‘Machine Living’: The Discourses and Ideologies of Spatial Order which Informed the High Rise Developments of the Housing Commission Victoria 1950-1970

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Stand at the bottom of a high rise tower and look up. Feel overwhelmed by the dizzying heights and ladders of small windows that seem to melt into an infinity of steel and concrete. Realise that these towers are homes. The high rise towers house not only families, but entire communities and inside there is a city within a city. Instead of street lamps, corridors are fitted with lurid fluorescent lights that expose all doorsteps and human movement to the outside world. The orange floodlights hanging from the tower-top ledges project a stark light that exposes the sharp vertical lines and textured surfaces of the dank, brown blocks.

Melbourne’s belt of Housing Commission high rise estates was built throughout the 1950s and 1960s. Today these buildings stand as symbols of a wasting modernist dream. They are also a legacy of the Commission’s urban renewal and slum reclamation programs. The modernist project embraced ‘vertical cities’, a blueprint devised by Swiss modernist architect Le Corbusier. They marked the urban landscape with vessels that symbolised the architecture of progress and strict spatial order. The initial awe and praise of the high rise was reflected in the attitudes of government, slum abolitionists, business, builders, engineers, planners and sections of the broader community. Today, despite the early enthusiasm, the estates are burdened by stereotypes reminiscent of those attached by early middle class urban reformers to the slums. Estate communities continue to suffer the depiction of ‘welfare ghettos’ plagued with crime, anti-social behaviour, ethnic conflict, drugs and violence.

The main proponents of urban renewal were architects, construction engineers and urban planners who demanded better town planning through the rhetoric of efficiency and order. Re-inventing the urban landscape in form and layout was imperative to the realisation of their ideal. These modernist aspirations and plans stemmed from wider international trends apparent in the United States, Great Britain.

as well as throughout Western Europe. During the 1950s, these countries saw the construction of state funded residential developments for the low income earner, in the form of prefabricated concrete towers to replace blighted areas. As a residential development body, the Victorian Housing Commission was driven by the enthusiasm and vigour of the modernist project, and this is reflected in the growth of the Commission’s high rise construction and redevelopment program of the 1960s. Until the 1970s, the Commission estate towers dominated Melbourne’s skyline as architectural monuments to the modernist urban landscape. In 1966, upon the completion of the South Melbourne thirty storey block ‘Park Towers’, the Commission received international acclaim for their technologically advanced construction methods and architectural forms and during this peak in construction and acclaim, the towers became symbols of modern material progress.

The power and influence of the Commission as a state housing body grew with the escalation of this urban renewal program. Initially, the Commission concerned itself with slum abolition, rehousing and interventionist social and moral reform. However, the urban renewal period of the 1950s and 1960s marked the Commission’s rise to technocracy and bureaucracy. Its policies and agendas moved away from the ‘softer’ reform years, with a focus driven by the technological and architectural preoccupations of ambitious construction professionals and planners. The era of urban renewal and mass construction of high rise estates saw the Commission become institutionalised as a strong arm of the welfare state. This rise to power encouraged the Commission to push for wider planning and redevelopment powers that exceeded the realm of state funded housing developments. To ensure the granting of such powers, management on the existing estates involved rigorous social controls and rent systems that promoted the Commission’s efficiency.

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6 Such projects by the earlier Commission, in the period between 1937-1950, were vigorously interventionist and paternalistic in their focus on the slum environment. In their approach to slum abolition these earlier reformers were convinced of the benevolent necessity behind their actions. They did not have the same self-interested technocratic focus as the urban renewal Commission, but possessed a paternalistic yet more sensitive approach. See Renate Howe, ‘Reform and Social Responsibility: the Establishment of the Housing Commission’, in Renate Howe (ed.), New Houses For Old: Fifty Years of Public Housing in Victoria 1938-1988, Ministry of Housing and Construction, Melbourne, 1988.
8 The Commission reinforced this throughout its organisational reports during the 1960s. See Housing Commission Victoria, Annual Report No. 29, 1966-1967, p. 3.
The Commission’s high rise estates varied in shape and height. The aggregated concrete towers ranged from two floor walk-up dwellings to thirty storey buildings with ten flats per level. Gardens, communal laundries, playgrounds and underground parking were some of the major features. Flats were fitted with modern domestic amenities, while officers and maintenance workers ensured the smooth operation of the estates. High rise towers were fitted with electric elevators to transport tenants with ease. The Commission viewed such clean and modern living as the antithesis to slum dwelling.

The Commission’s vision and its centralised technocratic organisation is best understood in light of prevailing architectural ideologies and the modernist drive for ordered urban landscapes. This profession-oriented architectural discourse was characterised by paternalism and disregard for the communities that the Commission sought not only to rehouse, but to re-organise and segregate. The Commission’s estates, specifically the high rise, were designed as gridded landscapes of neutrality and authority. As Richard Sennett has argued, gridded space stems from the physically determinist blueprint which creates boundaries that ultimately sterilise street life, kill off social and cultural spontaneity and subdue inhabitants. Such sterility is an inherent and oppressive characteristic of the modernist urban blueprint, which disregards any existing social or physical order. In its redevelopment program, the Commission was clearly preoccupied with the intricacies of design and the ideological force of functionalism and modernism, which heightened a disregard of the social and cultural impact on slum communities. Modernist urban planning discourse dictated that social order would follow the ordering of the urban landscape. It was a ‘technological shortcut to social change’, as Patrick Dunleavy contends. The Commission’s blueprints demanded massive changes to zoning and residential densities, and the high rise was central to such planning. The towers would provide efficient and ordered mechanical living surrounded by vast expanses of open space.

The expectation that people would simply adapt to their new environment was indicative of the prevailing modernist discourse, which anticipated that urban order would demand desirable modes of behaviour – a new social order. Such machine living effectively situated communities in a framework of spatial planning regimes, and the technical marvels of the Corbusian modernist utopia.

11 Sennett, The Conscience of the Eye, p. 60.
12 ibid.
This article seeks to address the Commission’s urban renewal program through two broad themes. Firstly, it locates urban renewal in the discourse of functionalism, modernist architectural ideology and design. Secondly, it views the impact of machine living on people, through the perspective of social control and efficiency engineered through spatial regimes and estate management. To explore these themes further it is necessary to examine a brief history of the design and construction of the Commission high rise estates.

**Urban Reform and the Early Commission**

The structure and activities of the professionally oriented urban renewal era marked a major shift in organisation and attitudes toward rehousing. The earlier reform era had concerned itself with inner and outer suburban construction of villa housing estates, along with domestic and civil education of working communities. This concern continued through the provision of ‘homes’ and not mere ‘houses’, in conjunction with town planning concerns. These concerns were prominent in the early (1930s) work of the Architects’ Panel. However during the 1950s professional influence grew and the Commission abandoned the moral focus of early reformers, becoming preoccupied with the technical and planning concerns of the modernist urban蓝图. This marked a significant shift in the Commission’s focus, from socially concerned urban reformers to the professionalism of architects and engineers.

Since the beginning of the twentieth century, Melbourne’s urban reform movements had blamed the slum environment for the moral and sanitary degeneration of the working poor. The perceived slovenliness, vice and crime of slums was viewed as stemming directly from the slum itself: ‘bad conditions made bad people, bad people made bad conditions worse’. Such environmental determinism was deeply ingrained in prevailing middle class ideologies and discourse. It justified interventionist methods, allowing reformers to enter the homes of working communities to promote middle class notions of respectability, domesticity and family. The growth of positivist inquiry and social work, the expansion of sensationalist slum journalism and the use of photographic evidence exacerbated strong bursts of moral panic and fear in middle class communities, which precipitated a desire to expose and monitor ‘that breeding...

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17 ibid., p. 144.

ground of criminality and immorality, that warren of alleys, and yards, a no-go area for the police, a space of resistance.\textsuperscript{19}

Urban blight, poverty and communities were amalgamated and stigmatised under the urban reformer’s gaze.\textsuperscript{20} Within urban reform discourse and ideology the term ‘slum’ packaged ‘a set of stereotypes about people and place that tell little about the communities to which the label is applied’.\textsuperscript{21} The stigma associated with the ‘squalor’ and ‘filth’ of Melbourne’s slums came to represent slum dwellers as ‘deviants’ and ‘degenerates’, and once a group had been determined deviant under the ‘ burgeoning power of the middle class state’, the authorities’ surveillance of the group increased.\textsuperscript{22} The desire for increased authority and surveillance over the working poor manifested itself in the Housing Commission’s urban blueprints, which demanded social order. In their zeal the reformers failed to recognise any order or coherence within communities that went beyond their own perceptions and experience.

The Architects’ Panel and Town Planning

Slum reclamation was absent from the Commission’s agenda until the urban renewal period of the 1950s and 1960s. The early Commission promoted industrialised prefabricated building methods and town planning regimes, but did not embrace total redevelopment and the high rise block.

In the late 1930s, the newly formed Housing Commission of Victoria held a competition to select a panel of architects who would advise on the technicalities of the Commission’s projects and housing schemes, and the Architects’ Panel was formed in 1939. The Panel devised basic town planning strategies and housing types for the Commission, and played a major role in design formation, devising the planning guidelines and construction methods for the Commission’s early developments.\textsuperscript{23} The Panel era was associated with low rise estate developments and experimentation with prefabricated and industrialised construction methods.\textsuperscript{24}

The Architects’ Panel did not endorse the high rise housing estates, believing that they would not provide suitable housing for families, they would be expensive to

\textsuperscript{23} ‘Planning Standards - Slum Clearance’, H.E. Bartlett Personal Papers member and chairman of the Architects’ panel, 1/1/2/4-1/1/2/10, Box 1/2/4-10, 1945-56, University of Melbourne Archives.
build and maintain, and they would be unsuitable for working people.  

However in the late 1940s the Panel promoted stringent planning and zoning guidelines that were devised specifically for the Commission’s housing projects, thereby endorsing the highly ordered and planned use of space. The Panel’s projects were geared towards suburban villa housing estates with low densities, and attention was paid to the need for community facilities, open space and leisure units, according to the population of each given area. The Panel believed an urban residential area of roughly 266 acres should provide for 4,000 residents, and that this area should be zoned for residential allotments, community facilities and amenities, shopping, planned leisure and open space. This would result in an overall density of fifteen persons to the acre. The Panel promoted walk-up flats for single persons and childless couples, while maintaining a rejection of multi-storey developments.

Despite these views, in 1958 the Housing Commission’s Deputy Director, J.P. Gaskin, and its Chief Technical Officer, R. Burkitt, compiled a report on overseas trends in mass housing. The report justified the decision to develop high rise, focusing on the use and success of multi-storey developments and industrialised building methods. This marked a major turning point for the Commission and the demise of the Panel. However while the Commission’s decision to build high rise signified a take-over by construction and engineer professionals, the architects were still influential. They designed the surrounding landscape in slum reclamation areas and suburban estate development projects. Nevertheless, construction engineers were better equipped to exert their dominance in the Commission, given their training and expertise in the area of construction and precast concrete panel technology. Trends in Europe and the United States encouraged the Commission’s move to embrace high density multi-storey redevelopment and slum reclamation. Urban renewal was ‘in vogue’ as a planning solution to slums and was thus inevitable.

Structure

‘The house is a machine for living in…’

25 ‘Some Notes on Housing’, 1953-55, 1/2/7, H.E. Bartlett Personal Papers, member and chairman of the Architects’ panel, University of Melbourne Archives.
26 ‘Standards of Community Planning’, 1946-51, 1/2/4, H.E. Bartlett Personal Papers, member and chairman of the Architects’ panel, University of Melbourne Archives.
27 ibid.
28 ibid.
30 ibid., pp. 193-4.
Modernist architecture can be crudely described as the fusion of art and mass production. In its design, it has strived to achieve freedom of movement in a perfectly coordinated form. Through the desire to recreate the city, modernist architects condemned the worn building facades and trampled paving stones of historic cities. New, sleekly modernist forms could not function freely in the framework of the nineteenth century city, so the city structure had to change. Modernist architecture and planning required a ‘clean-sweep’ approach; and modernist planners like Le Corbusier hoped to ‘expunge historical time from the city’. They believed that ‘one’s life must be invented rather than inherited’.

Swiss architect and urban planner Le Corbusier greatly shaped the ideas and activities of the modernist architecture movement. Writing as early as 1920, he became increasingly concerned with ‘bad planning’ in Western cities: ‘The congested jumble of places of work and dwelling places – successive encircling, choking belts, interpenetrating one another like gears … The modern industrial radio-centric city is a flourishing cancer’. Le Corbusier was concerned that ‘natural conditions had been wiped out’; by replanning cities to suit his vision, the fundamental natural conditions of ‘sun, space and greenery’ would be reinstated. ‘Healthy planning’ involved providing extensive open spaces that would serve as the lungs of the city, thereby precipitating the need to build upwards, not outwards. These vertical forms would serve as both work and dwelling places, and the introduction of community facilities and leisure units would create social feelings of civic mindedness, spiritual improvement and physical fitness. It was believed that these forms would also foster community and social interaction: ‘the new architecturally designed environment would ensure physical and mental well-being freed from the tyranny of the past bourgeois materialism’. In this way, the Corbusian city sought to impose a social order and composition which operated for the perceived collective benefit: ‘These potent ideas required the immense resources of the modern state for their realisation, not to mention the power of law to

35 Berman, All That is Solid Melts into Air, p. 306.
36 Power, Howels to High Rise, p. 189.
38 ibid., p. 184.
40 ibid.
41 ibid., p. 45.
enforce the concepts against individual resistance'.\textsuperscript{43} Le Corbusier embraced the mass production of prefabricated materials, motivated by his belief in the genuine biology of stone, cement, iron and glass.\textsuperscript{44} Stemming from this belief he argued that designed living space and human activity had a biological relationship. Le Corbusier viewed the city and its architecture as an industrial machine; an essential part of a mechanised existence to which the individual was required to adjust, to become part of the organic structure of the machine, which would then guide its inhabitants’ modes of behaviour and serve as a mechanism for social control.

Le Corbusier’s vision formed what Sennett has referred to as a ‘gridded space’ of authority that subdues the inhabitants.\textsuperscript{45} His vertical dwellings and the freeing up of open space via the modern technique of stilts\textsuperscript{46} exposed the urban landscape, creating a visual emptiness that aroused a sensation of authority.\textsuperscript{47} There was as preoccupation with strict spatial zoning of differentiated areas for industry, recreation, housing, shopping, leisure time and socialising. Le Corbusier recommended the provision of institutionalised recreation and community life.\textsuperscript{48} The Commission attempted this on its estates, creating recreational ‘community’ centres and over-designed playgrounds for children.\textsuperscript{49} Such a designed development of contrived model communities, Richard Sennett has argued, was detrimental to spontaneous street life;\textsuperscript{50} upon looking at such developments and the planning objectives behind them, the impression is that one is viewing an illustration of life rather than life itself.\textsuperscript{51}

Model communities and their zoning codes, like the high rise estates, had designated space which demanded designated activities and behaviour so that spatial order dictated daily routine. As Marshall Berman has argued:

The price of ongoing and expanding modernity is the destruction not merely of ‘traditional’ and ‘pre-modern’ institutions and environments but … of everything most vital and beautiful in the modern world itself.\textsuperscript{52}

Modernist planning discourse was so preoccupied with instituting physical order through the urban blueprint, that it ignored the existing rich culture and spontaneous nature of modern street and community life.

\textsuperscript{43}ibid.

\textsuperscript{44} Le Corbusier, \textit{Looking at City Planning}, pp. 93-94.

\textsuperscript{45} Sennett, \textit{The Conscience of the Eye}, p. 60.

\textsuperscript{46} Le Corbusier, \textit{Concerning Town Planning}, p. 88.

\textsuperscript{47} Sennett, \textit{The Conscience of the Eye}, p. 36.

\textsuperscript{48} Le Corbusier, \textit{Looking at City Planning}, p. 58.

\textsuperscript{49} Housing Commission Victoria, \textit{Annual Report No. 25}, 1962-1963, p. 3.

\textsuperscript{50} Sennett, \textit{The Conscience of the Eye}, p. 196.

\textsuperscript{51} ibid., p. 193.

\textsuperscript{52} Berman, \textit{All That is Solid Melts into Air}, p. 295.
Architects and engineers worshipped the design itself; its beauty, functions and form. In consequence, issues surrounding design overshadowed social needs in housing redevelopment. This professionalism was characteristic of ‘the post-war technocratic approach to “machine living” ‘. Le Corbusier rejected claims that modernist projects had an elitist focus. As Dunleavy notes, he strongly believed that plans were separate from politics, and that an emphasis on design and planning was ‘a legitimate exercise of professional power’. Many architectural professionals who saw the potential for such intricately designed projects to produce desirable social behaviour embraced the principles of the Corbusian vertical city. The professional zeal among architects and engineers was a driving force in the Commission’s development of high rise estates. The towers were developed on rigid spatial guidelines and were organised within contrived borders. The Corbusian ‘I’ and ‘Y’ vertical, frontal and indented forms which were used by the Commission are a good example of such order and rigidity. Their design ensured ‘privacy’ and isolation from neighbouring flats. The Commission’s preoccupation with design overshadowed their vision for urban renewal and it was through this emphasis that the high rises effectively became monuments to the technical achievements of those in the Commission. People, it seemed, were merely cogs in the machinery for the Commission’s blueprints.

Gaskin and Burkitt’s 1958 report on housing had recommended high rise developments as a practical choice for mass housing. They argued that these models would produce designs ‘which are aesthetically pleasing, structurally sound, and economical to build, maintain and manage’. The report also stated that higher densities, of up to 200 residents to the acre, were not only desirable but also necessary, on the proviso that estate management procedures were undertaken and that adequate community, shopping, parking and leisure facilities were provided. However proposals for higher densities were contradictory, given the ‘anti-overcrowding’ thrust behind slum reclamation. As Hall has noted, there was a paradox at work: ‘we must decongest the centres of our cities by increasing their densities’. The Commission argued that increasing densities and building ‘upwards’ rather than ‘outwards’ was practical because eighty per cent of the outside grounds would be left free for children’s

53 Power, Hovels to High Rise, p. 189.
55 ibid., p. 57.
57 ibid., p. 30.
58 Hall, Cities of Tomorrow, p. 207.
playgrounds, gardens and car parks. Economics also guided their reasoning, for the higher costs of acquiring land dictated higher densities.

In 1960, Slum Research Officer J.H. Davey and Commissioner Graeme Shaw inspected the slum dwellings of Melbourne’s most ‘blighted’ areas. Their report condemned areas by the block and referred to communities living under ‘sordid and verminous conditions’. It recommended that 1,000 acres of Melbourne’s ‘blighted’ neighbourhoods were ripe for demolition and required an extensive program of urban renewal. This report was referred to by residents as the ‘windshield survey’, for the assessors had driven through the suburbs, judging homes from the front seat of their car with no interior inspections or closer examination of the dwellings being made. In addition, Kaye Hargreaves has noted the report’s striking lack of evidence, and the absence of consideration of the social upheaval that such ‘wholesale’ demolition would cause.

Slum homes or not, the Commission needed to clear the way for a new urban order. It used the American term ‘urban renewal’ in the 1960 Shaw-Davey Report. According to the Commission, urban renewal encompassed a ‘wider concept’ in the redevelopment of depressed areas. ‘Urban renewal’ was a glossy promotion that suggested that wholesale demolition and redevelopment was in the best interests of the entire community. According to the Commission, urban renewal would convert the chaos and disorder of Melbourne’s slums into a cleaner and modern urban landscape. Yet the rhetoric neglected the fact that redevelopment would entail total demolition of ‘blighted’ neighbourhoods and consequent social dislocation through the fragmentation and relocation of working class communities.

Corbusian blank spaces were required in order to justify the construction and establishment of high rise estates and model communities. The Commission subscribed to the modernist urban planning agenda, which embraced a ‘clean sweep’ approach to

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60 The Housing Commission of Victoria, Annual Report No. 23, 1960-61, p. 5. This contrasted with the 1956 Royal Commission into the Housing Commission, which condemned the consideration to introduce high rise for low economic groups due to the high costs and other issues of practicality. See Royal Commission to Inquire into the Operation of the Housing Acts of Victoria and the Administration of The Housing Commission 1956, Alan Moir, Gladys Haine and Leo Patrick Devereux, Melbourne, pp. 61-2.
62 Kaye Hargreaves, This House is Not For Sale, Centre for Urban Research and Action, 1973, p. 2
63 ibid.
total redevelopment and replanning.66 ‘Hotch potch’ maintenance schemes and the partial replacement of slum areas would not, it was argued, adequately resolve the spiralling problem of urban blight: from the planners’ perspective, the objective was to ‘revive’ Melbourne’s inner suburbs, and prevent the future growth of urban blight.67 In their 1958 report Gaskin and Burkitt emphasised that there was no sense in distinguishing ‘good’ from ‘bad’ housing in a reclamation area. The clean sweep approach would enable ‘complete freedom in replanning and rebuilding’.68 The Commission’s freedom in this respect is clearly demonstrated by the fact that more than double the amount of housing declared substandard by the Shaw-Davey Report was demolished.69

The decision to build the high rise was met with applause from several sections in the community. The Bolte government strongly supported the move, as did community and church organisations, private industry such as the Master Builders Association, the Victorian Institute of Architects, and the City Development Association.70 With this widespread support, the Commission began the program with autonomy from government and little public criticism. As Mark Peel notes, such support marked a significant period of history, with governments and other bodies gladly offering planners ‘the chance to transform their mixed heritage of utopian radicalism and architectural determinism into a powerful material practice’.71

**Behaviour**

With the development of high rise and villa estates in the early 1960s, the Commission viewed itself as ‘a big business in property management’.72 In its publications, it celebrated the high rise and promoted itself in order to continue the urban renewal program as well as preserve the properties it had developed. Additionally, rent collection and the policy of screening for ‘suitable’ tenants were crucial to ensure the Commission’s continuing viability.73

Prior to high rise development, Gaskin and Burkitt’s 1958 report had recognised the need for a thorough system of estate management in order to avoid arrears, property damage and the potential embarrassment of the Commission:

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67 Petty, ‘Report on Slum Reclamation’.
Constant supervision is essential to keep community facilities operating and clean … The success of housing and maintaining tenants in multi-storey flats is dependent almost wholly on estate management and any laxity on behalf of the Authority is taken up by the careless tenant to the detriment of all concerned and reflects lack of control by the parent organisation.74

The Commission’s faceless management program followed on from its functionalist preoccupations. Yet the irony of modernist planning lies in its attempt to obliterate the pinnacle of modernist culture – the street and street life.75 As Berman highlights, the modern movement in architecture and urbanism turned against the modern romance of the street, which came to represent everything ‘dingy, disorderly, sluggish, stagnant, worn out, obsolete – everything that the dynamism and progress of modernity were supposed to leave behind’.76 The slum community, in its physical and social ‘disorder’, was an obstacle to better planning and modern living. As Tony Birch has argued, the slum was presented as

hostile and debilitating, affecting the children in particular. As a result reformers were able to present themselves as paternalistic but benevolent bodies, whose task it was to ‘rescue’ these children by bulldozing their homes77

‘Human renewal’78 justifications for high rise redevelopment and replanning were apparent in the attitudes of the Commission and its supporters.79 Their environmental determinism went hand in hand with an ignorance of the social, political and economic factors shaping the lives of a community.80

Re-planning focused on zoning to impose order. According to the ideas of Le Corbusier this was the means to create freedom and harmony. Yet strict spatial allocation could be stifling. As Gans has noted in the American context, planners lacked social and cultural consideration in calling for ‘many parks and playgrounds, but [leaving] out the movie house, the neighbourhood tavern, and the local clubroom; they proposed museums and churches, but no hot-dog stands and night clubs’.81 He has also

75 Berman, All That is Solid Melts into Air, p. 316.
76 ibid., p. 317.
78 Gans, People and Plans, p. 73.
79 See notes for ‘Slum Reclamation and Urban Re-development Conference’, convened by H. R. Petty (Minister for Housing and Immigration), South Melbourne Town Hall, December 12, 1960; see also Gaskin and Burkitt, A Report on Some Aspects, 1958, p. 51.
80 Gans, People and Plans, pp. 2-8.
81 ibid., p. 62.
pointed to the way that spatial regimes dictated social order and efficiency through the erection of borders that facilitated surveillance mechanisms: zoning sought to categorise communities by race, ethnicity and class, which not only operated to create divisions, but also as a key surveillance mechanism. Planning objectives attempted ‘to create spatial and cultural conditions in which duty and self interest coincide, to put into practice the Benthamite maxim that the more we are watched the better we behave, and that we behave best of all when we are watching ourselves.’ The high rise environment promoted ‘desirable’ modes of behaviour. The structures were ‘a geometry of power on which inner life remains shapeless.’ The estates offered no replacement for lost street life and culture, as the average estate provided for social interaction in non-neutral areas such as surrounding gardens or in estate community centres or communal recreation rooms – areas that were highly visible to the eye of the estate manager.

The generic working class community experienced communal order and support, shared values and space. In the face of poverty such communities appealed to local ‘economies’ – scavenging, theft, and barter – while sharing a code of neighbourhood resistance that protected the streets from authorities. A substantial body of historical work has considered slum street culture and the operation of such working class ‘mutual aid’ social systems. While social division and conflict did exist in these communities, a sense of order and community nevertheless prevailed. Those criticising the principles and aims of urban renewal have emphasised its disregard for neighbourhoods and the diversity of street life. For example, Jane Jacobs has commented that:

There is a quality even meaner than outright ugliness or disorder and this meaner quality is the dishonest mask of pretended order, achieved by ignoring or suppressing the real order that is struggling to exist and to be served.

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82 ibid., p. 27.
84 Sennett, The Conscience of the Eye, p. 68.
87 ibid., see also Birch, ‘The Battle for Social Control’.
89 Jacobs, The Death and Life.
90 ibid., p. 25.
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Stigmas and images of working class resistance induced fear in middle class urban reformers, who hoped that by imposing the urban renewal blueprint, social order would prevail. They increased surveillance over those ‘spaces of resistance’ they feared.91 Huxley has also suggested that there was a connection between ‘sanitary housing and aesthetic environments and the resulting improvement of labour power’.92 The environmental-determinist discourse emphasised that efficiency in labour productivity could be achieved alongside the provision of modern and clean dwellings. This parallel between economic efficiency, desirable modes of behaviour and spatial order is pertinent to systems of social control which operated on the high rise estates. The urban landscape served, in Michel Foucault’s words, as a physical ‘political technology’ used for the purposes of power and control;93 and such a deliberate arrangement of ‘spatial unities’ could enforce modes of self-conscious behaviour and lead to self-policing.94

In 1961 the Commission established its Estate Management Branch to supervise and manage the high rise estates.95 The Estate Officer ensured the installation of inoffensive, reliable and suitable tenants: those who would abide by a set of conditions, including regular rent payments and no property damage. Estate Officers were predominantly male. Many were ex-prison officers and other ex-employees of closed social control institutions.96 They collected rent and arrears, inspected flats, and ‘installed’ tenants.97 According to the Estate Officer’s Handbook, one of their roles was to police ‘the condition of the units and behaviour of tenants under [their] control’.98 The Handbook instructed: ‘you are the eyes and ears of the Commission [and] it is essential that matters which are not completely satisfactory are brought to the attention of the District Officer’.99

Estate Management also attempted to alleviate concerns in some sections of the community that, despite the aims of slum reclamation, the high rise estates would become the ‘slums of the future’.100 The Commission argued that careful design, rigorous management policy and maintenance upkeep, would ensure constant supervision and prevent the development of slum environments.101 The Commission screened potential tenants ‘with reference to their previous records’ in order to bar

94 ibid., p. 200.
97 ibid., p. 199.
99 ibid.
100 Tibbits, ; “The Enemy within Our Gates”; , p. 15.
101 ibid.
from the estates families known to create slum conditions. Estate Managers performed the screening, instructed by the Handbook in the following terms:

There are ways and means of loosening a person's tongue, but as we live in a democratic country and as you are agents of the Housing Commission it is not your position to resort to the means available to the less scrupulous.

The Commission believed that overcrowding was a direct contributing factor to the existence of slums, and the prospect of overcrowding in the new estates heightened the justification to check up on tenants. Following the 1956 Royal Commission to address such concerns, the Estate Officers' inspections also involved checking for extra individuals in flats. Such regulations disregarded the fact that working class families had members of their extended family residing in the same dwelling out of economic necessity, and only served to further dislocate communities. Multi-storey developments were unsuitable for large families, so the Commission constructed low-rise walk-ups to address their needs, although the project was abandoned in 1966 as it was said to be financially unviable. Lack of space and the breaking down of larger families were problems that were highlighted in a study undertaken by the Brotherhood of St. Laurence, which looked favourably upon high rise as a form of public housing, but highlighted tenants' concerns about lack of space and members of the extended family being forced to find alternative accommodation.

Propaganda
In 1966 the Commission completed a thirty storey block named Park Towers in South Melbourne. This development received much local and international attention, and the Commission reported it to be 'the tallest pre-cast load-bearing wall building in the world'. As Tibbitts has noted, '[t]he success surrounding the construction and opening of Park Towers marked the zenith of public acclaim for the slum reclamation and high-rise program', and the Commission made ongoing appeals to the Government to expand its powers 'to meet the wider concept of urban renewal with a change of name to [the] Housing and Urban Redevelopment Commission'.

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102 ibid.
104 Royal Commission to Inquire into the Operation of the Housing Acts.
107 Stevenson, Martin and O'Neil, High Living, p. 118.
110 ibid., p. 8.
desire for further authority was characterised by the production of boosterist publications. Housing Commission reports became increasingly glossy and promotional, and focused on the successes of slum reclamation. The Commission’s celebration of its achievements carried the egotism and arrogance inherent in the Corbusian modernist urban landscape. The ‘tall, clean and efficient modern buildings’ were not only celebrated as public housing developments, but as monuments to those in the Commission.

Yet outside the Commission’s sphere of support there were expressions of doubt and hostility. Residents resented the ‘slum’ label that had been placed on their homes and the disruption of community life through the slum reclamation program. Vandalism was a problem on the new estates, and middle class opposition to urban renewal projects was rising, with angry lobbyists referring to the estates as the ‘slums of the future’. Overseas, problems relating to high rise estate life were even more pronounced. In East London the Ronan Point towers suffered a tragic gas explosion in 1968, and in the United States concern was mounting over estate violence and the formation of ghetto culture. High rise construction for public housing overseas was being scaled down; ‘everything was suddenly wrong with them; they leaked, they condensed, they blew up, the lifts did not work, the children vandalised them, old ladies lived in fear.’ While the Commission recognised some of these difficulties, its Annual Reports did not really acknowledge the problems. To admit flaw or failure would have meant abandoning the project and thwarting the ‘moving spirit’ of modernity. The Commission continued to view its blueprints for low income residential development, and its wider planning agenda, as providing ‘windows for the future’. Aside from modernist rhetoric, the Commission’s self-promotion reflected a search for glory for architectural and engineering achievements. The Commission wanted recognition on a local, inter-state and international level. This was reflected in the technical emphasis in their reports, which devoted a section to technical advancements and the progress of urban renewal, entitled ‘Planning and Construction’. The section focused on design, productivity in pre-cast concrete load-

111 Hall, Cities of Tomorrow, p. 234.
112 Tibbits, ‘“The Enemy Within Our Gates”’, p. 150.
113 Hargreaves, This House, p. 1.
114 Stevenson, Martin and O’Neil, High Living, p. 145.
115 One side of Ronan Point Towers collapsed after a gas explosion, killing five people. The explosion marked the process of phasing out high rise development in Great Britain. After the incident, high rise gained notoriety in the media, and in the public eye. Such flats became impossible to let. See Power, Hovels to Highrise, pp. 196-197.
116 Hall, Cities of Tomorrow, p. 226.
bearing walls, \textsuperscript{120} progress in estate developments, and areas coming up for reclamation. \textsuperscript{121} In 1968 the Commission prided itself on a variety of technical advances such as mould resistant paint, underground car parks, gas and electric stoves, stainless steel sinks, kitchen fans, running hot water, power points, toilet lights and clothes hoists. \textsuperscript{122} The reports featured photographs that were composed to glorify the forms and layout of the estates. In a display of the fruits of the Commission’s achievements, panoramic aerial images of the Melbourne skyline emphasised the high rises domination of the surrounding landscape. Such views glorified the progress of the construction process, which was a crucial tool in the glorification of modernist forms. \textsuperscript{123} Le Corbusier himself revelled in such aerial perspectives of the modernist urban landscape. \textsuperscript{124}

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The enthusiasm for high rise construction peaked with Park Towers, but it was short lived. Three years later, the Commission was discredited and abandoned by its support base and after 1972 it announced it would phase out high rise development. \textsuperscript{125} Several factors contributed. Community crusades against the Commission had created a sensation in the daily press; and the Commission also found itself under fire for rising rates of vandalism, crime and abuse on high rise estates. Bad publicity was a major contributor, and in 1977 the Commission was exposed for corruption when it was found to be involved in making crooked land deals. \textsuperscript{126}

The Commission’s highly ordered technocratic approach had dictated that a new urban order would establish a corresponding social order. However the environmentally determinist discourse of urban renewal and slum reclamation did not have any regard for the importance of community and street life. \textsuperscript{127} Its logic was that urban renewal would also achieve ‘human renewal’. \textsuperscript{128} Within such a discourse there was a complete disregard for the economic, social and political structures of communities and cities. Spatial considerations over-rode other considerations. \textsuperscript{129} Instead of valuing a city that contained streets, human beings, culture and social order (even if it may be a ‘slum’), the urban renewal program and the modernist urban

\textsuperscript{120} This was a major prefabricated construction material produced locally in the Commission’s Holmesglen Factory and used for high rise and low rise estate development.

\textsuperscript{121} Housing Commission Victoria, \textit{Annual Report No. 29, 1966-1967}, p. 9.


\textsuperscript{123} Sennett, \textit{The Conscience of the Eye}, p. 171.

\textsuperscript{124} Le Corbusier, \textit{Concerning Town Planning}, p. 76.

\textsuperscript{125} \textit{ibid.}, p. 124.


\textsuperscript{128} \textit{ibid.}, p. 73.

\textsuperscript{129} \textit{ibid.}, p. 72.
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revolution valued landscapes of stone, steel and cement that it manipulated and constructed.