Built historiography in Glasgow’s New Gorbals – the Crown Street Regeneration Project

Florian Urban

In 2000, the Crown Street Regeneration Project in Glasgow’s Gorbals was completed after a master plan by Piers Gough of the London firm CZWG - Campbell, Zogolovitch, Wilkinson, Gough (Fig. 1). The Commission for Architecture and the Built Environment (CABE) commended the project as a ‘highly livable neighbourhood with well-placed community facilities and attractive public spaces.’

Built on symbolically contested grounds that were previously occupied by the Gorbals tenements (1870s-1960s) and the high-rise Hutchesontown flats (1960s-1990s), the new development is a textbook example of neo-traditional design. Approximately 2000 residential units and numerous commercial spaces are accommodated in block perimeter buildings that enclose central courtyards and abound with historical references.

Figure 1: Crown Street Regeneration Project, looking north. Crown Street runs north-south in the middle of the picture, Laurieston Road is on the left side (photograph: Guthrie, courtesy CZWG).

The use of historic forms and quotes turn-of-the-twenty-first-century architecture has been the subject of numerous studies. Analyses have mostly focused on the operations of architectural meaning, as a linguistic or poetic expression of individual experience, in relation to program and function, as indebted to typological continuity, or in relation to the specificity of place. Little attention, however, has been dedicated to the historiographic dimension of such architecture, that is, its capacity to make a statement on the significance of past events and conditions.

The Crown Street Regeneration Project has to be deemed a form of built historiography that inscribes a harmonized account of the past into the urban fabric. Like a written narrative, plans and buildings convey specific ideas about the past. The concept of historiographic representation through non-textual media has been refined by historians such as Robert Rosenstone or Hayden White, who insist that in media such as film or photography the processes of condensation, displacement, symbolization, and qualification are essentially the same as in historiographic texts. The same applies to architecture. The Crown Street Regeneration Project is a medium of information that conveys a historic narrative through tropes and character types. The fact that their historiographic meaning is a secondary function – buildings, in contrast to texts, are in first place created to provide shelter – does not take away from their efficacy to represent the past.

By these standards, Crown Street’s historic representation is as truthful or untruthful as that of a historical novel whose author does not aim at an accurate representation of the facts but nevertheless conveys predications about the past. Such fiction, written or built, carries a historiographic potential nearly as powerful as that of a historic study, and the categorical line between both is hard to draw. Both are shaped representations of reality, which conveys historic facts in a selective, mediated, and essentially subjective form. And both are motivated by intentions – in the Crown Street Regeneration Project rather explicit ones, but essentially of the same kind as those of a historian who writes in the context of a particular power constellation.

---

8 White points out that ‘the historical monograph is no less ‘shaped’ or constructed that the historical film or historical novel’. Hayden White, ‘Historiography and Historiophoty,’ *American Historical Review* 93 n. 5 (December 1988), p. 1195
The historiographic dimension of the Crown Street Regeneration Project works on three levels. There is the site, which in various moments in the twentieth century came to signify the urban ‘other’ - the city’s underbelly of crime, plight, and misery – and which, as a result of both gentrification and architectural redesign, is now apparently pacified. There are carefully chosen historic references such as tenement façades, bay windows, underpasses, courtyards, and *rues corridors*, which communicate certain conceptions about recent history. And there is a municipal strategy for Glasgow’s economic revival, of which the re-writing of history is a part, and which, among others, makes use of the Crown Street redevelopment’s architectural imagery.

The site

The first aspect of the Crown Street’s historiographic dimension can only be understood in relation to the area’s social and architectural history. Crown Street lies on the south bank of the Clyde in the part of Gorbals neighbourhood known as Hutchesontown. Situated across the river from Glasgow’s historic centre, the Gorbals constitute a former suburb that was incorporated into the city in the 1840s (Fig. 2). At two moments in the twentieth century the area came to denominate a despicable other. In the early twentieth century, the local tenements – most had been built in the 1860s and 1870s – shared the lot of most of the city’s working class housing with regard to poverty, overcrowding and insalubrious conditions in conjunction with gang-related crime. In public opinion, however, the Gorbals were singled out as Glasgow’s most notorious slum. This perception was reinforced by popular novels set in the Gorbals underworld milieu. The ‘gloomy Glasgow’ trope has not lost its lure to date, as the many bestselling autobiographies show, which depict past life in the Gorbals as dismal and rough, but also intense and authentic.

The perception of the Gorbals in general and the Crown Street area in particular as Glasgow’s archetypal slum was by no means a function of its architecture or urban plan. The Crown Street area had been a middle-class suburb in the early 1800s, and only by the mid nineteenth century degraded into a working class neighbourhood characterized by the level of filth and overcrowding that was typical for the city’s poorer quarters. The wealthy origins were still reflected in features such as the extraordinary width of Crown Street, the stately façades and the superior sanitation of many buildings. In the 1870s, the Gorbals had also been targeted by the City Improvement Trust, whose slum clearance policy did little to improve the dwelling conditions of the working classes, but nevertheless resulted in local interventions of widened streets and improved building standards. It is thus safe to

---


say that compared to other Glasgow neighbourhoods in the early twentieth century the misery and distress of many Gorbals’ residents was only to a small extent reflected in their buildings.\textsuperscript{11}

\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{figure2.jpg}
\caption{The old Gorbals – beginning of the demolitions in the early 1960s (photograph: George and Cordelia Oliver Archive, Glasgow School of Art).}
\end{figure}

\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{figure3.jpg}
\caption{The Gorbals in the early 1960s, probably Moffat Street looking south (photograph: George and Cordelia Oliver Archive, Glasgow School of Art).}
\end{figure}

\textsuperscript{11} Frank Worsdall, \textit{The Tenement, a Way of Life} (Edinburgh: Chambers 1979), pp. 77-78.
While the Gorbals were not the first tenement neighbourhood that was flattened as a result of the city’s post-war urban renewal program, it was definitely among the most prominent. Slated for demolition in the 1954 Glasgow Development Plan, most buildings were knocked down in the late 1950s and early 1960s to clear the site for five new developments named Hutchesontown-Gorbals A, B, C, D, and E. \(^{12}\) In an area approximately three times as big as today’s Crown Street redevelopment more than 7,500 tenement flats were knocked down and the majority of the approximately 27,000 residents dispersed. It is estimated that less than 25 percent of the former inhabitants eventually remained in the area. \(^{13}\)

![Figure 4: Construction of high-rises, Gorbals, 1960s (photograph: George and Cordelia Oliver Archive, Glasgow School of Art).](image)

The five developments fared quite differently with regard to their subsequent reputation, but as a whole their image was overshadowed by the riches-to-rags story of the Hutchesontown C towers on Queen Elizabeth Square. Designed by the highly acclaimed Basil Spence, and accompanied by great media spectacle, the two 20-storey blocks with 400 flats were begun in 1961. \(^{14}\) Spence claimed to acknowledge certain aspects of collective life in the old tenements, albeit in a radically transformed way. Much quoted is his comment that on washing day, with the clothes hung on the balconies of the building’s prow-like front, the towers were to resemble ships in full sail and thus become a dignified connector between Glasgow’s glorious shipbuilding


\(^{13}\) The area is bordered by the River Clyde to the north, Waddell Street to the east, Caledonia Road to the south and Crown Street to the west. Paterson, Toby, ‘Basil Spence and the Creation of an After-Image’ in Rhona Warwick, ed., *Arcade – Artists and Place Making* (London: Black Dog, 2006), pp. 96-107, here pp. 100 and 105 [exhibition catalogue].

past and an equally splendid future. It was not meant to be. Soon after their completion the towers became a byword for crime, plight and misery much in the same way the tenements had been a decade earlier. Reports on assaults and muggings in the corridors alternated with findings about leaks and poisonous asbestos panels. Unlike the tenements, the high-rise towers did not give rise to a counter-narrative of solidarity and community spirit in light of dismal physical conditions, and to date there are few exculpatory statements about them, not even after their demolition in 1993.

Today’s Crown Street redevelopment is situated on the adjacent Hutchesontown E area, immediately west of the site on which Spence’s towers had stood. Beginning in 1968 the plots were built up with twelve 7-storey deck-access blocks with 759 flats and two 24-story point blocks with 384 flats. Dubbed ‘The Dampies’ by local residents, the deck-access blocks were soon plagued by black mould and rotting carpentry. They were demolished in 1987, while the point blocks remain to date. The new development flanks both sides of Crown Street and is bordered by Ballater Street to the north, Caledonia Road to the south, Laurieston Road to the west and Camden Terrace/Pine Place/Commercial Street to the east. The 18-hectare area is the most prominent of the New Gorbals developments, since Crown Street is the southern prolongation of High Street and Saltmarket – the north-south axis of medieval Glasgow – and thus situated in close proximity to Glasgow’s city centre across the river.

The location of the Crown Street flats is a key element in the new development, since it relates them to a repeated historic rupture connected with the last century’s most famous failed utopia. The past is inscribed in the site as a memory of alternating sequences of despair, hope, despair, and again hope. This is particularly in those contexts where the current design faces the two surviving Hutchesontown E point blocks (Fig. 05). The new buildings both conceal and reveal the towers, on the one hand incorporating them into a perimeter block structure, and on the other hand contrasting them with the new scale and thus reinforcing the impression of height and loftiness. Thus they recall not only the account that the towers failed, but also that their failure originated in the hubris of their utopian goals. At the same time, the location of the new development points favourably towards the pre-tower-block era,

---

17 A notable exception is Docomomo, which declared Spence’s demolished Queen Elizabeth Square towers ‘key Scottish monuments’ in 1993.
that is, the city’s industrial past, which is now increasingly being depicted as Glasgow’s golden age of economic prosperity.

**Neo-historical architecture**

Both plan and buildings of the new development convey a historical narrative. The prize-winning master plan by CZWG divides the area into nine blocks on both sides of Crown Street. Seven contain residential units and some groundfloor commercial spaces, the eighth is shared by a newly built shopping centre and the two remaining point blocks, and the ninth is to be built up with a parish church (design: ADF architects) and CZWG’s ‘landmark building’.

The residential buildings were designed by various architects, including Page and Park, Elder and Cannon, CZWG, and Hypostyle. Hypostyle also designed the master plan and various buildings for the adjacent Queen Elizabeth Square area. The design takes elements from various historic models. Also the perimeter block plans and similarity of heights were strictly observed, conveying an impression of unity like a late-nineteenth century neighbourhood.

History is written through specific and generic historical references. The specific references are local. Quotations mainly refer to Glasgow’s three-storey tenements from the late nineteenth century. An example in the building on the corner of Laurieston Road and Claythorn Circus (Fig. 6), where the rounded corner and the sandstone cladding resemble white sandstone tenements, or the red buildings on the north side of Old Rutherglen Road (Fig. 7), whose colour and aligned semi-circular oriel windows refer to similar designs from early 1900s red sandstone tenements (Fig. 8 and Fig. 9). Local references to Glasgow’s industrial era can also be read from some of the artworks applied onto the buildings: an iron welder on a Crown Street façade (Fig. 10) and a bas-relief with chimneys and ship parts on Claythorn Circus.

Figure 5: Crown Street commercial centre (2010), in the background the point blocks, built 1968 (photograph: author).
Figure 6: Crown Street Regeneration Project: Laurieston Road/Clayton Circus (photograph: author).

Figure 7: Crown Street Regeneration Project: Old Rutherglen Road (photograph: author).
Figure 8: Late-nineteenth-century tenements on Saltmarket, City Centre (photograph: author).

Figure 9: Late-nineteenth-century middle-class tenements on Sauchiehall Street, West End (photograph: author).
There are also numerous generic historical references. Neoclassical ingredients abound, including columns, pediments, and arches (Fig. 11). The commercial centre on Crown Street and Errol Gardens is framed by an arcaded sidewalk, and the underpass on Benny-Lynch-Court (Fig. 12), opening the way under a three-storey building into a courtyard named for the old Gorbals’ famous boxer, can be read as a by now generic signifier of peaceful enclosure similar to Karl Ehn’s 1930 Karl-Marx-Court in Vienna.

Despite the historical elements, both plan and buildings are significantly different from the pre-tower-block era. While the plan stresses Crown Street, once again, as the area’s central boulevard, the traditional order of streets is modified. The through traffic is diverted onto Laurieston Road, bypassing the new neighbourhood on the west and leaving the inner streets, including Crown Street, comparably quiet. The four southern blocks are laid out around an oval square inexistent in the pre-war plan, which features a playground and the ‘Gorbals New Park’. Streets are widened to allow for on-street parking.

Also in the inner parts of the block the historic pattern is adapted to contemporary needs. The semi-private courtyards, which were typical in many European industrial cities in the late nineteenth century, and which traditionally featured stables and workshops, are extended and structured: private gardens with terraces on the edges adjacent to the buildings, and a publicly accessible green space in the middle.
The historic models for the buildings clearly stem from Glasgow’s wealthy neighbourhoods such as Hillhead or Hyndland, and not from the narrow and cheaply built working class tenements. No narrow wynds and restricted backyards bear witness to the hardships of past every-day life, but rather spacious parks and squares flanked by tenement cladding. Also in other respects the historic references
are ‘improved’ and adapted to the taste of the contemporary middle-class. The buildings sport French windows reaching down to the floor and are stripped of stucco cornices and horizontal mouldings. Touches of colour unknown in the historic tenements were added, such as bright blue window frames and railings. And most importantly, the lower two floors of many buildings constitute maisonette apartments with interior stairwells, three or four bedrooms, its own front and back door, and a small rear garden in the inner part of the block. Traditional tenement plans with shared close and access from the common stairwell are only found on the second and third floors.

The most significant modification in the buildings is that the new Crown Street redevelopment, in contrast to both tenements and towers, was mostly planned for ownership rather than tenancy. The inclusion of maisonettes and quasi-private gardens is only one aspect. But also the design caters to a wealthier clientele susceptible to quality architecture. Marking a break with the egalitarian tradition of modernist apartments, the development shows a hierarchy of spaces that is also found, albeit less pronounced, in Glasgow’s late-nineteenth-century tenements. On Crown Street, the differences are enhanced. Corner buildings are designed as recognizable icons, such as Elder and Cannon’s ‘flying roof’ building (Fig. 13) on the northeast corner of Crown Street and Clayton Circus or the ‘buttress tower’ building on the east side of the oval square. The most prominent example is CZWG’s 12-storey ‘landmark building’ on Crown Street and Laurieston Road (Fig. 14).

Figure 13: Corner building on Crown Street and Clayton Circle, designed by Elder and Cannon (photograph: author).

---

20 Of 1,950 residential units, 1,270 are private-sector homes, 600 socially rented homes, and 80 student flats. See http://www.cabe.org.uk/case-studies/crown-street (accessed October 2010).
Planned for a wedge between both streets, the building would be widely visible, particularly for any visitor entering the neighbourhood from the city centre. Taking from both modernist tower design and local traditional gusset buildings, the designers claim references to ‘Scottish baronial buildings’ with regard to the cantilevered top of the tower. Thus, through both form and rhetoric they consciously break with working-class history and conjure an aristocratic cache aimed at the new middle class inhabitants.

As a consequence from both design and gentrification social life in the new development appears decidedly different from that in the old tenement neighbourhood (Fig. 15). Today’s Crown Street, unlike both the tenements and towers of the past, is characterised by middle-class families. The density of businesses and inhabitants is significantly lower than in the overcrowded Gorbals of a century ago. Although a mixed-use boulevard like its predecessor, the new Crown Street now irradiates peace and quietness rather than hectic bustle.

21 The developers claim that approximately 20 percent are former Gorbals residents. See http://www.cabe.org.uk/case-studies/crown-street (accessed October 2010).
The strategy of reinvention, adaptation, and improvement of historical models carries a historiographic message that stresses the accomplishments of the industrial period. The tenement references point to positive connotations of Victorian working-class life, namely the purported community spirit and the protective enclosure in a familiar every-day environment. The references to shipbuilding and early industrial construction signify quality and craftsmanship, in contrast to the standardization and mass production connected with the tower blocks. And the urban hierarchy of more and less significant buildings connotes local identification and the celebration of place rather than social tension. All three interpretations contrast with the way in which the late nineteenth century interpreted its own condition, and also with the prevailing interpretation during the 1950s and 1960s.

**Design as a development strategy**

Crown Street has to be seen in the context of Glasgow’s long-time image marketing efforts. In this context, design has been used as a signifier for urban regeneration. The list of landmark buildings that were built with direct or indirect support from the city council on the once decaying river bank is long and includes Norman Foster’s Clyde Auditorium (1997), BDP’s Science Centre (2001), David Chipperfield’s BBC Scotland Headquarters (2007), and Zaha Hadid’s Museum of Transport (to be completed in 2011). Assuming only a slightly less prominent location, the refashioning of the twice-discredited Gorbals falls into the strategy of boosting the urban economy and exorcising the spirits of decline through prominent architecture.
The strategic value is evident from many details. In order to redevelop the area the Glasgow City Council transferred ownership of the formerly municipal land to the Glasgow Development Agency (later renamed Scottish Enterprise Glasgow), a municipal body in charge of strengthening the city’s business base, supporting entrepreneurs, and improving the business environment. For the redevelopment, a public-private partnership was set up between the Scottish Development Agency, which took the leading role, and several other players, including the City of Glasgow District Council, Scottish Homes, and some local community groups. The municipal authorities used a considerable amount of public funds with the objective to kick off a dynamism that would eventually make redevelopment attractive for the private sector. Given the stigma connected with the Gorbals, in the early 1990s it was by no means guaranteed that private investment in the area could be economically viable.22

The New Gorbals were thus a flagship project of the City Council’s economic regeneration programme. The competition that led to the 1990 master plan by CZWG was celebrated as the first step to regeneration, with the project guidelines from the very beginning aiming at a reinvented tenement block.23 Prominent architects from both Glasgow and London were selected to carry out the design. It has to be mentioned, though, that although the project planners hailed the development as ‘one of the most significant single residential regeneration projects in this century’ its showpiece status was partly lost due to the flurry of projects launched as part of the UK City of Architecture and Design designation in 1999.24

On a historiographic level, the project emphasises an account of Glasgow’s past as being conditioned by economic ups and downs, which were reflected in better and worse living conditions for the entire population. This is quite different from earlier depictions of the city’s history, which stressed the striking social inequalities during Glasgow’s industrial heyday, and described late nineteenth century Glasgow as being characterised by the many impoverished factory workers rather than the small wealthy middle class. In the new narrative of bloom, withering, and renewal, however, social differences are subsumed by the overarching dichotomy of boom versus bust. Both are connected to visual signifiers. The most obvious is the River Clyde, which, according to this writing of history, was once the cause of Glasgow’s

---

22 Michelle Thompson-Fawcett, ‘Reinventing the Tenement: Transformation of Crown Street in the Gorbals, Glasgow,’ *Journal of Urban Design* 9 n. 2 (2004), 184-185. The costs were split into approximately 63 percent private sector, 12 percent Glasgow Development Agency and 25 percent Scottish Homes. Of the initial 1000 flats, 75 percent were to be condominiums and 25 percent rentals at social rent level, with the ratio between owner-occupancy and rental property blurred by different forms of shared ownership and equity share. In an area once nearly completely inhabited by tenants, the municipal authorities now promoted ownership as a model. The sea change from targeting the poorest to supporting the middle class was slightly mitigated through a number of state subsidies available for local first-time owners. Ibid. 186 and 197. This trend had started in 1976, when the City Council had launched the Glasgow Eastern Area Renewal Plan, which for the first time allowed for 20 percent owner-occupied housing. Miles Horsey, *Tenements and Towers: Glasgow Working Class Housing 1890-1990* (Edinburgh: HMSO, 1990), p. 65.


wealth related to the shipbuilding industry, and hence could serve as a beacon for the city’s economic recovery.

Figure 16: Emblem on Old Rutherglen Road referencing Glasgow’s past. Note the pre-tower-block street plan on the lower left side and the shipbuilding imagery on the upper right side (photograph: author).

Reconfigured historiography

The Crown Street Regeneration Project shows a reconfigured historiography that is cleared of ambiguities and centred on growth, evolution, and revival. The maintained or restored street grid suggests that the pre-industrial, industrial, and post-industrial economies grew from a similar plan and are only variations of a continuous urban history. The reproduction of historic building forms stresses local continuum over periodical change. The formal references to the city’s industrial past communicate pride and acceptance of this period. This is different to the historiographic meaning of the 1960s tower blocks. An outcome of tabula rasa planning, they had presented the present as a rupture with the industrial past and the beginning of a higher level of progress. The early industrial era was depicted as the anti-thesis to the present, a lower level of life now to be overlooked from the lofty perspective of a tower flat, and so evident in its shortcomings that no visible traces had to be preserved. In the new development, these messages are no longer palpable.

The Crown Street Regeneration Project is a built account of the past. With regard to the condition of the late-nineteenth-century working class, the buildings point to communal spirit rather than alienation, and with regard to the economy they emphasize industrial achievement rather than exploitation. While such an interpretation might relate to historical facts, it is nevertheless strongly biased, and
has to be deemed the product of the specific social and political background of the late twentieth century, in particular the change from heavy industry to service economy, a neo-liberal agenda in national and local government, and an ideology of urban entrepreneurialism. Within this context, the New Gorbals reconcile conflicting perspectives: on the one hand a break almost as comprehensive as the modernist upheaval, which involved complete redesign and exchange of the population, and on the other hand the conception of historical continuity and long-lasting community life. Conveying a historical image cleared of ambiguities and imperfections, the Crown Street Regeneration Project thus communicates a message of both renewal and permanence.

Florian Urban is Head of Architectural History and Urban Studies at the Mackintosh School of Architecture, Glasgow School of Art. He holds a Master of Fine Arts from the University of the Arts in Berlin, an MA in Urban Planning from UCLA and a PhD in History and Theory of Architecture from MIT. He is the author of Neo-historical East Berlin – Architecture and Urban Design in the German Democratic Republic 1970-1990 (Farham: Ashgate, 2009) and Tower and Slab – Histories of Global Mass Housing (Abingdon: Routledge, 2011).

Dr Florian Urban
Head of Architectural History and Urban Studies
Mackintosh School of Architecture
Glasgow School of Art
167 Renfrew Street
Glasgow G3 6RQ
United Kingdom

f.urban@gsa.ac.uk