

The constant gardener

With the green city at the heart of a new exhibition at the Garden Museum, **Christopher Woodward** surveys the latest battleground in a 200-year-old contest between the green and the grey

I have cycled past the Heygate Estate in London a hundred times and never wanted to go inside: all you see from the Old Kent Road is a cliff of grubby concrete and lifeless glass. The estate is a complex of brutalist high-rise slabs completed in 1974. The residents of 1,200 flats have been re-housed by Southwark Council in preparation for the estate's demolition, but teenagers come back to hang out in their old neighbourhood. We hear a window smash; a police van flashes onto the estate, and figures scarp across the walkways in the sky. Then the estate is silent again. It's like a film set. It is a film set: Brad Pitt has shot his new zombie movie here.

We have come to see 'London's secret forest'. And none of us can believe it. In the centre of the Heygate is a wood of mature, tall, thrilling trees – historic plane trees beside those planted in the early 1970s and now scraping their branches against the windows. The traffic and squalor of Elephant and Castle dissolve into a leafy jungle.

"We're going to lose all of this," a local resident announces angrily, and hands around the prospectus issued by Southwark Council and its partner, the developer Lendlease. It is a thesaurus of developer-speak in 2011: consultation and

sustainability, mixed use and market places, Boris Bikes and wildlife zones. The language is clean, packaged, professional and characterless. Reading it is like eating soap. And, quickly, you taste something odd.

As a historian I am mildly irritated. The name of the architect has been wiped away and we are told that in the early decades of the 20th century life was great for most residents of Elephant and Castle. It wasn't. Read Charlie Chaplin's autobiography for a story of the slum. But this is really about the trees. Yes, the flats should be demolished, but what will happen to this precious urban jungle? The consortium promises to "work with high-value clusters of trees within the site where possible", to "ensure there is no net loss of trees within the wider area". The group is sceptical, given that 1,200 high-rise flats must become 3,300 low-rise homes. New trees will replace the old trees, which will be felled. But these will be 'architect's trees', as small and spindly as pencils or angle-poise lamps.

The trees around us tonight are real trees. Real trees are thick and knobby. Young couples lean against them, and old ladies sit on benches to watch the noiseless drop of conkers. Their branches sigh, sing and groan in the wind.

They scrape against the windows of children's bedrooms and terrify then befriend them. Real trees take us back into the ancestral rhythms of our past. They have thirsty roots, and drop wet, slippery leaves. Real trees are what people love.

The Heygate is the latest battleground in a two-century-old contest between the green and the grey. Nine times out of ten, green has lost, with heroic exceptions such as the Garden Cities of Letchworth and Welwyn, and the green belt, or 1970s projects such as Janet Jack's landscape on the Alexandra Road Estate in Camden. It is about whether spaces will be squared off for square footage or given to plants. But it is also a challenge to the values of nature: spontaneity, seasonality, physicality and health.

The 1970s was the last age of heroic aspiration in the city. The door is again half-ajar. I am new to this dialogue, and not a designer, but isn't this the moment for landscape architects to show what could be achieved if we started with the landscape? Naive, perhaps, in the face of Lendlease number-crunching, but then Ebenezer Howard was mocked as a hopeless utopian 100 years ago.

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PHOTOGRAPH: PAUL STUART



To accompany the Garden Museum's exhibition *From Garden City to Green City*, the Landscape Institute, in collaboration with the Twentieth Century Society, is running an autumn lecture series called *Urban Landscapes in the Twentieth Century*. We asked each of the five speakers to capture their thoughts in writing and have published their essays over the following pages.

01. The sharing of great things

David Davidson

02. Inventing the public realm

Roland Jeffery

03. Landscapes for leisure

Ken Worpole

04. Is this it?

Sarah Gaventa

05. A question of taste

Tim Waterman