

A Book of Hours for Robin Hood Gardens: Reportage drawing as an Interdisciplinary Conservation Method in Architectural Heritage

PhD Dissertation in Architectural Design
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Abstract

The housing crisis in London – where building renewal is less than 1% per year (Power, 2008) – calls for a re-thinking of the role that historic building conservation plays in debates regarding the demolition or refurbishment of social housing. My research aims to develop a new critical-creative methodology paying a special attention to the temporality of sites for architectural heritage and conservation practices via the medium of the graphic novel. My architectural case-study is the East London housing estate Robin Hood Gardens (1972), which was refused heritage listing in 2009 and 2015 and is currently being demolished as part of a local regeneration scheme.

This thesis brings together archival historical research, ethnographic on-site practice, and physical book-making. Its methodology draws on my own practice as an illustrator, situating this as a link between the Hungarian conservation practice '*falkutatás*' (Dávid, 1977) and the idea of 'site-writing' (Rendell, 2010), defined as a 'material, emotional, political and conceptual' approach to situated criticism and to practice-led research. *Falkutatás* applies archeological stratigraphy to walls of historical buildings and was developed in 1960s Hungary to reveal historical continuity. My thesis reevaluates *falkutatás* as a site-writing practice, specifically through a graphic novel that imaginatively re-works the historic, material and temporal literary form of *The Book of Hours*, late-medieval illuminated manuscripts.

The structure of my graphic novel follows the yearly cycle in twelve theoretical essays, each addressing a key theme of my practice-led research; these essays nest within four design folios, each addressing a different season at Robin Hood Gardens through the use of techniques specific to site-based research such as reportage drawing and montage. The sense of time emphasized by the seasons on the northern hemisphere inform the site-writing practices; each section works with a motif like the fallen stars for the summer season. Using combinations of spatial and visual narratives, my graphic novel reworks the processes and temporalities of heritage and conservation. By engaging with specific agencies and audiences – governmental bodies, architects, residents – often disregarded processes such as time spent waiting for demolition or recalling the entire lifecycle of the estate are brought to life.