

---

## ALTERNATIVE VIEWS OF AUTHENTICITY: THE CASE OF PARK HILL, SHEFFIELD

---

WALTER Nigel<sup>1</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> Nigel Walter, Department of Archaeology, University of York  
<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1152-522X>

**ABSTRACT:** Park Hill is the largest listed building in Europe. Opened in 1961, its design is an innovation on Le Corbusier's Unité d'Habitation, with horizontal 'streets in the sky' at every third level, with duplex apartments extending above and below each access level. It was Britain's first completed scheme of post-war slum clearance and the most ambitious inner-city development of its time.

However, while the development was conceived and opened with great optimism, by the time it was listed in 1998 it was in serious decline, both socially and physically. Unable to finance its refurbishment, Sheffield City Council sold Park Hill to developers for £1 in 2004. With the extensive involvement of Historic England, the subsequent refurbishment has upgraded the buildings and gentrified them, with only a small minority of units being available for affordable housing. The form and much of the physical fabric of the development has been preserved, but its original social significance has arguably been lost.

This paper examines Park Hill in the context of the development of the notion of authenticity from the Venice Charter (1964) through to the Nara Document (1994). The paper concludes that the listing and protection of a building such as Park Hill would not have been possible without the development of the multivalent approach to authenticity in the Nara Document, which forms an essential aspect of the broadened understanding of what constitutes cultural heritage.

**KEY WORDS:** Venice Charter, Nara Document, authenticity, Park Hill Sheffield

---

Park Hill is a large, post-war housing complex that towers over the centre of Sheffield; it is now also the largest listed building in Europe. It originally housed upwards of 3,000 people and comprised 995 flats, together with 31 shops, four pubs and other communal facilities. It was Britain's first completed scheme of post-war slum clearance and the most ambitious inner-city development of its time. Initially offering an idealistic vision of modern living, the development's fortunes subsequently waned and it fell into disrepair, becoming transformed into a symbol of urban decay and societal dysfunction. The controversial decision to list the development in 1998 has been pivotal to its subsequent regeneration.

Park Hill has a complex and contested history which illustrates the evolving face of modern Britain. The competing assessments of its relevance and importance help illustrate markedly different views of what constitutes cultural significance. As a result, Park Hill provides a useful case study for the exploration of alternative views of authenticity and the complex processes of preservation, adaptation, and re-interpretation that shape our understanding of heritage value.

This paper traces the development of the notion of authenticity from the Venice Charter<sup>1</sup> through to the Nara Document<sup>2</sup>, as it may apply to the story of Park Hill. The paper will provide a brief description of the development and its original social vision, explain the changes that have been undertaken, and discuss in what sense the significance of this remarkable building has been conserved.

## 1. The History of the Park Hill Development

Park Hill was a leading attempt to answer the urgent need for better housing in the aftermath of World War II. In the post-war years, Sheffield was an industrial powerhouse but, like many British cities, had a legacy of overcrowded and insanitary slum housing. In response, Sheffield City Council, under City Architect J. Lewis Womersley, embarked on a series of radical housing projects. In 1953 Womersley recruited two idealistic young architects, Jack Lynn and Ivor Smith, both still in their twenties<sup>3</sup>; their project at Park Hill (Fig. 1) was the flagship for an extensive housing programme that would change the face of Sheffield.

The construction of Park Hill began in 1957 and the development, comprising four interconnected blocks, was officially opened in 1961. Because of the consistent roof line and the pronounced topography, the height of the development grows from four storeys at its southern end (where it relates to neighbouring existing housing) to 13 storeys at the north end, and the west flank of the building towers above the railway station on the east side of the city centre (Fig. 2), like a huge defensive castle wall.

---

<sup>1</sup> ICOMOS. (1964). *International charter on the conservation and restoration of monuments and sites*. ICOMOS.

<sup>2</sup> ICOMOS. (1994). *The Nara document on authenticity*. ICOMOS. <https://www.icomos.org/charters/nara-e.pdf>

<sup>3</sup> Smith, I. (2008, April 20). *Park Hill, 1908–2008* [Lecture]. [https://s3-eu-west-1.amazonaws.com/us-website-content/Downloads/park-hill/080424\\_Ivor\\_lecture.pdf](https://s3-eu-west-1.amazonaws.com/us-website-content/Downloads/park-hill/080424_Ivor_lecture.pdf)



Fig. 1 Park Hill before Refurbishment, 2007. Paolo Margari; GNU Free Documentation License. [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Park\\_Hill\\_half-abandoned\\_council\\_housing\\_estate\\_Sheffield\\_England.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Park_Hill_half-abandoned_council_housing_estate_Sheffield_England.jpg)

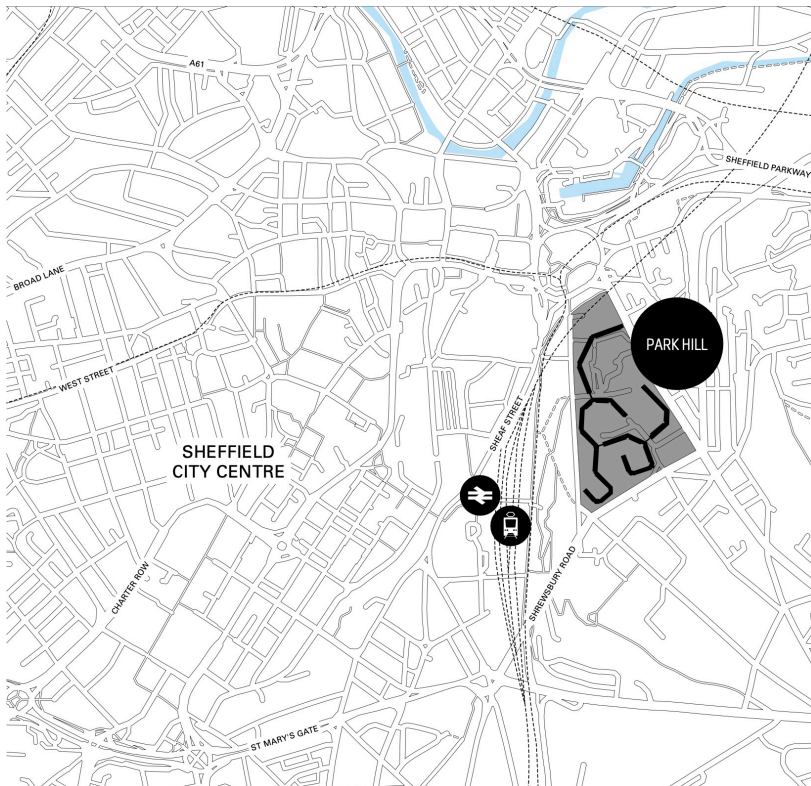


Fig. 2 The Location of Park Hill, Sheffield. Source: Urban Splash

The Park Hill accommodation was designed in basic clusters of four units, and was heavily influenced by Le Corbusier's Unité d'Habitation in Marseilles, which had been completed in 1952. As with the Unité, these units were spread vertically across three floors, with all units entered from horizontal deck access on the middle floor; the arrangement was known as 'streets in the sky'. But whereas the Unité placed this deck access in the centre of the plan, at Park Hill it was brought to the façade, making it a more social space and giving the elevations a recognisable horizontal structure. All housing units are dual aspect, with the stairs and bathrooms clustered in the centre of the plan to maximise daylight to habitable rooms, and with each flat enjoying a private balcony.

Park Hill, like its French predecessor, was a high density development conceived as a vertical village, with shared facilities including shops, pubs, and a nursery located within the estate itself, with the intention of creating a vibrant, self-sufficient community. The 'streets in the sky' were essential to this, borrowing from contemporary sociological interest in the role of the street in community formation. Efforts were made to rehouse people in the same relationships and support networks that already existed in the slum clearance areas, though the extent and success of this are contested<sup>4</sup>. Whatever the success of that, the development was conceived and opened with great optimism, and initially appears to have been well received by residents.

However, the fortunes of the development began to wane. This decline was due to multiple factors including the poor weathering of the fair-faced concrete, maintenance demands beginning to outstrip the Council's resources, changing social dynamics and poor housing policy which served to concentrate social need. Perhaps most significantly, Sheffield itself went through a profound crisis with the sudden closure of its heavy industry in the 1980s. Park Hill, once hailed as bold and futuristic, became notorious for crime and anti-social behaviour such that, for its many critics, it came to represent all the perceived failures of the post-war, State provision of social housing.

Given this seemingly unstoppable decline, it seemed likely that, like many other post-war estates across the UK, Park Hill would be demolished. Then, in 1998, the development was listed Grade II\*, the middle of the three grades of listing in England, placing it in the top 9% of protected heritage buildings. This listing was key both to protecting the building from demolition and paving the way for the regeneration program which was to follow. Lacking the means to finance its refurbishment as social housing, the local authority sold the site to the developer Urban Splash for £1 in 2004, with the promise that the estate would be transformed into a vibrant, mixed-use development.

Refurbishment of the different blocks has followed in phases, with the first and most ambitious phase completed in 2013 (Fig. 3). This involved the greatest degree of intervention, including revising internal layouts and narrowing the iconic 'streets' to allow better internal arrangement of flats, and new brighter external finishes and fenestration within the existing concrete frame. Subsequent phases were less invasive, including greater retention of existing finishes. The final phase is still awaited; a planning application for this was submitted in 2024.

---

<sup>4</sup> Smith, H. (2023). Demythologising Park Hill, Sheffield: The Hawksmoor Prize Essay 2022. *Architectural History*, 66, p. 257. <https://doi.org/10.1017/arh.2023.11>





Fig. 3 Park Hill, Phase 1 in 2017. Creative Commons CC0 1.0 Universal Public Domain Dedication. [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Park\\_Hill\\_\(36343727830\).jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Park_Hill_(36343727830).jpg)

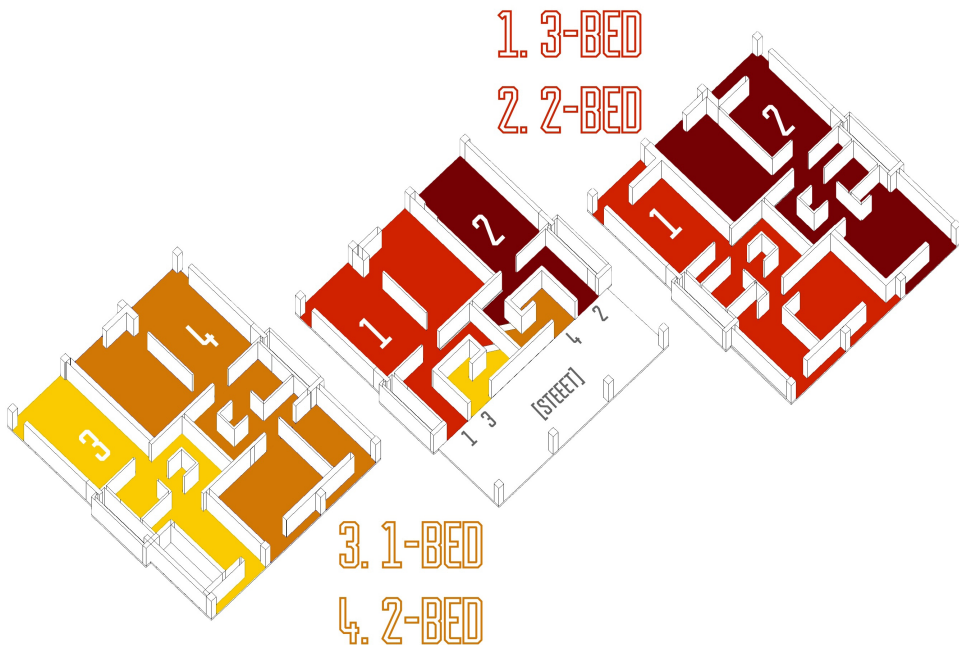


Fig. 4 Cluster of Four Flats – Original Configuration. Creative Commons Attribution-Share Alike 3.0 Unported license; changes made. [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Tres\\_niveles.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Tres_niveles.jpg)

The strategy adopted by Urban Splash across the different phases has included the retention of key architectural features, most obviously the external concrete frame and the 'streets in the sky' deck access, identified as of key importance in the list description. A more relaxed approach to the subdivision of spaces within the concrete frame – strongly signalled in the list description<sup>5</sup> (see section 3 below) – allowed for the redesign of the domestic accommodation to meet modern standards of comfort and convenience, including the introduction of modern amenities. Where the basic four-flat module originally comprised one 1-bed, two 2-bed and one 3-bed unit (Fig. 4), the new arrangement provided two 1-bed and two 2-bed units. Crucial to the success of this strategy from the developer's point of view has been the diversification of housing tenure – the great majority of the development is now privately owned, with a relatively small proportion of social housing. New commercial uses have been added, including workspaces, with a view to fostering a vibrant community. Finally, the developer has made efforts to involve both former and new residents in the regeneration process and in shaping the future of the community, through a process of community engagement.

## 2. Reception

As indicated above, Park Hill has strongly divided opinion since its inception. The development was opened in a spirit of profound optimism, and the accommodation undoubtedly offered a very substantial improvement in living conditions for the residents. The view from within the architectural community has generally been positive; for example, Reyner Banham described the building as 'a singular edifice' and a 'most imaginative and advanced community-building gesture'<sup>6</sup>. David Lewis praised the building for being 'cranked in dialogue with the contours. Like an Italian hill town, it gains its definition by topological compactness and sharp edge'<sup>7</sup>. Lewis goes on to conclude that the design

springs from an assessment – objective, compassionate, ideological – of the character of the community itself; its structure and its resilience; the terms of its stability weighed against those of change; and its significance for us is that these things have been taken by the designers as the key and stimulus to the social/environmental form which the buildings, and the people who now live in them, realize together as a whole<sup>8</sup>.

Urban Splash are judged to have produced a high quality refurbishment of what remains a landmark housing development; both phases 1 and 2 of the refurbishment were shortlisted for the RIBA Stirling Prize (in 2013 and 2024 respectively). As far as the architectural profession is concerned, both the original development and the refurbishment are considered a success.

However, as decline set in over the subsequent decades a powerfully negative public narrative developed. For all the positive change that Park Hill has undergone since its listing, a strong strand

<sup>5</sup> Historic England. (n.d.) 'PARK HILL, Non Civil Parish - 1246881 | Historic England'. <https://historicengland.org.uk/listing/the-list/list-entry/1246881>.

<sup>6</sup> Banham, R. (1961). Park Hill Housing, Sheffield. *Architectural Review*, 130(778), p. 403.

<sup>7</sup> Lewis, D. (1961). Criticism. *Architectural Design*, p. 397.

<sup>8</sup> Ibidem.

of negative sentiment remains; perhaps, for some, it is difficult to accept that brutalist concrete buildings such as this have any place in our cities, let alone any heritage value worth protection.



Fig. 5 'I love you' graffiti in 2022. Creative Commons Attribution-Share Alike 4.0 International license; changes made. [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:I\\_love\\_you\\_bridge\\_2022\\_\(cropped\).png](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:I_love_you_bridge_2022_(cropped).png)

Through its mixed-use refurbishment, Urban Splash has sought to overcome this negativity and reset the relationship between the Park Hill development and the wider city of Sheffield. A well-known piece of graffiti on one of the walkway bridges read 'I love you, will u marry me?' (Fig. 5). As part of the refurbishment, Urban Splash traced over this graffiti with neon signage, turning this marriage proposal into a public appeal to the wider city to take Park Hill to its heart.

However, the success of the refurbishment has come at a price, with the nature (and arguably the purpose) of the development having been changed considerably. Whereas the development was originally undertaken to alleviate poverty through the provision of social housing, the great majority of the refurbished housing is in private ownership, with Park Hill's initial purpose and significance abandoned in the process that can be characterised as modernist gentrification. On the other hand, while the link with the remaining previous residents has been broken in the process of redevelopment, simply by having been saved from demolition it can be argued that Park Hill has maintained its place in the cultural geography of Sheffield.





Fig. 6 The set of *Standing at the Sky's Edge*, 2024. Photo: Author

In a sign of its contemporary cultural salience, the development continues to feature in local and national media, not least in the successful musical *Standing at the Sky's Edge*, first produced in Sheffield in 2019 and then transferred to the National Theatre in London and on to the West End (Fig. 6)<sup>9</sup>. This critically acclaimed production traces the overlapping stories of three generations of occupants of a single Park Hill flat from the hope of its first tenants in the 1960s, through the poverty of a family of asylum seekers, to the professional owner post-refurbishment. In another sign of affection for the development, a free-to-download Park Hill font has been developed, reflecting the typographic forms suggested by the footprint of the blocks: 'Inspired by the iconic Brutalist architecture of Park Hill, the typeface is a celebration of the history of the site's past, present and future'<sup>10</sup>.

Given its varied history, Park Hill resists reduction to a simple proposition; rather, it is more like a complex and multifaceted narrative woven from many different threads, each contributing to the whole. The initial vision of social progress embodied by its design, the lived experiences of its early residents, the period of decline, and the current phase of regeneration – all are integral parts of its story. While the listing can be argued both on the basis of Park Hill's own architectural merit and for being representative of post-war public housing, there is also a more complex story

<sup>9</sup> National Theatre. (2024). *Standing at the Sky's Edge*. <https://www.nationaltheatre.org.uk/productions/standing-at-the-skys-edge/>

<sup>10</sup> Founded. (n.d.). *Park Hill Type*. Retrieved 7 January 2025, from <https://www.parkhilltype.com>



to be told of the attempt to create community cohesion, its subsequent fragmentation, and its partial recreation. The tension between these two – the material and the communal – has been visible in the process of Park Hill becoming designated as a heritage asset. Alongside this, we can also read in this complex history an evolving sense of authenticity.

### **3. Historic England's Role in Park Hill's Transformation**

Historic England<sup>11</sup>, the government's statutory advisor on the historic environment, has been a key player in the rebirth of Park Hill. Their involvement with Park Hill, far from being merely reactive, rather represented a directly interventionist and proactive form of curatorial protection<sup>12</sup>. It is Historic England that assesses which buildings should be given listed status, and makes recommendations to government; it is also Historic England that prepares the list description. These list descriptions vary; in the case of Park Hill, the text includes a detailed description of the development, with particular detail on the four original Public Houses. It concludes with the following assessment, which provides a justification for what was and remains a controversial listing, and anticipates some of the subsequent criticism:

ASSESSMENT Park Hill is of international importance. It is the first built manifestation of a widespread theoretical interest in external access decks as a way of building high without the problems of isolation and expense encountered with point blocks. Sheffield and the London County Council had the only major local authority departments designing imaginative and successful public housing in the 1950s, and this is Sheffield's flagship. The decks were conceived as a way of recreating the community spirit of traditional slum streets, with the benefit of vehicular segregation; Park Hill has been regularly studied by sociologists ever since it opened, and is one of the most successful of its type. The deck system was uniquely appropriate here because the steeply sloping site allowed all but the uppermost deck to reach ground level, and the impact of the long, flat-topped structure rising above the city centre makes for one of Sheffield's most impressive landmarks. The result was Britain's first completed scheme of post-war slum clearance and the most ambitious inner-city development of its time<sup>13</sup>.

There was nothing inevitable about the designation of Park Hill; rather, there seems to have been an active decision to support the expansion of the understanding of heritage into more contemporary and less obvious categories of building. English Heritage (as was) undertook extensive research and analysis, which established Park Hill's architectural merit, its social

---

<sup>11</sup> At the time Park Hill was listed, what is now Historic England was known as English Heritage, an organisation also responsible for the management of over 400 historic properties. In 2015 the two functions were separated, with Historic England created to take on the statutory and protection functions of the old organisation.

<sup>12</sup> Historic England. (2024b, May 20). *Park Hill, Sheffield, South Yorkshire* | Historic England. <https://historicengland.org.uk/services-skills/our-planning-services/enhanced-advisory-services/case-study-park-hill/>

<sup>13</sup> Historic England. (n.d.) *PARK HILL, Non Civil Parish - 1246881* | Historic England. <https://historicengland.org.uk/listing/the-list/list-entry/1246881>

importance, and its innovative status in the history of housing. The listing didn't just acknowledge the heritage value of the past; it enabled its adaptive reuse in order to safeguard what was most significant about the development for the future. The grade of listing was significant. Historic England defines grade II\* designations as 'particularly important buildings of more than special interest'<sup>14</sup>, placing Park Hill in the top 9% of England's listed buildings, and giving a strong signal of its perceived importance. And the listing came about through active collaboration between English Heritage and Sheffield City Council. The late Elain Harwood, writing after the listing but before the selection of a development partner (and in an English Heritage publication), notes how strongly supportive Sheffield City Council was of the listing of Park Hill, seeing it as critical to unlocking the regeneration of the development<sup>15</sup>.

Historic England's advisory role has proved critical to the regeneration project. Their team of architects, historians, and conservation specialists offered expert guidance on how to safeguard the cultural significance and character of the building while enabling its adaptation to meet current needs and to ensure it has a sustainable future. For example, one key aspect of their involvement was their preparation of the statement of significance, which gave confidence to the development team that the building's listed status would not prevent the degree of adaptation necessary.



Fig. 7 Cover of Historic England's *Constructive Conservation in Practice* (2008). Source: Historic England

<sup>14</sup> Historic England. (2024c, July 10). *What are Listed Buildings? How England's historic buildings are protected* | Historic England. <https://historicengland.org.uk/listing/what-is-designation/listed-buildings/>

<sup>15</sup> Harwood, E. (with English Heritage). (2003). *England: A guide to post-war listed buildings* (Rev.), p. 54. Batsford.

In 2008, English Heritage (now Historic England) published *Constructive Conservation in Practice*<sup>16</sup>, a collection of 20 exemplary schemes involving development of heritage sites across a range of sectors. These were chosen to illustrate its 'constructive conservation' approach, defined as 'a well-informed, collaborative approach to conservation-led development' (rear cover). Park Hill, the first phase of which was still at the pre-construction stage at the time of publication, features as one of those exemplary schemes, and its colourful elevation spreads over the front and back covers (Fig. 7). In this way, Historic England chose Park Hill to frame the whole collection, and thus, in a sense, to exemplify its whole approach to conservation.

In its description of Park Hill, the text states that the heritage values of the development

lay not only in the site's history but in the scale and vision of the original council housing scheme, in the expressed reinforced concrete frame and the relationship of the building to the landscape in which it sits. Substantial changes to the internal layout and the infill panels within the frame could therefore be introduced without damaging its historic significance<sup>17</sup>.

The key elements of significance are thus described as the history of the site, its status as council housing, the concrete frame as its major architectonic element, and its relation to the landscape. This leads to the conclusion that other aspects of the development, including the internal layout of units (the listing text describes the interiors as 'not of special interest') and the infill elevational panels within the dominant concrete frame, could tolerate more 'substantial changes'.

Historic England continues to use the term 'Constructive Conservation', and Park Hill is now explicitly presented as a success story of its collaborative approach with the development sector. Indeed, it serves as one amongst a number of case studies for Historic England's Enhanced Advisory Services, 'which are designed to remove risk' developers dealing with heritage sites, including 'reducing the potential for delays in the planning process'<sup>18</sup>.

Historic England's engagement with, and use of, Park Hill illustrates their belief that the significance of a heritage asset can be maintained while allowing for a significant degree of adaptive reuse. The approach taken in the case of a building as emblematic and problematic as Park Hill recognises that allowing well-managed change to what is a living form of heritage is the best way to preserve it, ensuring its survival in sustainable use. This, in turn, illustrates a multivalent approach to authenticity which looks beyond material factors.

#### 4. Views of Authenticity

It is relevant to note that the regeneration of Park Hill has been warmly endorsed by Ivor Smith, one of the original architects:

---

<sup>16</sup> Historic England. (2008b). *Constructive Conservation in Practice*. Historic England. <https://historicengland.org.uk/images-books/publications/constructive-conservation-in-practice/ccdpsweb/>

<sup>17</sup> Ibidem, p. 11.

<sup>18</sup> Historic England. (2024a, May 20). *Enhanced Advisory Services*. <https://historicengland.org.uk/services-skills/our-planning-services/enhanced-advisory-services/>

Urban Splash and their architects have got the balance right between respect for authenticity and the embrace of change. What they have done gives real meaning to the word ‘regeneration’; it represents a new vitality<sup>19</sup>.

The concept of authenticity, introduced into conservation in the 1964 Venice Charter, is often perceived as a straightforward question of preserving as much of the original building or object as possible. However, just as we have moved from an understanding of heritage as simply a collection of the oldest and most beautiful buildings to something more dynamic and evolving, shaped by its use, developmental history, and the diverse perspectives of those connected to it, so too our understanding of authenticity has necessarily become more multivalent. In this context, Park Hill offers a useful case study, illustrating the complexities of authenticity beyond mere physical preservation, and encouraging us to reflect on the place of authenticity in heritage. This section will consider three key points in the development of the idea of authenticity in conservation – the Venice Charter, the Operational Guidelines to the World Heritage Convention, and the Nara Document on Authenticity – in the light of the regeneration of the Park Hill development.

The focus of the Venice Charter is a concern for ‘historic monuments’, ‘ancient monuments’, and ‘ancient buildings’ – terms that are used interchangeably<sup>20</sup>. It is highly questionable whether those that drafted the Charter would have regarded a building such as Park Hill, completed just three years beforehand, as a possible candidate for eventual protection. Michael Falser quotes Raymond Lemaire, who had attended the 1964 conference, saying that ‘the participants of the Venice Charter had regarded a deeper discussion of the term ‘authenticity’ as superfluous, since their common understanding of conservation basically referred to European material heritage built of stone’<sup>21</sup>. Falser goes on to note that

The turn towards materials other than stone also called for a widened appreciation of vernacular, popular, informal and pre-industrial building styles as well as industrial and mass-produced heritage types<sup>22</sup>.

And, to be fair to the Charter, Article 1 argues that the importance of setting ‘applies not only to great works of art but also to more modest works of the past which have acquired cultural significance with the passing of time.’ This very sensible, open-ended wording allows space for the Venice Charter to be applied to Park Hill, regardless of how such a building might have been viewed at the time the Charter was written. Six decades on from Venice, Park Hill can now be judged to have heritage value.

---

<sup>19</sup> Smith, I. (2014). *Architecture: An inspiration*, p. 214. Matador.

<sup>20</sup> ICOMOS. (1964). *International charter on the conservation and restoration of monuments and sites*. Preamble. ICOMOS.

<sup>21</sup> Falser, M. S. (2010). From Venice 1964 to Nara 1994—Changing concepts of authenticity? In M. S. Falser, W. Lipp, & A. Tomaszewski (Eds.), *Conservation and preservation: Interactions between theory and practice: In memoriam Alois Riegl (1858-1905)*, p. 116. Edizioni Polistampa.

<sup>22</sup> Ibidem, p. 120.



Aside from a reference, in the context of Restoration, to ‘authentic documents’, the Venice Charter mentions ‘authenticity’ itself only once, in the concluding sentence to the first, visionary paragraph of the Preamble: ‘It is our duty to hand [ancient monuments] on in the full richness of their authenticity’<sup>23</sup>. While not stated explicitly, it is clear that the Charter’s authors have *material* authenticity in mind – that is, that buildings should be passed on *unaltered*, and that any change to them necessarily reduces their authenticity. This zero-sum view is closely aligned to what elsewhere I refer to as the ‘subtractive’ (as opposed to the ‘generative’) view of significance<sup>24</sup> – that with built heritage, all change is loss. This view flows from the refusal – endemic to conservation through the middle of the twentieth century – to differentiate between works of art and buildings. This is clearly evident, for example, in the work of Cesare Brandi, whose influence can clearly be seen in the Venice Charter<sup>25</sup>; indeed the Charter expressly frames the purpose of conservation as ‘to safeguard [monuments] no less as works of art than as historical evidence’<sup>26</sup>.

But such a position is theoretically and philosophically untenable – buildings are always built for a purpose, and as that purpose changes, whether by degree or through a complete change of use, so buildings change too. They do it naturally. Stewart Brand wrote compellingly on this in his book *How Buildings Learn*<sup>27</sup>. As argued elsewhere<sup>28</sup> the philosopher Hans-Georg Gadamer strongly resists the reduction of buildings to the status of works of art<sup>29</sup>, insisting instead that buildings are ‘borne along’ by ‘the stream of history’<sup>30</sup>. In facilitating the necessary change required for the refurbishment of Park Hill, Historic England are clearly not treating the building in these terms as an unalterable work of art.

The Venice Charter’s approach to change is most clearly seen in Article 5, which deals with use:

The conservation of monuments is always facilitated by making use of them for some socially useful purpose. Such use is therefore desirable but it must not change the lay-out or decoration of the building. It is within these limits only that modifications demanded by a change of function should be envisaged and may be permitted<sup>31</sup>.

---

<sup>23</sup> ICOMOS. (1964). *International charter on the conservation and restoration of monuments and sites*. ICOMOS.

<sup>24</sup> Walter, N. (2024a). Narrative and the legitimacy of change to historic buildings. In Z. Somhegyi & L. Giombini (Eds.), *The Routledge Companion to the Philosophy of Architectural Reconstruction*. (pp. 107–122). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003334200-11>

<sup>25</sup> Jokilehto, J. (1998). The context of the Venice Charter (1964). *Conservation and Management of Archaeological Sites*, 2(4), p. 230.

<sup>26</sup> ICOMOS. (1964). *International charter on the conservation and restoration of monuments and sites*, Article 3. ICOMOS.

<sup>27</sup> Brand, S. (1994). *How buildings learn: What happens after they’re built*. Viking.

<sup>28</sup> e.g. Walter, N. (2024b). Venice at 60: Article 5 and the Acceptable Limits of Use. *Protection of Cultural Heritage*, 20, 1–19. (p.12). <https://doi.org/10.35784/odk.6225>

<sup>29</sup> Gadamer, H.-G. (1989). *Truth and method* (J. Weinsheimer & D. G. Marshall, Trans.; 2nd, rev. ed.). Sheed and Ward. (Original work published 1960), p. 156.

<sup>30</sup> Ibidem, p. 157.

<sup>31</sup> ICOMOS. (1964). *International charter on the conservation and restoration of monuments and sites*, Article 5. ICOMOS.

In these terms, according to the Venice Charter, the allowing of considerable change (explicitly to both ‘the layout [and] decoration of the building’) will have caused much of the authenticity of the development to have been lost. And yet, if Historic England’s assessment of Park Hill is accepted, the refurbishment has left all the important factors of its cultural significance intact, and its authenticity has been robustly maintained. In this, Park Hill offers a sharp critique of the narrow understanding of authenticity in the Venice Charter.

In part, of course, this difference reflects the fact that the Venice Charter does not recognise social/communal value – this was not a term within conservation until the first publication of the Burra Charter<sup>32</sup>. While housing of any kind can be said to be ‘socially useful’, it could be argued that the refurbished Park Hill, now predominantly comprising private market housing, has been gentrified, and is thus considerably less ‘socially useful’ than the original 100% social tenure. In those terms also, the Venice Charter would therefore see the authenticity of Park Hill as significantly compromised, perhaps with more justification, on the contemporary view.

After the Venice Charter, the first significant step in the elaboration of the idea of authenticity in conservation came with the publication in 1977 of the Operational Guidelines for the Implementation of the World Heritage Convention<sup>33</sup>. Whereas the Convention itself made no reference to it, the Guidelines expand the understanding of authenticity considerably. Section 9 states that, in addition to a property’s outstanding universal value and its state of preservation,

...the property should meet the test of authenticity in design, materials, workmanship and setting; authenticity does not limit consideration to original form and structure, but includes all subsequent modifications and additions over the course of time, which in themselves possess artistic or historical values.<sup>34</sup>

There are two significant innovations here. First, there is the setting out of a taxonomy of authenticity with the listing of four aspects. Of these, design, materials and setting can all be read into the Venice Charter’s understanding of authenticity; the novelty is the inclusion of workmanship. To place workmanship as an integral dimension of authenticity is to accept that historic buildings require ongoing work, which may extend as far as some degree of change to the original. Even more significantly, this is reinforced in the second innovation, where we see an acceptance of what could be termed the ‘time depth’ of heritage. For the first time, authenticity is extended beyond a building’s ‘original form and structure’ to include ‘subsequent modifications and additions over the course of time’, to the extent to which these are of artistic or historical interest. It can be argued that this, too, is consistent with the Venice Charter which states that ‘The valid contributions of all periods to the building of a monument must be

---

<sup>32</sup> Australia ICOMOS. (1979). *The Australia ICOMOS charter for places of cultural significance* (‘Burra Charter’). Australia ICOMOS. [https://australia.icomos.org/wp-content/uploads/Burra-Charter\\_1979.pdf](https://australia.icomos.org/wp-content/uploads/Burra-Charter_1979.pdf)

<sup>33</sup> UNESCO. (1977). *Operational Guidelines for the Implementation of the World Heritage Convention*. UNESCO World Heritage Centre.

<sup>34</sup> Ibidem, Section 9.

respected...<sup>35</sup>. But Article 11 is addressing restoration, and the difficulties involved in choosing to reveal an underlying historical state, whereas the Guidelines, for the first time, leave scope for the normalisation of change. This is a very significant departure from the understanding in the Venice Charter, acknowledging (with Stewart Brand) the living nature of most built heritage – that all buildings change – and framing their authenticity therefore as something that can be added to and grow over time. The Operational Guidelines thus form an important stage of development in the idea of authenticity on the way to the Nara Document, and are much more compatible with the understanding of heritage as an ongoing contemporary cultural production, as evident at Park Hill.

The Nara Document on Authenticity<sup>36</sup> further expands on this developing idea of authenticity, explicitly acknowledging in Article 2 the World Heritage Committee's framework (from the Operational Guidelines) and aligning itself with spirit of the Venice Charter (Article 3). Article 9 states that authenticity is based in values, and that our ability to understand these 'depends, in part, on the degree to which information sources about these values may be understood as credible or truthful'. Park Hill is an exceptionally well-documented building, and indeed Historic England in its consistent involvement with the site has contributed significantly to that documentation.

Article 10 states that authenticity is 'the essential qualifying factor concerning values', and that an understanding of it 'plays a fundamental role [...] within the inscription procedures used for the World Heritage Convention and other cultural heritage inventories', which evidently includes England's process of statutory listing, in which Historic England plays a central role. It is clear that authenticity in the Nara Document is culturally relative, and that values and authenticity judgements cannot therefore be based on any fixed criteria (Article 11).

It is the final article of the Nara Document that is the most consequential for the current discussion:

Depending on the nature of the cultural heritage, its cultural context, and its evolution through time, authenticity judgements may be linked to the worth of a great variety of sources of information. Aspects of the sources may include form and design, materials and substance, use and function, traditions and techniques, location and setting, and spirit and feeling, and other internal and external factors. The use of these sources permits elaboration of the specific artistic, historic, social, and scientific dimensions of the cultural heritage being examined<sup>37</sup>.

The model here is of authenticity judgements based on a wide range of possible 'sources of information'. These sources are presented in seven pairs, and offer a further expansion of the fourfold taxonomy seen in the Operational Guidelines, discussed above: design is covered by the first pair, materials by the second, workmanship by the fourth and setting by the fifth. The innovations are in the third ('use and function'), sixth ('spirit and feeling') and last ('other internal

---

<sup>35</sup> ICOMOS. (1964). *International charter on the conservation and restoration of monuments and sites*, Article 11. ICOMOS.

<sup>36</sup> ICOMOS. (1994). *The Nara document on authenticity*. ICOMOS. <https://www.icomos.org/charters/nara-e.pdf>

<sup>37</sup> Ibidem, Article 13.

and external factors'), a catch-all category which sensibly renders the structure open-ended and adaptable to future needs. It is also clear that not all of these pairs will apply in every case – we are told that 'authenticity judgements *may* be linked' to these sources (emphasis added).

Applying the first six pairs to the case of Park Hill, we can note the following:

1. form and design: the design of the clusters of four interlocking flats around a 'street in the sky' is distinctive as an imaginative development of Le Corbusier's Unité d'Habitation, and that is retained. The elevational treatment, with its powerful exposed frame, maintains the integrity of the distant views of the development;
2. materials and substance: the first of the five phases involved a greater level of intervention and change, with refinishing of the exposed concrete and the introduction of more brightly coloured materials into the facade panels within the frame, though still with a progression from dark to light up the building;
3. use and function: this is perhaps the most difficult to judge. On the one hand, the development remains residential, though ground floor flats have been converted into commercial space because of security concerns. On the other hand, the change of tenure to predominantly private market housing is arguably a significant loss of authenticity given the Nara Document's acceptance of the fourfold value structure, here termed 'dimensions', including the social, in the last sentence of Article 13;
4. traditions and techniques: this pair, which is concerned chiefly with craft skills and practices, is perhaps the least applicable to so modernist a building as Park Hill;
5. location and setting: clearly the location of Park Hill has not changed, though the refurbishment has certainly changed the immediate setting, with the creation of more imaginative landscaping;
6. spirit and feeling: as with the tenure question discussed above, one would struggle to argue that the original spirit of Park Hill has survived, and therefore the refurbishment has resulted in a significant loss of authenticity.

These 'sources of information' then feed through into four dimensions which map onto the four groups of values found in the Burra Charter from its first iteration in 1979, which states that 'Cultural significance means aesthetic, historic, scientific or social value for past, present or future generations'<sup>38</sup>. The Burra Charter is significant in a UK context because the understanding of significance in Historic England's central *Conservation Principles* is based on a very similar fourfold structure of values<sup>39</sup>. It should also be noted that the only reference of any kind to international conservation literature in *Conservation Principles* is that its definition of

<sup>38</sup> Australia ICOMOS. (1979). *The Australia ICOMOS charter for places of cultural significance* ('Burra Charter'). Article 1. Australia ICOMOS. [https://australia.icomos.org/wp-content/uploads/Burra-Charter\\_1979.pdf](https://australia.icomos.org/wp-content/uploads/Burra-Charter_1979.pdf)

<sup>39</sup> Historic England. (2008a). *Conservation principles: Policies and guidance for the sustainable management of the historic environment*. English Heritage. <https://historicengland.org.uk/images-books/publications/conservation-principles-sustainable-management-historic-environment/>



Authenticity ('Those characteristics that most truthfully reflect and embody the cultural heritage values of a place') is based on The Nara Document on Authenticity<sup>40</sup>.

The aim of the Park Hill regeneration was never to take the building back to its original 1960's state, but instead to rescue this iconic building by creating modern apartments with improved amenities, while retaining its signature structure and form. On a strictly materialist interpretation of authenticity, as presented by the Venice Charter, the result can be seen as a falsification of the original design. On the other hand, arguing from a more holistic and multivalent view of authenticity as in the Nara Document, the result has safeguarded this extraordinary building for the future, while acknowledging that authenticity can encompass a considerable degree of change to the original.

## **Conclusion**

The 30 years between the Venice Charter and the Nara Document saw a significant expansion in how we understand the scope and nature of cultural heritage, of which Park Hill is one example. It is reasonable to conclude that this building would never have been listed at all, let alone given grade II\* status, had the understanding of authenticity present in the Venice Charter not been substantially expanded and refined through the Operational Guidelines and the Nara Document. While the listing of Park Hill preceded the publication of *Conservation Principles* by a decade, that document was the fruit of the development of thinking in what was then English Heritage over the preceding years, and to which the case of Park Hill clearly contributed, given the use subsequently made of it as an exemplar.

Park Hill demonstrates the limits of a narrow and rigid approach to heritage focused solely on the original state of a historic building, and the associated view that change represents a direct threat to authenticity. Had such an approach been taken, this iconic building would likely have been consigned to demolition. Instead, Park Hill underlines the importance of understanding heritage as something living and evolving, and that authenticity can endure through the change that comes with that life, provided it is managed well in accordance with robustly identified cultural heritage values. However, while the physical fabric of this development has been preserved and renewed, its original social significance has arguably been lost, with only a small proportion of the development now being available for affordable housing.

Ultimately, the case of Park Hill highlights that authenticity is not a static concept, but a dynamic process shaped by the multiple factors identified in Article 13 of the Nara Document, importantly including use and function. It compels us to think beyond the physical and to consider the human stories that give a place its true meaning. Park Hill serves as a powerful reminder that heritage is not merely about the past, but about how we engage with it in the present and allow it to change for the future.

---

<sup>40</sup> Ibidem, p. 71, note 11.

## Acknowledgements

This paper was presented at the TheoPhilos conference on ‘Authenticity from a European Perspective: 30 Years of the Nara Document on Authenticity’ in Thessaloniki, Greece, on November 29, 2024. My thanks to colleagues for their constructive comments. All photos by the author, except where noted.

## Bibliography

Australia ICOMOS. (1979). *The Australia ICOMOS charter for places of cultural significance* (*Burra Charter*). Australia ICOMOS. [https://australia.icomos.org/wp-content/uploads/Burra-Charter\\_1979.pdf](https://australia.icomos.org/wp-content/uploads/Burra-Charter_1979.pdf)

Banham, R. (1961). Park Hill Housing, Sheffield. *Architectural Review*, 130(778), 403–410.

Brand, S. (1994). *How buildings learn: What happens after they're built*. Viking.

Falser, M. S. (2010). From Venice 1964 to Nara 1994—Changing concepts of authenticity? In M. S. Falser, W. Lipp, & A. Tomaszewski (Eds.), *Conservation and preservation: Interactions between theory and practice: In memoriam Alois Riegl (1858-1905)* (pp. 115–132). Edizioni Polistampa.

Founded. (n.d.). *Park Hill Type*. Retrieved 7 January 2025, from <https://www.parkhilltype.com>

Gadamer, H.-G. (1989). *Truth and method* (J. Weinsheimer & D. G. Marshall, Trans.; 2nd, rev. ed.). Sheed and Ward. (Original work published 1960).

Harwood, E. (with English Heritage). (2003). *England: A guide to post-war listed buildings* (Rev.). Batsford.

Historic England. (n.d.) *'PARK HILL, Non Civil Parish - 1246881 | Historic England'*. <https://historicengland.org.uk/listing/the-list/list-entry/1246881>

Historic England. (2008a). *Conservation principles: Policies and guidance for the sustainable management of the historic environment*. English Heritage. <https://historicengland.org.uk/images-books/publications/conservation-principles-sustainable-management-historic-environment/>

Historic England. (2008b). *Constructive Conservation in Practice*. Historic England. <https://historicengland.org.uk/images-books/publications/constructive-conservation-in-practice/ccdpsweb/>

Historic England. (2024a, May 20). *Enhanced Advisory Services*. <https://historicengland.org.uk/services-skills/our-planning-services/enhanced-advisory-services/>

Historic England. (2024b, May 20). *Park Hill, Sheffield, South Yorkshire | Historic England*. <https://historicengland.org.uk/services-skills/our-planning-services/enhanced-advisory-services/case-study-park-hill/>

- Historic England. (2024c, July 10). *What are Listed Buildings? How England's historic buildings are protected* | Historic England. <https://historicengland.org.uk/listing/what-is-designation/listed-buildings/>
- ICOMOS. (1964). *International charter on the conservation and restoration of monuments and sites*. ICOMOS.
- ICOMOS. (1994). *The Nara document on authenticity*. ICOMOS. <https://www.icomos.org/charters/nara-e.pdf>
- Jokilehto, J. (1998). The context of the Venice Charter (1964). *Conservation and Management of Archaeological Sites*, 2(4), 229–233. <https://doi.org/10.1179/135050398793138762>
- Lewis, D. (1961). Criticism. *Architectural Design*, 397–398.
- National Theatre. (2024). *Standing at the Sky's Edge*. <https://www.nationaltheatre.org.uk/productions/standing-at-the-skys-edge/>
- Smith, H. (2023). Demythologising Park Hill, Sheffield: The Hawksmoor Prize Essay 2022. *Architectural History*, 66, 251–274. <https://doi.org/10.1017/arh.2023.11>
- Smith, I. (2008, April 20). *Park Hill, 1908–2008* [Lecture]. [https://s3-eu-west-1.amazonaws.com/us-website-content/Downloads/park-hill/080424\\_Ivor\\_lecture.pdf](https://s3-eu-west-1.amazonaws.com/us-website-content/Downloads/park-hill/080424_Ivor_lecture.pdf)
- Smith, I. (2014). *Architecture: An inspiration*. Matador.
- UNESCO. (1977). *Operational Guidelines for the Implementation of the World Heritage Convention*. UNESCO World Heritage Centre. <https://whc.unesco.org/archive/opguide77b.pdf>
- Walter, N. (2024a). Narrative and the legitimacy of change to historic buildings. In Z. Somhegyi & L. Giombini (Eds.), *The Routledge Companion to the Philosophy of Architectural Reconstruction* (pp. 107–122). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003334200-11>
- Walter, N. (2024b). Venice at 60: Article 5 and the Acceptable Limits of Use. *Protection of Cultural Heritage*, 20, 0–19. <https://doi.org/10.35784/odk.6225>