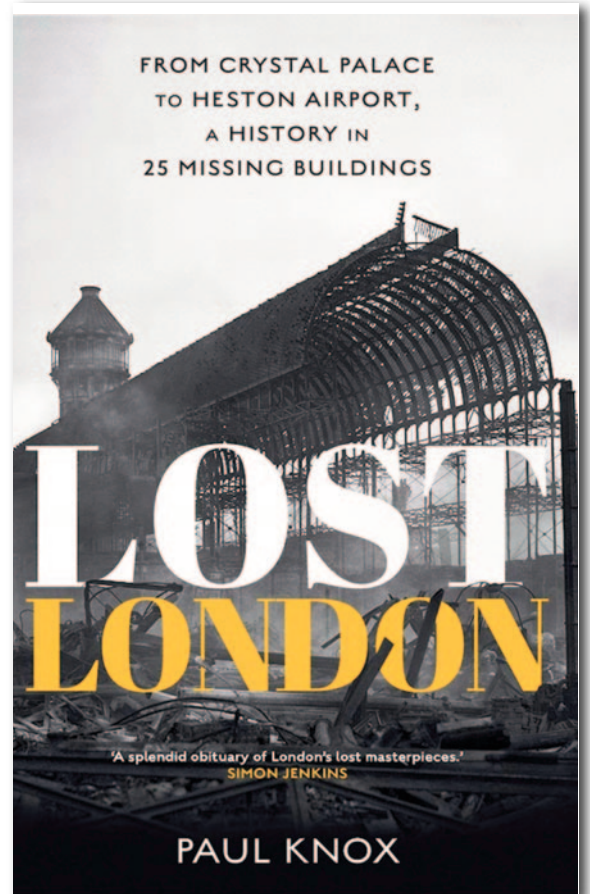
London has been rebuilt and reshaped perhaps more than any other city over its two-millennia history. From the construction of the Underground to slum clearance and the Blitz, buildings have long been damaged or demolished to pave way for the new. Today, demolition is big business, and around 3500 buildings are destroyed each year, most of which are social housing.

Paul Knox traces the history of London from the Great Fire to the present day through twenty-five lost buildings. Knox explores surprising and unusual locations in the city's history, like the Necropolis Station in Waterloo used by funeral parties traveling to a burial ground in Surrey. We see historic landmarks, like Christ Church Greyfriars and the Crystal Palace, as well as everyday places like the White Horse pub in Poplar and a housing estate in Hackney. This is a fascinating study of London's restless landscape, showing how conservation has changed over 400 years.

Preface by the author

One of my earliest childhood memories (from the early 1950s) is of the fenced-off bomb sites in our neighbourhood that were strictly out of bounds for us as kids. Covered with fireweed (rosebay willowherb) in the summer, the ruins were authentications of adults' stories about the Blitz. Within fifteen years or so, most of the sites had been cleaned up or redeveloped, occasionally leaving ghostly outlines of lost buildings on the gable-end of undamaged, next-door properties. Most of the sites had been filled in, sometimes sympathetic in character to surviving neighbours, sometimes intrusive or jarring. But buildings are lost and replaced for all sorts of reasons, all the time. As someone with an academic interest in urban development, I have learnt to see buildings - old, new or lost - in context of successive phases of growth and change.

All are products of the prevailing political economy, and all



become living histories. Together, their stories add up to a history of an entire city. This book is an attempt to bring such a perspective to a broad readership.

My approach has been informed not only by archival and field work but also by my involvement with design professionals, builders, developers, amenity groups and community groups.

Office visits, site visits and informal conversations have helped enormously. I am especially indebted to Christine Wagg, the Historian at the Peabody Trust, for assistance with archival material. I am also indebted to Jo Godfrey, at Yale University Press, for helping to distil the idea into a history told through the lenses of a few selected buildings, though the responsibility for the selections is mine. It was a challenging but fascinating task, given the history of London's development. In the end, there was no room for some of London's most widely lamented lost buildings, such as the General Post Office, St Martin's Le Grand; aristocratic mansions like Devonshire House, Piccadilly, and Dorchester House, on Park Lane; the Foundling Hospital, Bloomsbury; the Royal Bethlem Hospital, Southwark; the Coal Exchange, John Soane's Bank of England building, Brewers' Hall, the Clothworkers' Hall and the Haberdashers' Hall in the City. (extract).

>>>



11 Euston Arch, Marylebone, demolished 1962.

PAUL KNOX is an expert in the social and architectural history of London. Originally from the UK, he is now University Distinguished Professor at Virginia Tech. He is the author of numerous books, including London: A History of 300 Years in 25 Buildings, Metroburbia and Cities and Design.

>>> Some descriptions of featured buildings

Millbank Penitentiary, Westminster 1821-92

The prison that once stood on the left bank of the Thames between today's Vauxhall and Lambeth Bridges represented a new regime of law and order. Amid the unsettling transition to a rapidly industrialising and urbanising society it was a decisive response to demands for a greater degree of social control. At the same time, it was an expression of reformist ideals about proportionality in sentencing and punishment.

Resolving these very different impulses drew, in turn, on two very different philosophies: the metaphysics of evangelical Christianity and the calculated rationality of Utilitarianism, 'fused together as the joint justification for a new institution of pain and suffering: the penitentiary! Millbank Penitentiary was the first of its kind, a place where pain and suffering were intended not only as punishment but also as context for the personal transformation of the incarcerated. Its ominous, fortress-like appearance was fearsome, and its internal regime did not disappoint. Built at great cost, surrounded by controversy and dogged by difficulties, Millbank nevertheless showed what might work (and what would definitely not) in terms of prison design and administration.

Columbia Market, Bethnal Green 1869-1958

Victorian market halls provided clean, regulated spaces for traders and a reliable, predictable environment for customers.

Yet in London a strong tradition of street trading and street markets meant that new, purpose-built retail markets were slow to make an appearance. Columbia Market was intended to redress this deficiency: a landmark philanthropic project designed to establish a frontier of urban modernity in the heart of the East End, providing local households with an efficient, clean and orderly setting in which to compare prices and produce, make purchases



18 Bird's-eye view of Borough High Street, 1885.



6 John Nash's stucco terraces, Regent Street, demolished 1895-1927.

and enjoy a regular round of sociability, free from any of the disreputable characters that tended to hang around informal street markets. An enormous Gothic structure that architectural critics compared in scale and spectacle to Westminster Abbey, it was paired with a housing project, Columbia Square, that was designed to provide affordable, sanitary housing for even the poorest inhabitants of Bethnal Green, conceived with the best of paternalistic intentions.

Kensington Town Hall, Kensington High Street 1880-1982

Kensington Town Hall stood on Kensington High Street for 102 years. Its history reflected London's changing social geography and the development of West London, and of northern Kensington in particular. It also reflected the evolution of London's administrative framework and the energy of London's maturing political economy after the Reform Act of 1832 (which basically gave the vote to middle-class adult males, shifting the balance of local power away from middle-to-upper-class Anglican Conservatives towards middle-class Nonconformist Liberals).

It was all part of the Victorian metanarrative of civic progress, carried forward through a variety of public institutions whose civic buildings were tacitly understood by Victorians as symbols of progressive change and icons of local identity. Like schools, libraries and galleries, town halls served as municipal flagships, their symbolism 'comprehensible to both the ratepaying public and the public which daily used the buildings'.

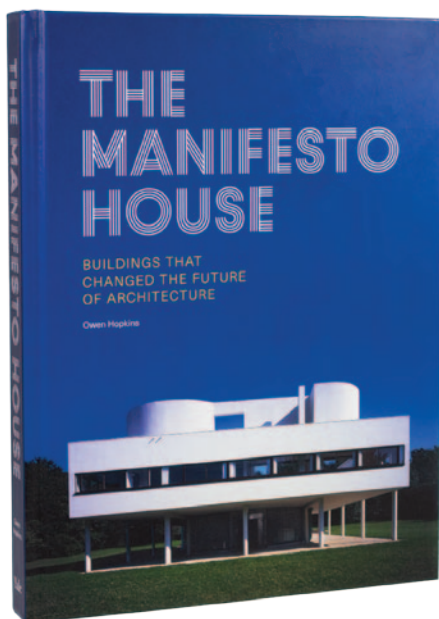
Firestone Factory, Brentford 1928-80

The Firestone factory is best known as a landmark case in the history of Britain's conservation movement. The façade of its administration block was a prominent feature of the 'Golden Mile' of the Great West Road in Brentford. Less has been written about the rest of the factory complex, which was an important example of the Garden Factory movement of the interwar period, and a significant instance of the 'daylight factories and new production methods that underpinned the transformation of London's industrial structure and its metropolitan economic geography. More generally, the Firestone factory was symbolic of the introduction of the mass automobile that transformed interwar London, and of the beginning of American corporate influence in British industry.

The interwar period saw a new phase of industrialisation 'based on light' (that is, electrically powered) manufacturing: what the Barlow Report later characterised as a 'new economic era'. The relative economic prosperity of the London region supported the consumption of a new range of mass consumer products. ■

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