

# On File and As Files

## Tracing Communicative Processes in the Byker Archive

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### Abstract

In this paper, we piece together threads of communicative processes between residents, architects, and other parties, as found in the lists and letters of the archive of the Byker Redevelopment in Newcastle Upon Tyne (1968-83). Documents that are usually discarded or neglected by architectural researchers - from a stack of various papers documenting residents' lists of complaints, evaluative papers such as an audit report, and architects' memos, to a resident's letter of complaint - enable us to reconstruct, first, how a mainstream practice collected and filed residents' experiences and understanding of their homes, and second, how, through the circulation of those papers in action as files, residents' notes were also embedded in the design process.

### Keywords

archives, materiality, participation, architectural design process, post-World War II housing

### DOI

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# 1 “Extra Work” in the Byker Archive

To manage just one housing project, the Byker Redevelopment in Newcastle Upon Tyne (1968-83), Ralph Erskine's Sweden-based architecture practice established a UK branch office right at the heart of the development area. Thanks to the fact that the office files have been kept in their entirety according to the architects' wishes, we have been able to piece together threads of communicative processes between residents, architects, and other parties as they appear across many boxes in the archival shelves of the RIBA Collection in London (Figure 1) and, to a lesser extent, in the collection at ArkDes in Stockholm. Trawling through the files, we do not seek to know more about the history of designing Byker per se. Instead, we focus on micro-data that can tell us something about how these papers first register, then circulate residents' voices and concerns. We make use of notes and documents usually discarded or neglected by architectural researchers - from a stack of lists and letters of residents' complaints, through evaluative papers such as an audit report, to architects' memos.<sup>1</sup> Through patient reading and good fortune, we were able to follow across the files how one resident's experiences were registered. This example helps us understand how these papers enabled residents' experiences to enter the design process.



**FIGURE 1** The extensive Byker files in RIBA Collections in London. With the archive still largely un-catalogued, and in any case too vast for systematic review, we approach these files through an iterative-inductive research process. Photograph: Ewan Harrison, 2020.

<sup>1</sup> See also: Kajita, H. S. 'When they feel they've got a beef': Building on Residents' Complaints in the Byker Archives. *Scroope*, 32, (in review); Kajita, H. S. (2023). Gossip and Complaint: Ways of (Re-)Producing the Social in Housing "Expertly." In A. Migotto & M. Tattara (Eds.), *Contested Legacies: Critical Perspectives on Post-war Modern Housing*. Leuven University Press; and, Kajita, H. S. (2022). Urgent minor matters: Re-Activating archival documents for social housing futures. *Architecture and Culture*, 10(3), 483-511. <https://doi.org/10.1080/20507828.2022.2093603>. The research for these complementary papers was conducted for the project "(Im)Possible Instructions: Inscribing Use-value in the Architectural Design Process" funded by Independent Research Fund Denmark (GRANT\_NUMBER: 9032-00006B - IPD) with Newcastle University and University of Copenhagen (2019-23).

The City of Newcastle Upon Tyne had, for years, pushed for a tabula rasa approach to Byker's redevelopment, typical of post-World War II modernist planning. However, with Ralph Erskine's Arkitektkontor AB's influence, Byker marked a shift towards contextual and publicly engaged architecture and planning, as broadly advocated by anti-authoritarian movements in Europe and specifically promoted in policies such as the UK's Skeffington Report on participation in urban planning.<sup>2</sup> In Sweden, the architectural office had gained popularity for their democratic approach to welfare state-sanctioned housing programs. They approached large-scale housing projects with an interest in considering the close ties of local communities. They were inspired by what has since been described as the Swedish model, which "gently intervenes in everyday life and restructures social relations,"<sup>3</sup> where welfare state citizens "should be made to desire the appropriate things, so as to generate a control that would also emerge from below."<sup>4</sup>

At Byker, around 2,000 new homes gradually replaced the existing Victorian terraced housing in a phased redevelopment, while structures such as churches, clubs, and baths were retained. The iconic Byker Wall and the low-density housing it enclosed were designed to support small "gossip groups," and in the early years, the architects advocated for as many of the existing tenants as possible to stay in the area to preserve the neighborly community spirit.<sup>5</sup> Famously, the team of architects led by project architect Vernon Gracie set up their office in the middle of the redevelopment area to work closely in contact with the residents (Figure 2). Going beyond the fact of the architects' proximity to the community, we seek to learn more about exactly how they engaged with residents and let this work inform the design process.

Starting out with the Pilot Scheme in the southern part of the estate, the architects experimented with various methods for informing and communicating with the local residents who were moving into this new low-rise housing. This community involvement came to influence the long-term rolling program of the entire estate, throughout which the architects continuously experimented with communication and information.<sup>6</sup> Thus, the records provide particular insights into the architects' varying efforts of community involvement. Gracie, according to one of the other architects working in Byker, Michael Drage, described that the acclaimed community involvement of Byker Redevelopment relied less on the small annual budget for participation than on the enthusiasm and goodwill of the team and residents.<sup>7</sup> A letter found in the archive explains that such engagements with tenants were considered "extra work" - an additional workload to their formal architect and planning consultant roles, which made the office uneconomical financially. Importantly, however, the architects defined this extra work to be integral to their professional obligation.<sup>8</sup>

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2 Skeffington, A. M. (1969). *People and planning: Report of the Committee on Public Participation in Planning*. HMSO

3 Mattsson, H. and Wallenstein, S.O (2010). Introduction. In Mattsson, H. and Wallenstein, S.O. (Eds.). *Swedish Modernism: Architecture, Consumption, and the Welfare State* (p.20). Black Dog Publishing.

4 Hirdman, Y. quoted in Mattsson, H. and Wallenstein, S.O (2010). Introduction. In Mattsson, H. and Wallenstein, S.O. (Eds.). *Swedish Modernism: Architecture, Consumption, and the Welfare State* (p. 16). Black Dog Publishing.

5 While there are both positive and negative reports about the success of the architects' aspirations for continued sense of belonging and community spirit (see for instance reports by Sirrka-Lisa Kontinnen, Peter Malpass and Mavis Zutshi listed in this article's reference list), the architects' aims to retain the majority of existing residents during the redevelopment are generally understood not to have been fully met.

6 For a full description of the design phases of Byker Redevelopment, see: Drage, M. (2008). "Byker: Surprising the Colleagues for 35 Years - A Social History of Ralph Erskine's Arkitektkontor AB in Newcastle." *Twentieth Century Architecture: The Journal of the Twentieth Century Society*, 9: 148-162.

7 Drage, M. (2008) Byker: 153. In the text, Drage also refers to Gracie, V. J. (1984). Pitfalls in Participation. In Hatch, R. C. (ed.). *The Scope of Social Architecture* (pp.186-201). Van Nostrand Reinhold.

8 Paraphrased from: Purchess, C., Letter to the Industrial Co-ownership Movement. Byker, RIBA Collections. See also the architects' expression of interest, Erskine, R. (1968) Byker: Newcastle, 1968. Byker, RIBA Collections.



**FIGURE 2** Byker Ralph Erskine tillsammans med ett barn [Byker Ralph Erskine with a child]. Arkitektur- och designcentrum Stockholm. (Link to download and terms of license: <https://digitaltmuseum.se/011015013688/byker-ralph-erskine-tillsammans-med-ett-barn>)

In this paper, we turn to the special kinds of “participation” documents filed in the archive under the “Pilot Scheme” that facilitated information exchanges with residents continuously over time. We refer to this as a “communicative process.” We focus on the minutiae of specific details, such as oral and written complaints which are often overlooked in architectural research in favor of more generalizable values. In the archive, we discovered notes about issues like creaking floorboards and other noise-related concerns, which serve as illustrations of the numerous minor matters raised by residents.<sup>9</sup> While these concerns are important, this paper centers less on *what* the residents complained about and more on *how* (if) these records – essentially, these fragments of additional work for both architects and residents – were integrated into the practice’s creation of more formal building information.

With the archive still largely uncatalogued and, in any case, too vast for systematic review, we approach these files through an iterative-inductive research process. We piece together shreds of material evidence, aided by media theory, case literature, and our own backgrounds in architectural history and Heidi’s practice-based research. Taking inspiration from Cornelia Vismann’s (2008) media materialist approach, we view the office files as more than just repositories of information. They grant us access not only to the individual documents *on file* but also to the temporality of the dynamic process through which they were accumulated *as files*. Through this research, we explore how files interweave information that is often treated as belonging to separate domains – whether it pertains to practice, social concerns, or architectural history. From this standpoint, we seek to comprehend architectural objects in terms of their production and utilization, recognizing that these processes involve communication and information that extend beyond the architect’s office.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>9</sup> For more about the different lists and letters see Kajita’s texts listed in note 1.

<sup>10</sup> Ockman, J. (2015). Foreword. In Deamer, P. (ed.). *The Architect as Worker: Immaterial Labor, the Creative Class, and the Politics of Design* (pp. xxi-xxvi). Bloomsbury. : xxi

In our research on the peculiarities of the Byker files, we seek to understand how communication between architects and tenants was facilitated. We ask how tenants' desires, complaints, and material practices were documented, and, more importantly, we explore the mechanisms and processes through which these were considered in the design process. This paper first demonstrates how the architects' collection and compilation of residents' written complaints into lists allowed residents' experiences to traverse the files and become part of the discourse among architects and other professionals. Secondly, it highlights that both architects and residents gained experience and confidence in this process, with residents even taking the initiative to address the architects directly through self-initiated and more extended letters.

*MR J M<sup>c</sup>GUINNESS  
9 JANET SQUARE  
NEWCASTLE UPON TYNE  
30-09-71*

*Dear Sir,*

*Please find below a list of faults in  
the above address which you requested.*

*4 KITCHEN UNIT DOORS BADLY CHIPPED. MR R ERSKINE SAID WOULD  
BE REPLACED. THESE DOORS WERE FAULTED ON DAY OF OCCUPYING HOUSE  
CREAKING FLOORBOARDS BECOMING INCREASINGLY WORSE.  
CRACK IN WOOD SURROUND OF ONE BEDROOM WINDOW FRAME  
2 CRACKED TILES (HORIZONTAL) AT END OF BATH ALSO ALL RADIUS  
CORNER TILES SURROUNDING BATH BREAKING LOOSE AS BATH SETTLES  
1 BEDROOM WINDOW STIERING. [?]  
THERMOSTAT REGULATOR ONLY WORKS BETWEEN 20 AND 25 DEGREES CENTIGRADE  
AS DISCUSSED AT LAST MEETING RAINWATER GUTTERS VERY INEFFECTIVE  
SUGGEST FUTURE 4PA HOUSES HAVE LARGER DOOR BETWEEN KITCHENETTE  
AND outhouse. TALL PERSONS CONTINUALLY HIT THEIR HEAD ON TOP OF  
DOORWAY. !  
SLACK BOARD ON FRONT DOOR THRESH.*

**FIGURE 3** Visual transcription from snapshot of Mr McGuinness' list of complaint September 30<sup>th</sup> 1971. Original in Byker, RIBA Collections. By Heidi Svenningsen Kajita, 2023.

## 2 Moving Across the Files

In 1971 residents who had recently moved into their homes in the Pilot Scheme were requested by the architects to provide lists of complaint. Handwritten on various kinds of note papers, ranging in how detailed and refined they were, these lists were part of a continuing exchange of information.<sup>11</sup> One example is a list submitted by Mr McGuinness, 9 Janet Square (1971). (Figure 3). “Dear Sir,” he wrote, “Please find below a list of faults in the above address which you requested.”<sup>12</sup> McGuinness made a personal address to Mr Erskine and continued with a series of points:

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4 Kitchen unit doors badly chipped. Mr R Erskine said would be replaced. These doors were faulted on day of occupying house | Creaking floorboards becoming increasingly worse | Crack in wood surround of one-bedroom window frame | 2 cracked tiles (horizontal) at end of bath also all radius corner tiles surrounding bath breaking loose as bath settles [...]<sup>13</sup>

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Continuing, McGuinness made a suggestion for “future 4PA (type) houses to have a larger door between the kitchenette and outhouse. Tall persons continually hit their head on top of the doorway.” This showed his awareness that there was room for design improvements in the next phase of the design. McGuinness documented specific issues with various objects, such as doors, floors, window frames, and more, detailing breakages, creaks, cracks, and unsatisfying dimensions. It’s worth noting that McGuinness indicated the list was written upon request. From other documents, we know that his specific points were part of discussions with neighbors at collectively organized meetings.

In Byker, the Pilot Scheme Residents’ Association went beyond the architects’ request for lists of complaints and collectively pursued “a small number of relatively minor matters,” including faulty construction, repair work, maintenance, vandalism, and nuisances from overcrowded shared spaces.<sup>14</sup> As seen in Mr. McGuinness’s complaint about the chipped kitchen unit doors, Mr. Erskine’s promise to replace them had not been fulfilled. It’s common for complaints to get stuck in bureaucratic systems, and, as in other collectively organized housing, there are numerous instances of Byker residents’ frustration with such obstacles, sometimes even leading to protests. For example, on one occasion, residents withheld their rent for a week due to poor municipal maintenance practices. According to local press clippings and stories, the Byker community is well-known for its mutual support structures despite inadequate public services, both then and today.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Some lists appear to have been hastily scribbled. Other lists, such as Mr McGuinness’, are neatly composed, and yet others are sparsely informed merely listing single words on the back of scrap papers. The lists and letters of complaint are located in business files with a broad variety of documents from questionnaires and other documents used in participatory process to notes about the architects’ office organisation and invoices.

<sup>12</sup> McGuinness, J.. *List of complaint*, September 30<sup>th</sup>, 1971. Byker, RIBA Collections.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> M. JG/BA. Housing Committee: Byker, Pilot Scheme, draft. May 24, 1972. Byker, RIBA Collections, London also cited in Kajita (2022) “Urgent Minor Matters”.

<sup>15</sup> E.g. Hannah Graham (2017): Life on the Byker Wall Estate: What it’s really like to live in ‘best neighbourhood in UK’. In *Chronicle Live*. Nov 11. Accessed September 15, 2023, <https://www.chroniclelive.co.uk/news/north-east-news/life-byker-wall-estate-what-13888970>. See also the local residents’ magazine *Byker Phoenix*. Selected issues can be accessed in Byker, ArkDes Collection.

As we approached the archival boxes, we also encountered more typical "participation" documents, such as user manuals and questionnaires. However, we did not anticipate finding the personal lists and letters among them. This discovery reminded us of Vismann's insight that files "appear in all shapes and forms."<sup>16</sup> They can be loose pages, found in little boxes, wrapped in packing paper, enclosed in capsules, bundled together with string, or organized as vertical folders ready to hold anything that fits between two paper covers. To understand how the various sheets of paper, which recorded specific objects, faults, concerns, and nuisances submitted by residents of different households, contributed to the architects' design processes, we needed to read across this diverse range of materials, cross-referencing both social and technical documents.

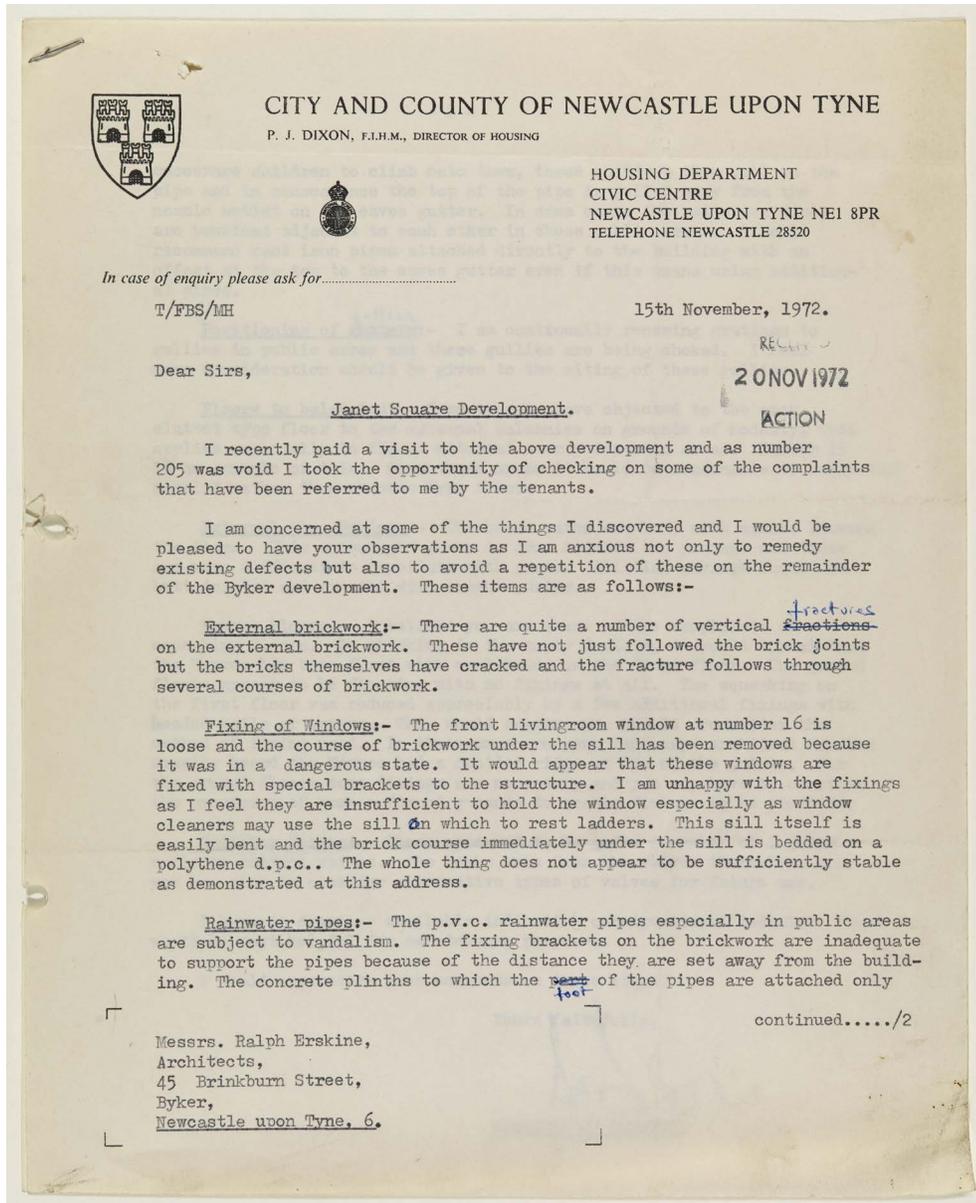


FIGURE 4 Page 1 of 'Letter to the architects from Director of Housing regarding the Janet Square Development. Dated 15<sup>th</sup> Nov 1972. Byker, RIBA Collections.'

encourage children to climb onto them, these children then pull on the pipe and in consequence the top of the pipe is pulled away from the nozzle outlet on the eaves gutter. In some cases two rainwater pipes are provided adjacent to each other in these public areas. I would recommend cast iron pipes attached directly to the building with an offset at the top to the eaves gutter even if this means using additional pipes.

Positioning of <sup>gullies</sup> gutters:- I am continually renewing gratings to gullies in public areas and these gullies are being choked. I feel more consideration should be given to the siting of these gullies.

Floors to balconies:- Some tenants have objected to the open slatted type floor to the external balconies on grounds of modesty. This applies especially to floors situated over pedestrian areas. Number 16 is an example of this. Over these areas it would be reasonable to construct a solid rather than an open type floor.

External Flag Pavings:- The house paths are laid with spaces between the flags. This encourages grass to grow between the pavings and these are more difficult to negotiate with prams. All flag pavings should be butt jointed and grouted with cement mortar.

Weyroc Floors:- I believe you are aware of the complaints of squeaking floors. On checking in the empty dwelling it would appear that the Weyroc has been fixed with oval brads on the first floor. The ground floors appear to be floating with no fixings at all. The squeaking on the first floor was reduced appreciably by a few additional fixings with headed nails or screws. This would suggest you should reconsider the method of fixing used. In the room where your landscape architect has his drawing board the Weyroc had a decided ridge at one of the joints. For the ground floors some fixings are necessary and you may have to consider the provision of some softwood grounds to enable fixings to be provided.

Radiator Valves:- There appeared to be quite a number of leaking radiator control valves. The leaks were from the valves themselves and you may wish to consider alternative types of valves for future use.

I have no drawings available indicating constructional details. These would be most helpful for maintenance purposes.

I would appreciate your comments on these items.

Yours faithfully,

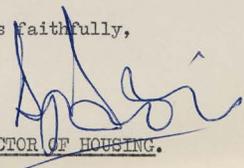
  
DIRECTOR OF HOUSING.

FIGURE 5 Page 2 of 'Letter to the architects from Director of Housing regarding the Janet Square Development. Dated 15<sup>th</sup> Nov 1972. Byker, RIBA Collections.'

In the Byker files, complaint notes have been stapled and hole punched – they have been made ready to be kept on file as valuable information. Looking further through the files we find that these notes were later transferred to and compiled in architects' typed lists: a single cross-referenced document shows how some detailed information was retained and other information was edited out. In the reworked version, summarised in the architects' words, Mr McGuinness' complaint now reads as follows:

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## 9. Janet Square

No noise insulation, cupboard door chipped, and nail heads coming through, lock on door insecure, cracks in window frames, floors creaking, heat regulator not working, radiators clanking when heating up. Beading coming off cupboards. No handrail on outside stairs.<sup>17</sup>

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The architects' summary was further mediated through other documents exchanged between the architects and the housing department, which described the need for further investigation, rectification, or changes to the design of later phases. We discern how the "creaking floorboards" mentioned in McGuinness's list – just one of many minor issues raised in residents' complaints about their housing – was addressed in design evaluations and technical documents. By tracing records related to the floors, our aim is not to provide a representative account of events but rather to gain insight into the recording devices used in these communicative processes. We contemplate the gap between formal building information and the highly specific, individualized concerns of residents at any given time. Our example illustrates how we can interpret these historical files as mediators of various voices. Recognizing the specificities of the filed complaints allows us to understand how locally formed relationships were maintained and carried through into the bureaucratically regulated decision-making processes of experts and professionals. Some concerns are retained as information, while others are left behind. As Vismann explains, lists serve as more than an account of events: listing is a process aimed at regulating things.<sup>18</sup>

By 1972, complaints from McGuinness and others about squeaking floors had reached official ears, along with more general concerns about noise levels from residents of Janet Square. The Director of Housing documented these issues in his list of concerns from a site visit as follows (figure 4 and figure 5):

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Weyroc Floors: – I believe you are aware of the complaints of squeaking floors. On checking in the empty dwelling it would appear that the Weyroc has been fixed with oval brads on the first floor. The ground floors appear to be floating with no fixing at all. The squeaking on the first floor was reduced appreciably by a few additional fixings with headed nails or screws.<sup>19</sup>

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Noise issues were further investigated in an audit by the Chief Public Health Inspector (1972) and found to be caused in part by children's play and social gathering in the shared spaces between buildings, but concerning the floors the inspector advised the Director of Housing that it would be:

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practical to take steps to increase the insulation value of the floors after ensuring that the present construction is not faulty in any way. In particular, [he writes] I am thinking of creaking floor boards or spaces between floor board ends and walls and similar situations where the noise can by-pass the insulation.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Erskine, Ralph. *Byker Pilot Scheme*. No date. Byker, RIBA Collections.

<sup>18</sup> Vismann (2008). *Files*: 6

<sup>19</sup> Director of Housing Janet Square Development. Dated 15<sup>th</sup> Nov 1972. Byker, RIBA Collections.

<sup>20</sup> Chief Public Health Inspector, Memorandum. Dated 18<sup>th</sup> Sep 1971. Byker, RIBA Collections.

The architects responded to this matter in a letter to the Director of Housing, stating that they would find a new solution to fix the Weyroc floors in later phases of the redevelopment. And so on.

Following the thread of the creaking floors, we can observe how residents' lists of complaints – representing their lived sensibilities towards their environments – feed into the lists and memos of the architects, public health officer, and the Director of Housing. Across various files, these lists function as directives for the next steps. Lists generate files, and in this process, they “sort and engender circulation.”<sup>21</sup> These lists transfer specific information between various parties, preparing it for consideration in the revised design and realization of the built fabric of the Pilot Scheme houses and in subsequent phases.

The specific communicative processes developed by the Byker architects enabled them to engage beyond the concerns of a single client and encompass the multiple concerns of numerous residents. As Erskine stated when discussing dialogues with residents in a 1975 radio show, “I don’t think I am redefining the role of an architect. I am just extending the traditional role that one has always had with a specific client to a more general client.”<sup>22</sup> In response to the interviewer, Jeremy Bugler, who questioned the participation processes in Byker, Erskine clarified that it was not a “populist solution derived through long meetings and discussions with the local people... No Byker person has been given a fine-point pen and a set square and told to design his own house.”<sup>23</sup> In Byker, the architects created the plans, specified the materials, and managed the construction processes, and they were not directly instructed by residents. Instead, they were influenced by residents through continuous exchanges that took place on-site and over time. Erskine explains:

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The comparison I have always made when I first started working as an architect, I was quite often doing private houses, one family houses. Now it was obvious there that you talked to the father, the mother and if you were interested and the family was of that type, you would talk to the kids as well and the whole time you were planning the house you discussed with them the plans, you adjusted the plans you exchanged ideas with them, they tried to influence you and you influenced back; and that is nothing new. The only rummy thing, the curious thing I think is that this hasn't been done in these larger commissions.<sup>24</sup>

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Within the Byker archives, lists of complaints, architects' instructions, memos, and other documents illustrate how residents' evaluative comments, although infrequently, influenced decision-making about design through formal building information. These documents were preserved on file, enabling the architects to access information both in Byker and in different projects at a later date. Therefore, the function of a document on file is not fixed; it can be mobilized differently in changing contexts. Consequently, the Byker files offer us insights into communicative processes before, during, and after they are objectified in the construction information they inform.

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21 Vismann (2008). *Files*: 6

22 Ralph Erskine quoted in Bugler, J. *This Island Now*, Transcript of radio broadcast, March 20<sup>th</sup>, 1975. Byker, ArkDes Collection: 13.

23 Bugler (1975). *This Island Now*: 13

24 Ralph Erskine quoted in Bugler (1975). *This Island Now*: 13

### 3 Accumulated Experience

The residents' complaints about the pilot project also had a broader impact on the architects' design approach. The architects gained experience in eliciting and incorporating residents' insights into the design process. Furthermore, through providing feedback about their homes, residents became adept at articulating their experiences. For instance, the issue of noise in the high-density housing was a common concern raised by residents. However, it was influenced by a variety of factors and could not be resolved solely by addressing material specifications and construction. Residents didn't limit their engagement to providing written feedback about the design of their dwellings only when prompted by the architects. They also took the initiative to initiate broader inquiries through letter-writing. For example, a letter written to the architects by Mr. McGuiness in 1972, approximately six months after his initial list, outlines a more extensive set of concerns (refer to Figure 6 and Figure 7). He began his letter with "Dear Sir" and continued:

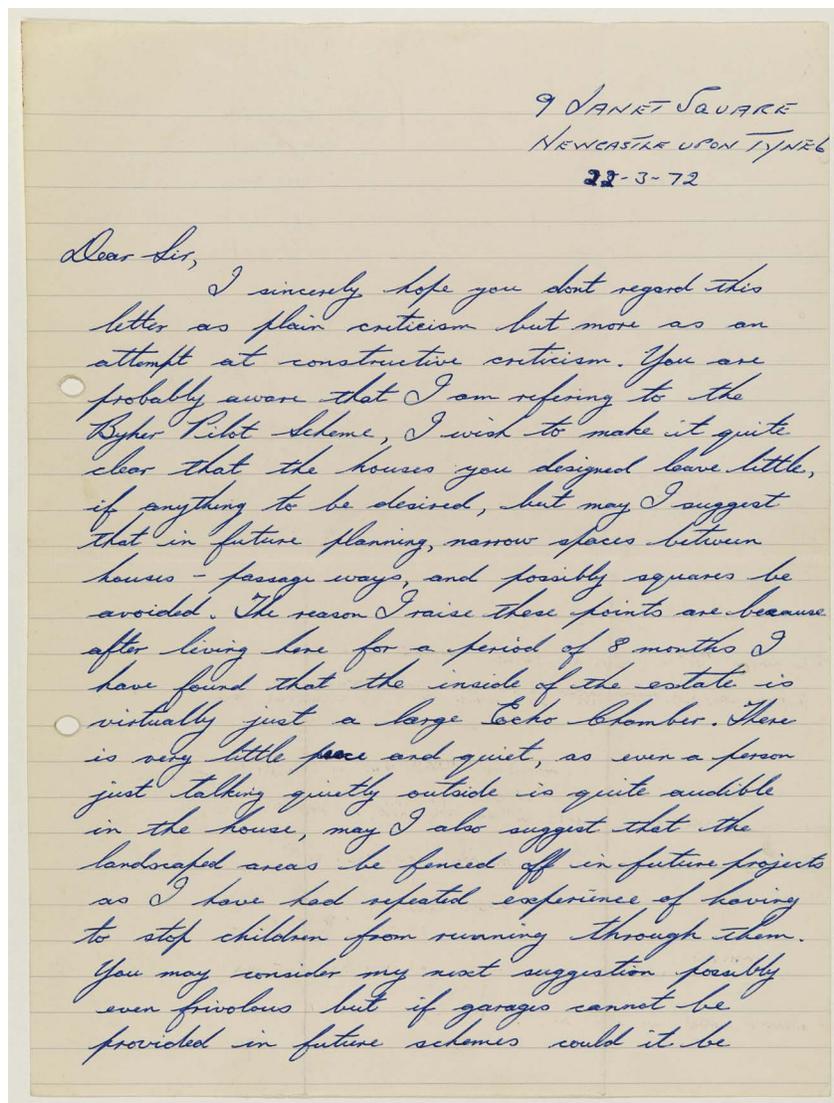


FIGURE 6 Page 1 of Mr McGuiness' letter of complaint March 22<sup>nd</sup> 1972, 2 pages. Byker, RIBA Collections.

I sincerely hope you don't regard this letter as plain criticism but more as an attempt at constructive criticism. You are probably aware that I am referring to the Byker Pilot Scheme, I wish to make it quite clear that the houses you designed have little, if anything to be desired, but may I suggest that in future planning, narrow spaces between houses - passageways and possibly squares be avoided [...] after living here for a period of 8 months I have found that the inside of the estate is virtually just a large Echo Chamber. There is very little peace and quiet, as ever a person just talking quietly outside is quite audible in the house, may I also suggest that the landscaped areas be fenced off in future projects as I have had repeated experience of having to stop children from running through them [...] Personally my wife, family and myself feel it is rather a pity things turned out the way they have, having lived in Byker all our lives [...].

Yours Faithfully, J McGuiness<sup>25</sup>

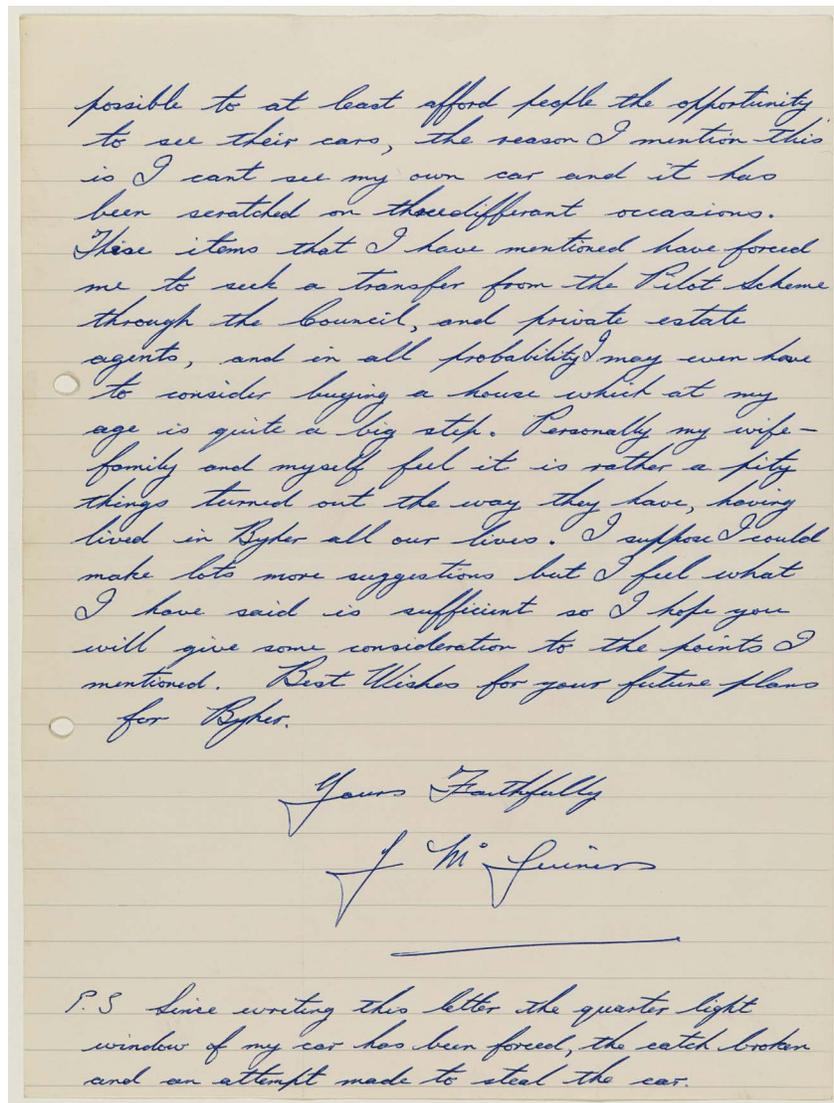


FIGURE 7 Page 2 of Mr McGuiness' letter of complaint March 22<sup>nd</sup> 1972, 2 pages. Byker, RIBA Collections.

Mr McGuinness' "constructive criticism" brings his personal experiences to bear on ideas for future design, but the feedback now goes well beyond the initial list of complaint requested by the architects. What had been the extra work of the architects collecting feedback, has now become the extra work (and skill) of the residents providing it.

In the letter the "Echo Chamber", as McGuinness calls the housing development, is described in terms of relations between spatial design and activities of use. In his critique of fences and passageways, McGuinness inscribes social processes, say desires and regrets for what could have been; sensory experiences of peace and quiet; and he describes residents' material practices such as having to stop children running through landscaped areas.

The letter, addressed to Mr. Erskine, conveys a command that, unlike the requested list, may not have been timed to coincide with specific design phases. Nevertheless, concerns raised in the letter, such as those related to noise and the proximity between private and public spaces, were taken into consideration by the architects in their ongoing design work. Erskine explained:

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Byker is not radically different because of these conversations we've had from what it might have been anyway. But saying that I think it's important to understand that Byker is part of an on-going process [...] Therefore one does nonetheless get an accumulated experience of what people want and then it does get altered each time, no job at one time is like the job before entirely.<sup>26</sup>

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We initially encountered the letter in the archive, then transcribed it, and now we share it with research communities by reading it aloud and discussing it here.<sup>27</sup> Picking up this archival document is an act that, in itself, can translate and contextualize concerns. In other words, we examine Mr. McGuinness's heartfelt evaluation of design and social agency, which remains relevant in ongoing heritage and transformation processes in postwar housing today. As *file*, the letter highlights specific and localized critiques of institutionalized practices, suggesting that these practices are adaptable and capable of accumulating experiences from below.

In her chapter "A Short History of Silence," architectural historian Janina Gosseye (2019) reminds us that those who use, occupy, and construct buildings possess unique spatial knowledge often absent from historiographic accounts. *On file*, the letter makes visible complaints and residents' socially reproductive processes (often kept *off the record*). It serves as a command to address these minor issues. This reminder from the past underscores the possibilities for a more inclusive future in mainstream practice. The letter captures complaints at a moment of suspension, as described by complaint scholar Sara Ahmed, "not yet done, not yet beaten."<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Ralph Erskine quoted in Bugler (1975). *This Island Now*: 15 (Authors' emphasis)

<sup>27</sup> This paper was first developed by the authors for presentations at SAHGB Annual Symposium *ARCH/TECTURES ARCH/VES*, July 2020; and the symposium *The Practice of Architectural Research*, KU Leuven, October 2020.

<sup>28</sup> Ahmed, S. (2021). *Complaint!*. Duke University Press: 276.

## 4 Conclusion: On File and As Files

These unconventional “participation” documents, catalogued under the “Pilot Scheme” and preserved within the extensive Byker archive, reveal how the architects initiated and facilitated information exchanges through residents’ lists and letters of complaint. Residents’ initial comments were further mediated through evaluative lists, memos, and investigative reports by experts and professionals. We find that paperwork was one of the means employed by the Byker architects to incorporate social agency into their mainstream design process. We also note, by tracing the forms of complaints used by one resident, that residents gained confidence in initiating and articulating their experiences. We have traced a cycle of effects, complaints, and the detailed design of creaking floor construction across files that document both these communicative processes and contractual information, design drawings, and specifications compiled according to familiar project phases.

*On file*, these materials allows us to catch fleeting glimpses of how the communicative processes with residents at Byker operated through paperwork and gain insights into the architects’ practices. Thus, we observe how information is exchanged between different parties, across various documents, and over the extended timespan of the project, even when these elements are often seen as separate and incompatible. We know from social studies of Byker that the architects contributed to processes that engaged residents in the redevelopment, resulting in some degree of collective organization. According to those studies, residents’ contributions were somewhat limited; “the citizen (adopted) the role of demander and complainant: informant rather than decision-maker.”<sup>29</sup> However, we demonstrate here that the lists and letters of complaint, carefully elicited and retained by the architects, serve a more significant purpose than merely registering residents’ dissatisfaction. These rare records must be seen as more than remnants of the lived social processes, as they also directed and conveyed residents’ spatial knowledge into new building information. As files, they represent material means through which social concerns were formalized and integrated into the design process, and possibly into the physical objects as well.

As researchers, each approaching this work from our own unique perspectives, we draw two key conclusions. First, when considering archival research methodology more broadly, we find value in looking beyond the official documents that typically serve as the primary focus of archival research, such as drawings and, less frequently, specifications and other contractual documentation for the final building. Job files, which include letters, lists, and memos that record the everyday “bread and butter” work, to borrow Ricardo Agarez and Nelson Mota’s term<sup>30</sup>, are often considered marginal by architectural historians. In fact, they are rarely preserved at all. Nevertheless, our analysis demonstrates that these files not only record but also enable the reconstruction of architects’ communicative processes. When the paperwork is innovative and seeks to incorporate residents’ experiences, as is the case at Byker, it becomes an integral part of a specific architectural practice and its approach to design.

While communicative processes are a routine part of design and construction procedures and can often be traced by architectural researchers when job files have been retained in the archive, they are seldom the primary subject of study. These communicative processes, both on file and as files, enable us to challenge the conventional understanding of an architect’s written work as a finite specification and representation. From the files, we learn that at Byker, both architects and other specialists, as well as

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<sup>29</sup> Zutshi, M. (1978). *Speaking for Myself: a Report on the Byker Redevelopment* (Newcastle Council for Voluntary Service). Byker, ArkDes Collection: 53.

<sup>30</sup> Agarez, R. and Mota, N. (Eds.) (2015) The “Bread & Butter” of Architecture, *Footprint*, special issue no. 17.

residents, undertook additional work through lists and letters of complaint to document and transfer residents' knowledge into the design process. These 'extra' Byker files thus point to an underdeveloped area of historical research in architecture and also offer contemporary practitioners some insights and techniques on how these ubiquitous communicative processes can enhance and mobilize information from various actors and participants in architectural design processes. Studying the architects' site work through the archived papers, we illustrate that it blurs the boundaries between practical and social concerns as they accumulate over time. As files, the papers play a role in transfer processes, enabling different information to be picked up—or blocked—in design processes that are often more porous and heterogeneous than the final set of drawings might suggest.

As media historian Kate Eichhorn demonstrates, archival approaches can help us understand marginalized voices when we view the institutional archive not solely as “a place to recover the past but rather as a way to engage with some of the legacies, epistemes, and traumas pressing down on the present.”<sup>31</sup> Archives can be critically mobilized to reveal marginalized perspectives for more just and inclusive purposes.<sup>32</sup> In considering our architectural history of Byker, among the many stories offered by the vast archive, we have explored the potential in media that enabled residents' voices to become embedded in the architectural design process. From a practice-based perspective, we argue that such a historical approach has the potential to address the issues architects face today in the reevaluation, maintenance, and transformation of the extensive postwar housing stock across Europe.

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<sup>31</sup> Eichhorn, Kate. 2013. *The Archival Turn in Feminism: Outrage in Order*. Temple University Press: 5

<sup>32</sup> The historiographic approach aligns with e.g. Migotto, A. and Tattara, M. (Eds.) (2023). *Contested Legacies: Critical Perspectives on Postwar Modern Housing*. Leuven University Press; Azoulay, A. A. (2019). *Potential History: Unlearning Imperialism*. Verso. Mattsson, H. (2020), *The Politics of the Archive: The Historiography of the Recent Past*. In Pech, C. and Andersson, M. (Eds.). *ArkDes research symposium on architectural history: 2018*. ArkDes.

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