

many hundreds of design students telling me in their crits how their designs will look, feel or what they will be like to live in or use. The natural and perfectly understandable inexperience of the design student means that quite often they are just plain wrong. An architectural student may intend a space to be light and airy or to achieve some particularly dramatic lighting effect, but since he or she has no experience of actually creating such a space their design may be a great disappointment if constructed. All too often these days design students, and some of their tutors who should know better, are content to have the ideas without testing the realisation.

Quite recently an architectural student in my school had drawn an absolutely delightful section through a most imaginative and atmospheric space. Unfortunately the lighting effects shown on the drawing would have been quite impossible from the relatively small aperture he proposed constructing in the roof. This student described his work with considerable verbal skill and no little advocacy but had deceived himself and some of his critics through both his drawn and word pictures of the design.

Such students can be taken to the laboratory or made to do some calculations and be confronted with the results. However, what becomes rather more problematic is when the image in the designer's mind is about some form of social reality. Another architecture student had presented a housing scheme at a crit which I did some years ago. He described how he had separated pedestrians from vehicles which he said would drive into what he called a 'mews court' surrounded by dwellings. His drawings confirmed this showing a leafy sunlit view with a lady carrying a parasol being escorted across some cobbles to a vintage car by a man wearing plus fours, a cap and gauntlet driving gloves. The image then was of genteel behaviour, traditional values and a leisurely lifestyle. The jury became suspicious and asked if furniture lorries could get in and turn round. He had not checked this. We asked if he had thought how to protect the trees from damage by children playing football. He thought the children would play elsewhere. We asked if he thought the residents of his scheme were really likely to own vintage Bentleys or perhaps old Ford Cortinas propped up on bricks while undergoing major repair. He thought that would not matter, so we asked why he had drawn the Bentley. Gradually the whole image conjured up by his 'mews court' began to unravel, but he was very reluctant to see this. He was after all firmly caught in the image trap. He could no longer look critically at his work to test the realisation of his image.

Unfortunately such images are not the exclusive preserve of students. In Sheffield we had three major housing schemes constructed

on the same principle in the 1960s. Park Hill was, we were told, based on a 'street' form of access, it was just that these were 'streets in the air' (Fig. 13.10). So famous were these schemes that a considerable amount has been written about them not least by their original architects. They were highly influential and many architects visited and studied them, while English Heritage now believes the only remaining scheme to be worthy of protection through 'listing'.

Jack Lynn in describing the 'streets in the air', argued that Le Corbusier's ideas of Unité d'Habitation with their internal circulation were inappropriate in England:

Centuries of peace and a hundred years of housing reform in this country had given us the open street approachable from either end and off which every house was entered directly through its own front door . . . Does gregariousness depend on the open air? Why is there so little conversation in the tube trains and lifts? Are there sociable and anti-social forms of access to housing?

(Lynn 1962)

These architects had apparently convinced themselves and their clients that they were indeed constructing 'streets in the air'. So convinced were they that they extended the image to describe the communal refuse chutes as 'the modern equivalent of the village pump'. Again the imagery is one of a quiet bucolic lifestyle in which there is a community spirit. Sadly the reality was rather different. The front doors may have opened off the decks, but the living spaces all looked the other way. The 'streets' were one sided with

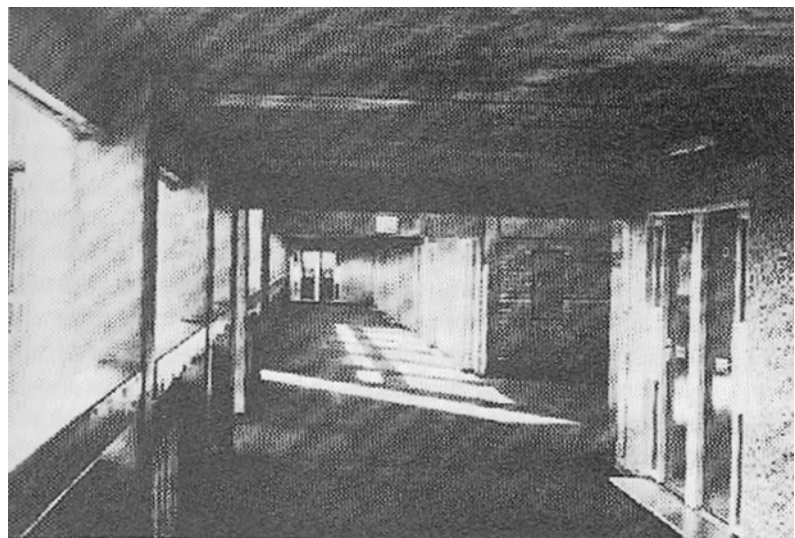


Figure 13.10
'Streets in the air' or an example of the image trap?