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“I am convinced I shall achieve something valuable if I can brighten the lives of the people here”: bombsites, housing and art in Lambeth

Introduction

This paper discusses three sculptural reliefs by the artist Peter Laszlo Peri installed upon two state-built social housing estates in Lambeth after the Second World War. Both estates were built by the London County Council (LCC). The London County Council was formed in 1889 and controlled the newly-formed County of London, roughly the area of land that is now referred to as inner London. The London County Council was superseded by the Greater London Council (GLC) in 1965. The GLC controlled a much larger area of land and a far greater population, taking in the surrounding suburban areas of London.

After discussing the LCC’s treatment of communities within their replanning of London, I shall examine the three artwork’s physical setting within the reconstruction of the immediate area: the two estates they were installed upon, as well as the wider context of the LCC’s housing and public art policies in the post-war years. Reconstruction of this area, and many other areas of London, was needed after the damage caused by the aerial attacks on London as part of the London Blitz of 1940-41, as well as later V1 and V2 attacks.

In 1952 the South London Press describes how artist Peter Laszlo Peri had approached the LCC with the idea of creating concrete reliefs on the façades of housing.¹ Once commissioned, Peri produced *Following the Leader (Memorial to the Children Killed in the Blitz)*, installed on the Vauxhall Gardens estate, as well as *Boys Playing Football* and *Mother and children playing* on the nearby South Lambeth estate.

These artworks sit within the context of other later LCC artworks installed within housing schemes as part of the LCC's 'Patronage of the arts' programme, a scheme formalised in 1956, running until 1965, with the replacement of the LCC by the GLC (Greater London Council). The scheme aimed to install artworks within housing estates, old people's homes, schools and parks. Sometimes these were commissions with a specific site in mind, and sometimes the LCC would purchase pre-existing works. The LCC often purchased works they saw in exhibitions, such as the LCC's open air sculpture exhibitions that ran every three years from 1948. For instance, Franta Belsky's *Lesson* was on display in the 1957 LCC open air sculpture exhibition, and subsequent versions of *Lesson* were purchased for the Avebury estate in Bethnal Green and Rosa Bassett school.² From the late 1940s the LCC began installing art on housing estates, however, once allocated funding was in place from 1956, the patronage of the arts scheme officially began and was administered with great enthusiasm by the LCC. The last years of the LCC produced a great many installations of artworks in housing settings. In 1959 alone, the LCC installed Franta Belsky's *Lesson* on the Avebury estate in Bethnal Green; Elizabeth Frink's *Blind beggar and his dog* on the Cranbrook estate in Bethnal Green; Willi Soukop's *Pied Piper* mural on the Elmington estate in Camberwell; Leon Underwood's *The Pursuit of Ideas* on the Hilgrove estate in South Hampstead and Siegfried Charoux's *The Neighbours* installed on the Highbury Quadrant estate in Highbury. The LCC's aim was to introduce artwork into the lives of ordinary Londoners, as well as to add interest to the environment.

Many of the artists who worked for the LCC were émigré artists, such as those mentioned above: Siegfried Charoux and Willi Soukop were born in Vienna and Franta Belsky was born in Brno, Czechoslovakia. Many of these artists were already established in their native countries before having to leave due to the political upheavals caused by Nazi persecution across Europe, and they brought with them their skills and the benefits of their training. Peter Laszlo Peri was no exception. He was born in 1899 in Budapest, Hungary, and as a young man,

attended evening classes in art, becoming apprenticed to a stonemason. Due to their support of the Hungarian communist revolution, Peri and his wife fled to Vienna, then Paris, and then settled in Berlin in 1920. In Berlin, Peri worked with the avant-garde group Der Sturm, building a reputation as a constructivist artist. As a precursor to the work he would carry out with the LCC in the 1940s and 1950s, Peri worked for the architect's department of Berlin. In 1933, Peri and his second wife fled Berlin after she was arrested for distributing communist literature. They sought political exile in England, and the couple moved to Hampstead in London. Peri had been an established artist in Berlin, but was unknown in England: worse, he had had to leave most of his work behind in Berlin, meaning he had to build a career again almost from scratch. Once living in England, in Hampstead alongside other émigré artists and those with anti-Fascist politics, he co-founded, and regularly exhibited with, the Artists International Association.³ The Artists International Association was an exhibiting society with left-leaning politics, interested in promoting wider access to art, such as in the form of public murals. Peri's politics, social conscience, and experience in architectural art and public art, meant he was perfectly placed for the post-war work of the LCC, installing artworks on housing for the benefit of 'ordinary' people.

The three Peri artworks in Lambeth, all produced and installed between the late 1940s and early 1950s, are significant responses to trauma: bomb damage, displacement and a rapidly deteriorated and, at once, rebuilt, environment. They sit alongside the histories of architecture and planning, and I shall examine these artworks to further understand the reconstruction of the Lambeth area, as well as London as a whole. John Gold describes how the study of the architecture of the Modern Movement allows for, and indeed requires, a wide range of scholarship and source material to fully understand the era.⁴ By looking at the artwork left behind by the LCC - a visionary, yet now defunct, municipal authority - the very specific needs and intentions of the LCC, and the residents they catered for, in the immediate post-war years

are revealed. These artworks, often figurative, are a record of the posed and positioned concrete citizens served by the LCC. They stand alongside the history and remains of the LCC's planning and architecture, and by being set amongst them are inextricably linked with them. However, these figurative sculptures remain a relatively overlooked area of the LCC's ambitious rebuilding programme.

Historians Dawn Pereira⁵, Dolores Mitchell⁶ and Margaret Garlake⁷ have all written about the LCC's art patronage but not a close examination of the housing artworks, and not as an analysis of the artworks as a communication tool between the LCC and Londoners. Garlake describes the function of these works as identifying a place amongst the new and anonymous post-war architecture, and as being a marker for a community.⁸ The LCC's collection of art does indeed perform this function, particularly the stand-alone figurative sculptures in prominent settings in public areas of housing estates, for instance alongside a community centre, near pathways through the estate, or near old people's homes. However, a closer reading of individual works, particularly when sited amongst housing, allows one to position these - predominantly figurative - artworks as responses to new environments, of communities (re)-housed, rapid change and trauma. I shall explain how the installation of these three Peter Laszlo Peri artworks, within the context of the LCC's wider policies on housing and their patronage of the arts, represent a municipal authority's response to sites of destruction, trauma, change and anxiety.

Destruction and housing: 'the new Britain must be our war memorial'⁹

The frontispiece image of the 1943 *County of London Plan* shows a street devastated by bomb damage. The scene at once familiar - one of a terraced street - but also unsettling, odd. The chaotic scene, and the act of photographing such a scene, is reminiscent of slum photography, of the 'spectacle of the slum'.¹⁰ However, the purpose of this image is not to depict slum conditions, but to highlight the damage and disruption caused by an aerial attack. The

photograph is a microcosm of distress, focused on a section of a terraced street and a handful of residents. A scene oft-repeated across London and the rest of the country, homes and their contents have been turned inside out and upside down: what should be indoors in a private, domestic space is now out on the street, in disarray, and in public view. The strain of the situation is clear on the faces of the adults in the image, their clothes soiled with the dirt and dust of destruction. Onlookers in the background evidence of the spectacle of destruction and distress. A removal truck sits in the street, loaded up with salvaged furniture, the contents of people's lives piled awkwardly onto the truck. In the foreground, a group of five children stand amongst the glass and the rubble. The boy in the centre looks straight up at the viewer, bed spring in hand. Part of a bed displaced by a bomb, now clasped as trophy, adds to this topsy-turvy disruption of ordinary life, and the elevated view of the camera adds to the strangeness of the scene.

The LCC was acutely aware of the need to repair London housing damaged by aerial attack, as well as to continue to deal with the backlog of 'slum clearance' begun in the interwar period as a result of the 1930 Housing Act. The Act declared that if a local authority believed of an area,

that the dwelling-houses in that area are by reason of disrepair or sanitary defects unfit for human habitation, or are by reason of their bad arrangement, or the narrowness or bad arrangement of the streets, dangerous or injurious to the health of the inhabitants of the area.¹¹

then an area could be declared a 'clearance area'. In other words, housing could be designated to be pulled down as part of the slum clearance of an area. Some slum clearance was achieved between the wars, but the Second World War necessarily halted this process, meaning that many properties that had been identified for clearance in the 1930s had deteriorated still further

throughout the war years. This, as well as the destruction wrought from aerial attack, meant that a significant proportion of housing stock in areas like Lambeth was 'sub-standard', according to the 1930 Housing Act.

Plans to rebuild London were set out in *The County of London Plan*, commissioned by the LCC and published in 1943, the war still raging and ahead of further damage from V1 and V2 attacks. After the war and the bomb damage inflicted on London, of the LCC's 98,000 dwellings, 11,000 were either destroyed or uninhabitable.¹² A task both daunting and inspiring, described by the leader of the LCC Lord Latham in his introduction to the County of London Plan: 'We can have the London we want; the London that people will come from the four corners of the world to see; if only we determine that we will have it; and that no weakness or indifference shall prevent it.'¹³

This stirring rhetoric, alongside the Plan's frontispiece, is designed to induce moral outrage at the destruction in the image and inspire the reader to follow the LCC's plans to sweep away and start again. The image, and the persuasive tone of voice, are intended to make the message that your home may need to be pulled down seem a sensible - and necessary - idea. As well as the physical damage to property, there was the emotional trauma of thousands of displaced people who had lost their homes. Lynda Nead describes how, 'War had shattered families, physically, emotionally and psychologically, and the home was necessarily the foundation of post-war reconstruction and the restoration of family life. Home would repair the damage of war.'¹⁴

And it was to housing, the setting for the home, that the LCC's attention turned, realising the emotional significance of the home as well as the urgent need to house those returning from war, expecting a new and better Britain, acknowledged by Carter and Goldfinger in their Penguin book, *The County of London Plan Explained*, in 1945: 'The London Planners know

that all the thousands of young married men and women in the Forces and war industry look forward more than anything to HOMES OF THEIR OWN.’¹⁵ However, in the immediate post-war years of 1945-49, the urgency of housing dominated over any stylistic or design considerations in housing. In 1945, the responsibility of housing at the LCC was transferred from the Architect to the Valuer. John Forshaw, as Architect to the LCC and co-author of the *County of London Plan*, resigned in protest over this snub. Under the Valuer, rapid results took priority over design and the look of much of the LCC’s housing in the late 1940s harked back to the inter-war years: brick-built, neo-Georgian, five storey estates.¹⁶ Both the South Lambeth estate and the Vauxhall Gardens estate appear such.

The impact of LCC planning on the community of Lambeth

The communities of London are a focus of *The County of London Plan*, and are discussed throughout: rhetoric that Nicholas Day, in his 1988 thesis, describes as ‘socialist posturing’.¹⁷ As early as page two of the plan, the geographical communities of London are discussed: communities are defined by space, as the amount of space taken up by a population. As well as describing their physical grouping, the authors of the County of London Plan note, ‘a strong local loyalty to each community whether large or small’.¹⁸ The importance of communities is strongly emphasised in the Plan’s rebuilding of London, and, the authors warn, ‘To ignore or scrap these communities in favour of a new and theoretical sub-division of areas would be both academic and too drastic; the plan might look well on paper but it would not be London.’¹⁹ Communities are defined by their space and population: a ‘neighbourhood unit’ is explained and defined in the *County of London Plan* as an area of a population around 6,000-10,000 people.²⁰ The idea of the neighbourhood unit being a community was not a new one but gained real traction with the LCC and planners of the 1940s. Arthur Ling, influenced by American ideas, had studied the neighbourhood unit idea - that communities could define and form the urban environment - in his 1936-38 thesis, ‘Social and community units’, supervised by Patrick

Abercrombie, co-author of the 1943 *County of London Plan*.²¹ These units are also discussed in the 1944 Dudley Report, with the link between the urban neighbourhood unit and community being made explicitly: ‘the idea of the urban neighbourhood must be not merely to break down the large town units into units of a size which will allow a full growth of community spirit and neighbourhood feeling, but to ensure that its redevelopment takes place in such a way that each unit, while still essentially but a single part of a greater whole, becomes a comprehensible entity in itself’.²² Lambeth, an area in South London, is one such community. Michael Collins writes that, although the County of London Plan embraced planning on a grand scale, ‘Perhaps of greater importance it identified and formalised London’s village communities’.²³ With planning on a massive scale through the anonymous collective of the LCC’s Architect’s Department, the LCC needed to ensure recognition of these communities both in its use of architecture, but also, crucially, in its use of public art. The LCC used public art, in its very presence, as well as its subject, to communicate its ideas about community and housing to residents. The depiction of, and perhaps celebration of, working-class Lambeth dwellers was a subject apt for the politics and thinking of the immediate post-war years. Architects in Britain, particularly the LCC, were greatly interested in the society, architecture and politics of communist Russia. This interest began in the 1930s, but even into the late 1940s publications and articles still spread word of Russia’s reconstruction. There was also the Society for Cultural Relations with the USSR (SCR) founded in 1924, which had an Architecture and Planning Group. Arthur Ling, Berthold Lubetkin, Cleeve Barr were all involved in this group, and all had connections to the LCC. The SCR also had a branch at the LCC and some of its members were involved with the Communist Party architects’ group. Groups such as these organised trips over to Russia and in 1955, John Forshaw (Architect to the Council from June 1941 to December 1945) and other architects from the Ministry of Housing and Local Government were invited over to Russia.²⁴ In 1947, a symposium entitled ‘The kind of architecture we want

in Britain’, was organised by the Architecture and Planning Group of the Society for Cultural Relations with the USSR. A review of the symposium concluded: ‘I personally believe that we shall get a great architecture in England only when the working class is dominant, when the state and society are moulded by the great ideas of socialism, and when architecture is inspired by the conscious aim to celebrate and inspire the achievements of the people...’.²⁵ This celebration, or monumentalising, of ‘the people’ is evident on the facades of the South Lambeth and the Vauxhall Gardens estate, Lambeth, and parallels with the Socialist Realist art of Russia are clear, both visually and ideologically.

Art and the London County Council

Alongside the massive programme of rebuilding after the Second World War, the LCC took a keen interest in the artistic and cultural life of Londoners. The LCC took this cultural responsibility seriously, as W. Eric Jackson (former Senior Assistant Clerk of the London County Council and enthusiastic chronicler of the LCC) writes in his 1965 history of the LCC, ‘The layout of a public park, the design of furniture in schools and homes, even the typography of an agenda paper, can demonstrate cultural values’.²⁶ Due to the 1947 General Powers Act, the LCC (along with other local authorities) could provide funding for cultural organisations delivering culture to Londoners. The LCC made grants available to the Whitechapel art gallery, Dulwich picture gallery and the British Film Institute. For the LCC’s final year, 1964-65, the LCC allocated £400,000 ‘between music (including the running costs of the Royal Festival Hall), opera, ballet, drama, art galleries, films, and other forms of artistic expression’.²⁷ The patronage of the arts scheme, ad-hoc at first, was formalised in 1956 and £20,000 a year was allocated to the purchasing and commissioning of works of art for this purpose. The LCC’s minutes of proceedings record how this figure was arrived at: ‘The approximate value of new architectural work and open-space development in 1954-55 was £20,000,000; we think that £20,000 a year would be a reasonable sum for the Council to set aside for the purposes we have

in mind'.²⁸ The leader of the London County Council, Isaac Hayward, had a keen interest in the patronage of the arts and on 2nd November 1954 he was asked if he would make a statement on the Council's policy regarding the acquisition of works of art. He replied as follows:

'On occasion sculpture and other artistic decorative features have been incorporated in some of the Council's schools and other buildings and in some of its housing estates as part of the building scheme, and charged the capital cost of construction...I am strongly of the opinion that the Council has a cultural and educational responsibility to do what it reasonably can to encourage and assist in the provision of works of art'.²⁹

The success of the LCC's patronage of the arts at least partially lies with the backing and enthusiasm of Isaac Hayward as the leader of the LCC between 1947 and 1965, and he would often attend the unveiling ceremony for an artwork.

The climate the post-war LCC operated in was of a political environment favourable and ready to accept such state patronage, to accept the role of art in civilising a post-war society, and the need to rebuild anew. Margaret Garlake quotes C. Tennyson, the chairman of the Central Institute of Art & Design: 'The new Britain must be our War Memorial...in rebuilding the fine old churches and halls that have been destroyed, don't let us be too much enslaved by the idea of restoration. It is so much more important to encourage creation by living artists.'³⁰ The LCC's activities did not exist in isolation and must be viewed in the context of other local authorities such as Hertfordshire's successful programme, the development of the New Towns and their integral art schemes, and a general expansion in art education across the country. However, the LCC went further than any other local authority in its enthusiasm for the arts, as Dawn Pereira identifies,

'During this period the LCC operated the most comprehensive public arts programme within the era of post-war development. The LCC's intervention was innovative as it

was the only council in Britain to place contemporary art in such a diverse range of sites, including housing estates, homes for the elderly, schools, colleges, parks, and highways. Its vision enabled working-class Londoners to access art in settings that had never been utilised so widely before: a radical approach in that it placed murals and sculptures outside people's front doors in the heart of their communities. This was art for the 'common man'.³¹

The post-war era also saw the formation of the Arts Council from the previously-named Committee for Encouragement of Music and the Arts (CEMA), with the Arts Council's motto, 'the best for the most'.³² Garlake explains this assumption as, 'the premise that making and experiencing art is no less integral to a civilised society than education or health care'.³³ The LCC's vision of incorporating a body of artwork amongst the rebuilding of London after the war enabled a wide section of mainly working-class Londoners to access art in their everyday environment. The LCC's aim was to not just provide shelter and new housing for Londoners, but also to provide aesthetic interest and cultural enrichment. As Pereira describes, the LCC was effectively placing artwork outside the windows of residents in areas such as Lambeth.

Opportunities for artists in post-war Britain were limited. Budapest-born Peter Laszlo Peri, an established artist who had practised in Europe, found himself in England pitching to a municipal authority for little recompense, to practise his art. As Herbert Read observed with frustration in 1944, opportunities for sculptors from rich patrons were lacking:

"the sculptor is essentially a public artist. He cannot confine himself to the bibelots which are all that fall within the capacity of the individual patron of our time. The sculptor is driven into the open, into the church and the market-place, and his work must rise majestically above the agora, the assembled people. But the people must be worthy of the sculpture".³⁴

This was the era of the public artist, the public sculptor. The era of the wealthy individual patron was over: the new patron was the state and, in the case of the LCC, this often meant art being placed on or around housing.

The South Lambeth estate

Lambeth's housing stock was typical of the kind of inner-city, over-crowded and, at times deemed 'insanitary' by the terms of the 1930 Housing Act: exactly the kind of housing the LCC was keen to improve. A working class, at times quite poor, area like Lambeth where the old nineteenth century terraced streets and tenements were described as 'dreary and monotonous'³⁵ was housing ripe for pulling down and starting again.

After the Second World War, the LCC hoped to make inner-city areas like Lambeth attractive for young, fit, working people. As Forshaw and Abercrombie explain, these are precisely the types of people who have been leaving the inner city:

This decentralisation has been happening in an unplanned way; the boroughs see their population dwindling, as their best elements, especially the young married folk leave the old surroundings...

...What we now propose is to anticipate this loss, to enhance it by means of a bold reduction and to produce a satisfactory environment by wholesale rebuilding made possible by war damage.³⁶

This 'really satisfactory environment' involved improved housing, as well as the incorporation of public art.

In terms of style and construction, the South Lambeth estate is a typical LCC estate of this period, as mentioned earlier. The estate is the site of two of the LCC's Peter Laszlo Peri artworks, *Mother and children playing*, 1951-52 (figure 1) and *Boys Playing Football*, 1951-52 (figure 2). It is a pre-war estate begun in the 1930s, with construction inevitably halted by

the war. After the war, work on the estate resumed and the estate was extended up to Fentiman Road, which is near the site of the two artworks.

Figure 1: Peter Laszlo Peri, *Mother and children playing*, Horton House, South Lambeth estate, 1951-52. Photographed by author, 2017. Reproduced by kind permission of the estate of Peter Laszlo Peri.

Figure 2: Peter Laszlo Peri, *Boys Playing Football*, Wareham House, South Lambeth estate, 1951-52. Photographed by author, 2017. Reproduced by kind permission of the estate of Peter Laszlo Peri.

During the Second World War, the Fentiman Road area was hit several times, documented on the LCC bomb damage map of the area. The LCC bomb damage maps were edited and modified throughout the Second World War using 1916 ordnance survey maps and as damage occurred, the maps would be coloured in by staff in the LCC's Architect's department.³⁷ The lighter the colour, the lesser the damage: yellow signified 'blast damage – minor in nature', through to black, 'total destruction'.³⁸

LCC bomb damage map, '89: Kennington; Walworth' shows the area that the South Lambeth estate was built on, and in the area south of Fentiman Road between Meadow Road and Carroun Road is a circle indicating a V1 attack.³⁹ The site of this attack is where the area of the estate containing *Mother and children playing* and *Boys Playing Football* is situated.

Fentiman Road and the surrounding roads were hit multiple times throughout the war and thus have corresponding warden's reports. These reports, written hastily on the scene as aerial attacks unfolded, reveal the strain of living through aerial bombardment. A Fentiman Road incident report dated 27th September 1940 states, 'H.E. Rear of houses completely destroyed. 2 casualties. Local windows shattered'.⁴⁰ A later note following up on the incident simply explains, 'casualties cleared'.⁴¹ Another, dated 27th May 1941, reveals the everyday trauma of

experiencing one's home and possessions ruined: 'Mrs. Martin, 55 Fentiman Road, wishes to know how soon her front steps can be put in as they are in a very dangerous condition and the rain pours in and is doing further damage'.⁴² These wartime reports for the Fentiman Road area detail damage to houses, fire, gas leaks, water leaks, phone lines down, injuries and fatalities: all on this one ordinary Lambeth street, representative of so many other streets across London and the rest of the country.

The Vauxhall Gardens estate

Whilst the South Lambeth estate is notable due to the amount of bomb damage on that land, in contrast, the Vauxhall Gardens estate, the site of *Following the Leader (Memorial to the Children Killed in the Blitz)*, seen in figure 3, was subject to attacks in the area but did not suffer any direct damage on that site. This artwork is an early post-war example of an artwork placed within an LCC housing scheme, and was installed on the stairwell of Darley House, on the Vauxhall Gardens estate. Darley House is situated on the edge of the estate and faces on to the park. The artwork is sited to the rear of the block, and today faces out onto the area where the cars are parked. One can only assume that in the late 1940s and early 1950s, the rear of Darley House had fewer cars and was more of a space in which to socialise, stop and chat to neighbours, or perhaps for children to play.

Figure 3: Peter Laszlo Peri, *Following the Leader (Memorial to the Children Killed in the Blitz)*, 1949. Installed by the LCC on the stairwell of Darley House, Vauxhall Gardens estate, 1951-52. Photographed by author, 2017. Reproduced by kind permission of the estate of Peter Laszlo Peri.

After approaching the LCC with his idea, Peri was commissioned by the LCC to produce a relief for the stair tower of Darley house, a 1949 extension to the 1930s Vauxhall Gardens estate.⁴³ The estate is set on the edge of Vauxhall Gardens park, an open space cleared after the

war, roughly on the site of the old Vauxhall Pleasure Gardens, and thus a visitor today can clearly see the artwork from across the park. The commission was Peri's idea: he approached the LCC with the idea to 'brighten up' some of their new estates with concrete reliefs depicting scenes of family life. The LCC agreed to him experimenting with this art form on two Lambeth estates: Vauxhall Gardens estate and South Lambeth estate (which, as mentioned earlier, has the two reliefs *Mother and children playing* and *Boys Playing Football*). Peri talks about this commission in the South London Press in November 1952:

I am convinced I shall achieve something valuable if I can brighten the lives of the people here. I am a great believer in bringing art to the people, the ordinary people, rather than shutting it away in studios. They are the people who really appreciate it. I am very grateful to the LCC for giving me this chance.⁴⁴

Peri's thoughts of 'brightening up' the area may have resonated with the people of post-war Lambeth: an area of many older properties, bomb-damaged and still scarred by bombsites. An artist working on facades amongst the ruins must have temporarily counter balanced what Richard Cork describes as "'the national dinge" of austerity-oppressed Britain'.⁴⁵ The work is of six figures of children, holding hands, playing a game of 'follow the leader' (figure 4). The children alternate: girl; boy; girl; boy; girl; boy, their hair and clothes fly in the wind, their faces expressing excitement. The children ascend upwards together, as if to heaven, and originally, the brick wall the relief was set upon was coloured blue with white flecks to represent the clouds in the sky.⁴⁶

Figure 4: Peter Laszlo Peri, *Following the Leader (Memorial to the Children Killed in the Blitz)*, 1949. Installed on the stairwell of Darley House, Vauxhall Gardens estate, 1951-52. Photographed by author, 2017. Reproduced by kind permission of the estate of Peter Laszlo Peri.

The piece, from its title, is a memorial. From the corresponding LCC bomb damage map, it is clear the area suffered some bomb damage: not specifically on Laud Street, where the artwork is, but in the area around the estate. It is also clear, when comparing the LCC bomb damage map⁴⁷, which used 1916 ordnance survey maps, and a current map of the area, how much the area was changed since the war. The period this artwork was being installed on Darley House marks a period of great change: both of recent bomb damage and subsequent clearance, as well as a time of opening up new vistas. This would have happened with the clearance of buildings to create Vauxhall Gardens Park, dramatically transforming the land from buildings and streets to open space and park.

The three Lambeth reliefs

The three sculptural reliefs executed by Peri in Lambeth, can be read together: one can imagine them as a Lambeth triptych, particularly with the heavenward ascension of the children. Though the three are on two different estates, they are within walking distance of each other, with each 'panel' separated out and spread across Lambeth's housing facades. Looking at them alongside one another it is clear they have much in common. All three are made of 'pericrete', Peter Laszlo Peri's own secret mixture of concrete, named after himself. He used coloured concrete frequently in his work, and in Lambeth he used red, ochre and white concrete for the various figures. Peri's Lambeth figures are of contemporary, 'ordinary people', as Peri calls them⁴⁸, or as Pereira describes, the 'common man'⁴⁹, reflecting the population surrounding them: these show the people and community of mid-twentieth century Lambeth. Peri's idea of creating murals depicting family life fed into the LCC ideal for the rebuilding of London: to rebuild paying attention to the communities of London. Perhaps Peri, a shrewd artist looking for opportunities in post-war England, cottoned on to this rhetoric and knew that the subject would appeal to the LCC. In offering to create reliefs of family life, Peri was appealing to the same demographic that the LCC wanted to appeal to: young families, young newly-weds,

people with young children, the borough's 'best elements'.⁵⁰ Peri, by engaging with the LCC's desire for the young, the married and the physically fit, is part of the social engineering of the inner city by the LCC. These pericrete citizens frozen on the facades of housing are not the sick or the old, they are not the poor, and they are not 'slum-dwellers': they are the vibrant future citizens of London.

The theme of football, and children, is relevant as football was a popular form of sport for working-class boys: then as now. The kit worn by the seven boys in *Boys playing football* (figure 2), with the long shorts, dates these football players firmly in the mid-twentieth century. Oddly, there is no football, the football is merely implied. The LCC, alongside building new housing, were very anxious for children - like these boys playing football - to have improved facilities to play sport, such as new open spaces and parks, instead of playing in narrow, terraced streets. This is graphically demonstrated in the 1946 Ministry of Information film *The Proud City*. A teenage boy, playing football, turns to the camera, and exclaims, "Cor, just think of having playing fields and all the proper kit-seems like a dream to me!"⁵¹ The image of the boy in *The Proud City* serves the same purpose as the frontispiece image of the County of London Plan. It serves to stir and motivate the viewer. The aim is to encourage the viewer to see the LCC's (or in the film's case, the government's), point of view that to rebuild the country, buildings and whole streets must be pulled down.

Boys playing football, along with *Mother and children playing* (figure 1), represents the clearing and rationalisation of the Fentiman Road bombsite. Once a site of danger and excitement, of adventure-play during the war, after the war is tarmacked over: smooth, safe, modern, and clean. Much of the LCC's planning focussed on children: 'neighbourhood units' were planned around the number of children it took to fill an elementary school.⁵² Whether through destruction from aerial raids, or the need to clear sub-standard housing, peace promised better housing, and a better future for children. Ralph Tubbs' Penguin book *Living in Cities*

explains this urgently in a section 'The child in the city': 'Today's children are the adults of tomorrow. Every handicap they have is a handicap to future civilisation. Planning for the child of to-day is laying the foundations of the society of to-morrow.'⁵³

But who, or what, is Peri commemorating? Where did he find the people and community he depicts? It is evident from the local press that he did speak to people as he worked on these reliefs *in situ*, but it is not known whether he spoke to people in the area or spent much time in Lambeth before completing his designs for the reliefs. This distinction is relevant as it would reveal whether his designs were reacting to the people in the area, or whether their reactions were simply noted as he began the creation of the works on site. In November 1952, Peri was photographed for the South London Press working on *Boys Playing Football* up high on a scaffold, and the newspaper quotes a nearby resident, 'Said one housewife in Fentiman Road, "I don't know much about art, but I must say it has brightened up the estate quite a lot. Everyone here is talking about it"'.⁵⁴ It is easy to imagine that passers-by would have called out to Peri while he worked, interacting with this unusual figure carrying out an unusual activity.

In July 2019, I was informed by Peter Peri, Peter Laszlo Peri's grandson, that the title of the relief, *Mother and children playing* was originally *Here we go...* referring to the song 'Here we go round the Mulberry bush'. The reverse of the maquette for the work has the original title *Here we go...* written on the reverse in Peri's hand. Peri's grandson informed me that Peri's wife, Mary, was a pianist and a state primary school music teacher and was very interested in English folk traditions, and that this perhaps influenced the title of the work. Common children's rhymes and folk traditions complement the ethos behind these works: of mass appeal to ordinary people. In this paper, I refer to the piece as *Mother and children playing*, despite knowing its original title, to ensure any reader may identify and cross-reference the artwork against other sources such as its listing with Historic England.⁵⁵

The South London Press article refers to Peri as the ‘Festival sculptor’ as his work, *The Sunbathers* had only the year before been on display on the South Bank during the Festival of Britain. The Festival of Britain’s South Bank exhibition was just a short distance from the site of the three concrete reliefs. Isaac Hayward, leader of the LCC, explained how the Festival inspired himself and others in the LCC to continue this momentum:

After the Festival of Britain, there were few opportunities available to artists. It was bad enough for painters but worse for sculptors. Many of us at the LCC felt we ought to do something. Of course, the Festival of Britain, where art was used in connection with the buildings, gave an inspiration, but after it ended, our interest continued.⁵⁶

Other local papers also report how local women had been calling up to Peri while he worked and he is quoted in *The Star* in December 1952, ‘The ordinary people are the ones who really appreciate it. I am surprised at the knowledgeable questions that women ask me’.⁵⁷

But, why did the LCC and Peri depict Lambeth people on the facades of Lambeth housing? Did people really want to leave their front doors and look up and see themselves, or, a version of themselves? To a certain extent, as the authors of the County of London Plan explain in 1943, this is community direction and control – about maintaining a cohesive society after the chaos and upheaval of war. ‘The social group structure of London...is of the utmost importance in the life of the capital. Community grouping helps in no small measure towards the inculcation of local pride, it facilitates control and organisation.’⁵⁸ These artworks also demonstrate how confident the LCC was in its knowledge of the communities of London. W. Eric Jackson explains in his 1965 history of the LCC: the LCC, ‘(F)elt itself to be the leading representative body for the county, symbolising London and the people of London, and with the rightful capacity to act on their behalf as spokesman, host, and trustee.’⁵⁹

This form of patriarchal, top-down municipal authority has suffered the accusation of patronising those it serves, but the LCC did permeate many aspects of Londoners lives. Crucially, many residents of London – and perhaps of these two Lambeth estates – were LCC employees. In her 1989 essay, *Members and Officers of the LCC, 1889 – 1965*, Gloria Clifton analyses who was working for the LCC. By 1909, the LCC was the largest employer in London. Clifton also observes that the vast majority of lower level staff were from London.⁶⁰ Far from being a detached and patriarchal top-down municipal authority, the LCC's staff would have contained many people like those depicted in Lambeth by Peter Laszlo Peri. The LCC is also confident that they know the nature of each community, as Abercrombie describes in the 1946 film *The Proud City*, a film that functions as propaganda for the 1943 County of London Plan and the LCC's rebuilding of London: 'that loyalty and neighbourliness that holds a group of people together because they have the same interests and pleasures, and because they share their troubles and their triumphs.'⁶¹

These concrete-or pericrete-citizens also serve to reassure: the theme of family is familiar, a source of comfort. During the war, both in London and cities up and down the country, normal family life was disrupted due to men serving abroad as well as the evacuation of children away from danger. These idyllic scenes of children playing, of maternal love and friendship played out in Lambeth streets, serve as antidote to the separation endured by parents and children. The scene of the mother playing with her children and, especially, the scene of the dead children ascending to heaven, would have been poignant to a population who, only a handful of years before these were installed, were separated from their children. This housing, and the artworks within it, serve as panacea for sites of trauma and anxiety: as Lynda Nead describes, 'Home would repair the damage of war'. This is contrary to what Garlake describes as the post-war 'need to forget': a desire to reconstruct and to look forward, to the future.⁶² These artworks

prevent this housing and this environment from being a total departure from the old streets, and the events of the war, just a handful of years before.

Conclusion

These two London County Council post-war housing estates in Lambeth, and the three sculptural reliefs installed upon them, addressed community grief and disorientation after the destruction of war-time aerial attack. The LCC deliberately provided homes attractive to families and newly-weds who were increasingly leaving the tired, bombed-out surroundings of London. The recurrence of art with a family theme, as well as works that reference the local community, sit alongside the LCC's desire to rebuild homes, communities and family life. The housing and the choice of artworks show the LCC's memorialisation of already shifting communities through the installation of public art that referenced or appealed to communities that were, increasingly, of the past. Catherine Jolivette describes the visual displays of the South Bank exhibition of the Festival of Britain, explaining that they, 'participated in contemporary discourses of nostalgia...to construct new narratives of the national past that produced reassuring icons for an unstable future'.⁶³ The LCC's artworks perform the same function: icons of nostalgia for London's communities as reassurance amidst new, post-destruction landscapes. However, this is handled differently across the two estates, South Lambeth and Vauxhall Gardens. Whilst the stabilising and the nostalgic is evident on the two South Lambeth artworks, *Boys playing football* and *Mother and children playing*, the artwork on the Vauxhall Gardens estate is surely different: unsettling, odd. The South Lambeth artworks are reassuring and traditional: football and families, both staples of working-class life. That Peri decided to create a memorial at Vauxhall Gardens is odd, as it is not only a memorial but actually depicts dead children ascending to heaven. This is made explicit in its title, though it is worth considering how many residents and passers-by in Lambeth would have realised these children were ascending to heaven, rather than just playing. Especially when considering

that, although later LCC artworks were installed with a plaque informing the viewer of the title, sculptor and date of a piece, it appears that these Peri works had no plaque or interpretation. The relatively early date of *Following the Leader (Memorial to the Children Killed in the Blitz)*, is significant, especially when considering the LCC was installing artworks on estates right up until 1964.⁶⁴ By depicting children killed by aerial attack so soon after the war and the occurrence of those aerial attacks, Peri is not seeking to reassure or be nostalgic, rather he is seeking to address community grief. Public memorials provide a focal point for grief and reflection. This is particularly poignant in the case of children. By being a general memorial, as opposed to a specific memorial of named children, this allows a viewer – or a Lambeth resident – to identify their grief with these children: Peri’s children playing following the leader represent the general tragedy of children killed during the Blitz. What these three artworks have most in common is their humanising of the buildings and landscape and the recognition of the people of Lambeth and the very recent trauma caused by the war.

Leader of the LCC Isaac Hayward understood and appreciated the human side of housing and the humanity and dignity needed when designing and planning good housing and environments when he commented on London’s housing problem in 1949, describing:

‘The problem is one not merely of bricks and mortar, but of flesh and blood, of the personality, customs, hopes, aspirations, and human rights of each individual man, woman and child who needs a home’.⁶⁵

By using publicly sited artworks to mark new housing developments for bombed out, or inadequately housed, residents, the LCC was highlighting their scheme of rebuilding to solve the post-war housing crisis, as well as humanising the environment by using sculptural depictions of Londoners in their community in settings built for them by the London County Council.

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- ¹ South London Press, *Festival sculptor brightens flats*, 25 November 1952
- ² C. Wheeler, *Sculpture 1850 and 1950. London County Council exhibition at Holland Park, London, May to September 1957*, (London: London County Council, 1957)
- ³ G. Whiteley, "Peri, Peter Laszlo [formerly Ladislav Weisz] (1899–1967), sculptor and etcher." *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*. September 23, 2004. Oxford University Press <https://doi.org/10.1093/ref:odnb/64507>, accessed October 2019
- ⁴ J. Gold, *The Experience of Modernism: Modern Architects and the Future City, 1928-1953*, (London: E & F.N. Spon, 1997)
- ⁵ D. Pereira, 'Art for the common man', (2009)
- ⁶ D. Mitchell, 'Art patronage by the London County Council (LCC), 1948-1965', *Leonardo*, vol.10, no.3, (summer 1977), 207-212
- ⁷ M. Garlake, *New Art, New World: British Art in Postwar Society*, (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1998)
- ⁸ M. Garlake *New Art, New World*, 231-232
- ⁹ 'The Shape of Things to come', *The Listener*, 5 March 1942, 297, quoted in Garlake *New Art New World*, 238
- ¹⁰ B. Campkin, *Remaking London: Decline and Regeneration in Urban Culture*, (London: I.B.Taurus & Co, 2013). 25. Campkin quotes Keith Gandall's term, the 'spectacle of the slum' from Gandall, K. *The Virtues of the Vicious: Jacob Riis, Stephen of the Slum*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997)
- ¹¹ HM Government, *Housing Act, 1930* (<https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/Geo5/20-21/39/enacted>, accessed 22/03/2019) 1
- ¹² W. E. Jackson, *Achievement: A Short History of the London County Council*, (London: Longmans, Green & Co. Ltd., 1965) 93
- ¹³ J. Forshaw & P. Abercrombie, *County of London Plan 1943*, (London: MacMillan & Co., 1943)
- ¹⁴ L. Nead, *The Tiger in the Smoke: Art and Culture in Post-War Britain*, (London: Paul Mellon Centre for British Art, 2017) 250
- ¹⁵ E. J. Carter & E. Goldfinger, *The County of London Plan: explained by E. J. Carter & Ernő Goldfinger*, (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1945) 24
- ¹⁶ N. Bullock (1994) Ideals, priorities and harsh realities: Reconstruction and the LCC, 1945–51, *Planning Perspectives*, 9:1, 87-10, 94

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- ¹⁷ N. Day, 'The role of the architect in post-war state housing: A case study of the housing work of the London County Council, 1939-1956', (1988), 168
- ¹⁸ Forshaw & Abercrombie, *County of London Plan*, 2
- ¹⁹ Forshaw & Abercrombie, *County of London Plan*, 3
- ²⁰ Forshaw & Abercrombie, *County of London Plan*, 9
- ²¹ N. Day, 'The role of the architect in post-war state housing: A case study of the housing work of the London County Council, 1939-1956', (1988), 169
- ²² HM Government, *Report of the Design of dwellings subcommittee of the Central housing advisory committee appointed by the minister of health and Report of a study group of the Ministry of town and country planning on site planning and layout in relation to housing*, (1944), 58-59
- ²³ M. P. Collins, (2017) The London County Council's Approach to Town Planning: 1909–1945, *The London Journal*, 42:2, 172-191, DOI: 10.1080/03058034.2017.1305253 [accessed January 2018], 186
- ²⁴ N. Day, 'The role of the architect in post-war state housing: A case study of the housing work of the London County Council, 1939-1956', (1988), 52-53
- ²⁵ Andrew Boyd, quoted in N. Day, 'The role of the architect in post-war state housing: A case study of the housing work of the London County Council, 1939-1956', (1988), 27
- ²⁶ W. E. Jackson, *Achievement*, 218
- ²⁷ W. E. Jackson, *Achievement*, 223
- ²⁸ LCC minutes of proceedings, 1956, 205 (LMA reference 18.6 LCC, available on library open shelves in LMA Information Area)
- ²⁹ LCC minutes of proceedings, 1954, 576, quoted in LCC minutes of proceedings, 1956, 205 (LMA reference 18.6 LCC, available on library open shelves in LMA Information Area)
- ³⁰ 'The Shape of Things to come', *The Listener*, 5 March 1942, 297, quoted in Garlake *New Art: New World*, 238
- ³¹ Pereira, *Art for the Common Man*, 19
- ³² Garlake, *New Art: New World*, 19
- ³³ Garlake, *New Art: New World*, 4
- ³⁴ H. Read (1944), Herbert Read, *Henry Moore sculpture and Drawings*, London, 1944, p.xxxvi, quoted in Cork & Rosenberg, *Architects Choice, Art in Architecture in Great Britain since 1945*
- ³⁵ Forshaw & Abercrombie, *County of London Plan*, 4: under the title 'Depressed housing areas and obsolescence of the East End', the authors describes the East End and other industrial areas, "where there are large areas of dreary and monotonous streets. The

invincible cheerfulness and neighbourliness of the Londoner makes the best of these areas”. Lambeth, both historically and in the 1940s, was an industrial area with its proximity to the Thames, as well as the numerous small factories and works in the area.

³⁶ Forshaw & Abercrombie, *County of London Plan*. 8

³⁷ L. Ward, *The London County Council Bomb Damage Maps, 1939-1945* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2015) 6

³⁸ L. Ward, *The London County Council Bomb Damage Maps, 1939-1945* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2015) key to colours used (removable)

³⁹ The circles on the LCC bomb damage maps indicate V1 and V2 attacks, depending on their size

⁴⁰ ARP message form, 27 September 1940, Lambeth Archives, ref: MBL/CD/25/576

⁴¹ ARP message form, 27 September 1940, Lambeth Archives, ref: MBL/CD/25/576

⁴² ARP message form, 27 May 1941, Lambeth Archives, ref: MBL/CD/25/1605

⁴³ <https://historicensland.org.uk/listing/the-list/list-entry/1430235> [accessed February 2019]

⁴⁴ South London Press, *Festival sculptor brighten flats*, 25th November 1952

⁴⁵ R. Cork and E. Rosenberg, *Architects Choice, Art in Architecture in Great Britain since 1945*, (London: Thames & Hudson, 1992), 11

⁴⁶ R. Millicent; *This sculpture's human*, *Daily Worker*, 10 November 1948

⁴⁷ LCC bomb damage map no. 89 Kennington; Walworth shows Laud Street, the site of Darley House, and the surrounding area

⁴⁸ South London Press, *Festival sculptor brighten flats*, 25th November 1952

⁴⁹ Pereira, *Art for the Common Man*

⁵⁰ Forshaw & Abercrombie *County of London Plan*, 8: as mentioned earlier in the quote, “This decentralisation has been happening in an unplanned way; the boroughs see their population dwindling, as their best elements, especially the young married folk leave the old surroundings, which are not benefitted by this reduction except in strictly limited patches of new tenements. What we now propose is to anticipate this loss, to enhance it by means of a bold reduction and to produce a really satisfactory environment by wholesale rebuilding made possible by war damage”

⁵¹ Ministry of Information *The Proud City, A Plan for London*, A Greenpark Production, in association with the Film Producers Guild Ltd. Written and Directed by Ralph Keene, 1946

⁵² Forshaw & Abercrombie *County of London Plan*, 9: “The Plan we submit contemplates the conservation or creation of communities which would be divided into smaller neighbourhood units of between 6,000 and 10,000 persons related to the elementary school and the area it serves. It is the intention of our proposals that children living in these units should not have to

cross a main road from home to school. Each unit would need a neighbourhood centre, perhaps focussed around the school”

⁵³ R. Tubbs, *Living in Cities*, (Middlesex: Penguin Books, 1942), 47

⁵⁴ South London Press, *Festival sculptor brighten flats*, 25th November 1952

⁵⁵ <https://historicengland.org.uk/listing/the-list/list-entry/1430263> [accessed October 2019]

⁵⁶ D. Mitchell, *Art patronage by the London County Council*, 208

⁵⁷ The Star, *A Sculptor takes art to the people*, 4 December 1952

⁵⁸ Forshaw & Abercrombie, *County of London Plan*, 29

⁵⁹ Jackson, *Achievement*, 226

⁶⁰ G. Clifton, ‘Members and Officers of the LCC, 1889-1965’, in A. Saint, (ed.) *Politics and the People of London: the London County Council, 1889-1965*, (London: The Hambledon Press, 1989) 26

⁶¹ Ralph Keene, *The Proud City: A Plan for London*, (Ministry of Information, 1946)

⁶² Garlake, *New Art: New World*, 213

⁶³ C. Jolivette, *Landscape, Art and Identity in 1950s Britain*, (Abingdon: Ashgate publishing, 2009), 16

⁶⁴ The LCC installed *Neighbourly encounter* by Uli Nimpf on Rotherhithe’s Silwood estate on 8th July 1964

⁶⁵ London County Council, *A Survey of the post-war housing of the LCC, 1945-1949*, foreword (London: London County Council, 1949)