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Review of Wetherell, S. (2023) Foundations: how the built environment made twentieth-century Britain

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on the subject. (Full disclosure: I was involved in that project.) But Keil's account is less accessible and less grounded historically: he makes no reference, for example, to the works of H.J. Dyos or Ken Jackson. Abbot's and Keil's surveys, then, are complementary more than competitive. Together, they provide a fine introduction to the subject, including how it has been treated in the media and by academics.

We need more surveys of the sort that Abbott provides. There is surely a general appetite for what urban historians have to say, but few of us try to satisfy it. Perhaps that is because publishers show too little interest. As yet, Oxford's series, which runs to more than 700 titles, includes no survey of cities, neighbourhoods or housing. Maybe we should lobby them. And by 'we', I especially mean historians who, by and large – and speaking of stereotypes – have been encouraged and trained to create narratives that are both engaging and truth-seeking. A simple recipe, but all-too-rare.

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Sam Wetherell, *Foundations: How the Built Environment Made Twentieth-Century Britain*. Princeton University Press: Princeton, NJ, 2020. 272pp. 43 b/w illustrations. £32.00 hbk. £22.00 pbk.
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Sam Wetherell's *Foundations: How the Built Environment Made Twentieth-Century Britain* offers 'a history of twentieth-century Britain told through the transformation of its built environment' (p. 3). It is a lively, smartly paced book that introduces readers to a suite of built forms that transformed urban Britain from the 1930s to the 1990s, whilst at the same time engaging with some of the important historiographical trends that characterize the field of modern British urban history at present. Wetherell's chief concern is with the much-debated transition from a mid-century politics of welfarism and state-sponsored economic development to a late century 'neoliberal' political economy based on faith in the freedoms of the market. *Foundations* traces this transition by organizing its analysis around six distinctive urban forms: the industrial estate, the shopping precinct, the public housing estate, the private housing estate, the shopping mall and the science park. The first three of these forms, Wetherell argues, are paradigmatic of what he calls the 'developmental social politics', which held sway in Britain from the 1930s to the 1970s and was 'oriented toward full employment, urban redevelopment, managing consumer demand, modernizing domestic life, and fabricating community out of proximity' (p. 4). The last three, meanwhile, are totems of neoliberalism and represent 'the abandonment of the developmental and social aims that guided mid-twentieth-century regimes, and their replacement with the market as the ultimate arbiter of political action' (p. 12).

Wetherell devotes a chapter each to these six paradigmatic urban forms, and along the way presents plenty of interesting detail on these building typologies and the social experience(s) of installing them in twentieth-century Britain. One particularly interesting aspect of the approach is the attention given to the transnational transfers and circulation of these built forms and the ideas that surrounded them. Thus, we see shopping malls, business parks and architectural theories of 'defensible space' find

their way from the United States to Britain. And there are important but hardly known stories of the imperial and post-imperial circulation of built forms as, for example, industrial estates came to be planted in East and West Africa and South Asia as tools of colonial economic development, before being taken up by US agencies as part of their Cold War-era international development programmes. Wetherell's determination to read British urbanism as an inherently imperial formation in a postcolonial (and transatlantic) context is stimulating and productive and this is undoubtedly a growth area for future studies in the field.

At times, Wetherell's sharp division of his six typologies into 'developmental' and 'neoliberal' camps does risk becoming rather too schematic, and one has the feeling that some of the ever-messy empirics of this history are skated over for formalist reasons. I struggled to square Wetherell's opposition of the 'public' shopping precinct and the 'private' shopping mall with my own research in this area, which reveals complex public-private combines undertaking both of these types of development (and more) right across the period under study here. Some of Britain's post-war shopping precincts were built and owned by public authorities, but many were simply private commercial developments, while others were built by private developers on land leased from public authorities. This nuance suggests there was nothing quintessentially 'public' about the shopping precinct as a built form, but that the complex and variable political and economic relations that underlay specific building projects were supremely important.

Wetherell's concern in this book is to emphasize the epochal nature of the neoliberal transition – 'to make an assertion about change rather than continuity in the last third of the twentieth century' (p. 11) – but this does lead to a somewhat overdrawn contrast between the political, economic and urban forms of the post-war and the post-Thatcher eras. In order to stress the 'public' character of post-war social housing designs, for example, Wetherell focuses on high-density housing estates and on 'district heating' schemes (publicly owned, estate-wide heating systems). But, as Wetherell acknowledges, the vast majority of post-war social housing in Britain was low rise and low density while the application of district heating was vanishingly thin (just 200,000 households in England and Wales by 1980, at a time when the council housing stock in England alone was well over 5 million and 57 per cent of the British population lived in owner-occupied homes). It is hard to see district heating as a technological totem for the age when its social reach was so limited.

Despite these reservations, there is a great deal to appreciate and enjoy in this book. Wetherell's account of the coming of the science park to Britain (with its new tech- and knowledge-based modes of economic activity, new relations and experiences of labour and post-modern, post-industrial landscapes) is novel and fascinating. So too is his account of community planning (along with its limits and fragmentation in postcolonial Britain) on the Thamesmead Estate in Greater London, or his treatment of late century gated housing estates and their paranoid social geographies. Wetherell has a keen archival eye for unearthing the personal and social experiences of inhabiting the landscapes of twentieth-century Britain, and thus humanizes this history of urban built forms admirably. The book's consideration of urban built forms as social and political 'agents' of sorts – 'encoded [with] the prevailing political, social, technical, and economic assumptions of their age' (p. 5), and designed according to historically specific notions of citizenship, subjectivity and society – is also productive and stimulating. And here, the book echoes work in the

field of Science and Technology Studies (STS) on the agency and 'obduracy' of the built environment.¹

At its heart, this book deconstructs now 'obsolete' urban landscapes: those that have outlasted the prevailing political currents of their time but still stand, denuded of contemporaneity but maintaining their powerful presence at the heart of urban and social life. Such an intellectual framing allows Wetherell to show how neoliberalism in Britain was 'layered on top of the ruins of mid-twentieth-century developmental projects', and to present 'the built environment...as a giant museum, exhibiting the decrepit and shabby remains of prior means of capital accumulation along with obsolete visions of society' (p. 5). *Foundations* should serve students, specialists and the interested public as a great guide to this living urban museum.

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¹ A. Hommels, 'STS and the city: techno-politics, obduracy and globalisation', *Science as Culture*, 29 (2020), 410–16; T.F. Geiryn, 'What buildings do', *Theory and Society*, 31 (2002), 35–74.