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Stefan Couperus

Experimental Planning after the Blitz. Non-governmental Planning Initiatives and Post-war Reconstruction in Coventry and Rotterdam, 1940–1955

The history of blitzed cities in the Second World War allows for a rather evident articulation of an experimental space. The destructive effects of aerial bombardments incited an avalanche of ideas and ideals about the planned redevelopment of cities such as London, Coventry, Plymouth, Rotterdam, Le Havre, Hamburg, Dresden and Warsaw.

A somewhat provocative, but nevertheless empirically supported reading of war-time destructions due to bombardments is that they were considered «a blessing in disguise».¹ Other than interwar municipal policy schemes, political reform and town planning projects, bombs were capable of removing the tenacious impediments to modernist urban reform, such as slums, blight areas, vested interests, old property rights, and social misfits who inhabited the inner city alleys and districts. Moreover, obliteration by bombs allowed for subsequent clearance of (sometimes undamaged) adjacent structures and spurred a revision of the physical organisation of the urban environment as a whole. This perceived window of opportunity to act upon the city with unprecedented energy and swiftness was accompanied by the establishment of a governance structure in which urban planners obtained a pivotal position.²

The reconstruction of blitzed cities can not only be regarded as an experimental space, it also fits the temporal framework of an experimental interlude during which a number of planning ideas and thoughts were advanced or even acted out. From the first post-apocalyptic weeks until the promulgation of the grand post-war structures of urban planning, housing and welfare from the late 1940s onwards, the locally felt urgencies of recovery fostered a series of planning experiments. Most of

1 On this observation, see: J. Düwel / N. Gutschow (eds.), *A Blessing in Disguise. War and Town Planning in Europe, 1940–1945*, Berlin 2013.

2 Influential studies include: W. Durth / N. Gutschow, *Träume in Trümmern: Stadtplanung 1940–1950*, Munich 1993; J. Düwel, *1945: Krieg – Zerstörung – Aufbau*, Berlin 1995; D. Voldman, *La Reconstruc-*

tion Des Villes Françaises de 1940 à 1954: Histoire D'une Politique, Paris 1997; J. Hasegawa, *Replanning the Blitzed City Centre: a Comparative Study of Bristol, Coventry and Southampton 1941–1950*, Buckingham 1992; J. M. Diefendorf, *In the Wake of War: The Reconstruction of German Cities after World War II*, Oxford 1993; K. Bosma / C. Wagenaar

these experiments were initiated by (local) authorities. However, with the local authorities awaiting national directives for action, the voluntary sector produced a series of planning ideas too.

This article is in line with recent historiography that acknowledges the wider range of non-governmental actors, discourses and understandings of modernist planning in blitzed cities in post-war Europe. Further adhering to Dennis Sweeney's recent call to approach modernity from the perspective of the «heterogeneous and multiple rationalities of social reform projects and their immanence», this article highlights two non-governmental experiments in community planning in the blitzed cities of Coventry and Rotterdam that emerged from the local voluntary sector.³ In the case of Coventry, the *Family Health Club Housing Society* strove to plan and build a self-sufficient, almost autarchic community estate at the outskirts of the city. In the case of Rotterdam, the *Rotterdamsche Gemeenschap* directed its energy towards the establishment of an alternative socio-political set-up, which departed from the neighbourhood level.

Both experiments focused on promoting alternative visions of post-war urban society and were conceived and partly executed outside of the authorised redevelopment plans, revealing their own rationalities and planning practices. Both projects had to cope with the hesitance and unpredictability that characterised urban politics and governance in the 1940s.

This article argues that the planning of blitzed cities was not monopolised by authorised planners and administrators, but also included voluntary, private initiatives that emerged during the experimental interlude of the 1940s. As such, this analysis stretches beyond the recently addressed theme of popular participation and consultation in post-war urban planning. It stresses the impact of private initiatives in reconstruction planning in the transitional stage between wartime crisis politics and the planned city in the era of post-war welfarism. Despite the fact that both projects failed to come to full fruition, they disclose a clear experimental outlook on the redevelopment of urban society after large-scale destruction and demolition.

(eds.), *Een geruisloze doorbraak. De geschiedenis van architectuur en stedenbouw tijdens de bezetting en de wederopbouw van Nederland*, Rotterdam 1995; J. M. Diefendorf (ed.), *Rebuilding Europe's Bombed Cities*, London 1990; C. Wagenaar, *Welvaartsstad in wording. De wederopbouw van Rotterdam, 1940–1952*, Rotterdam 1993.

- 3 D. Sweeney, «Modernity» and the Making of Social Order in Twentieth-Century Europe», in: *Contemporary European History* 23 (2014), 209–224; S. Goebel / D. Keene (eds.), *Cities into Battlefields: Metropolitan Scenarios, Experiences and Commemorations of Total War*, Aldershot 2011; M. Clapson /

P. J. Larkham (eds.), *The Blitz and Its Legacy: War-time Destruction to Post-war Reconstruction*, Aldershot 2013; S. E. Cowan, *Technocracy, Democracy and Publicity: Public Consultation and British Planning, 1939–1951*, PhD thesis University of California, 2010; G. Wagner-Kyora (ed.), *Wiederaufbau europäischer Städte: Rekonstruktionen, die Moderne und die lokale Identitätspolitik seit 1945*, Stuttgart 2014; P. J. Larkham / E. Erdem (eds.), *Alternative Visions of Post-War Reconstruction: Creating the Modern Townscape*, London 2015.

1. Rebuilding Post-war Coventry

After the devastating German air raids in 1940, the booming industrial city of Coventry was subjected to the immediacy of recovery and reconstruction.⁴ Much of the inner city had been turned into ashes and housing shortages subsequently skyrocketed well into the 1950s. The modernist city architect Donald Gibson took up the physical reconstruction of the blitzed areas as soon as the debris was removed from the streets.⁵ Coventry gradually became the symbol of post-war recovery in Britain: It was hailed as a modern industrial city, whose population, despite continuing problems with mass housing, experienced one of the highest degrees of affluence in Britain in the 1950s.⁶ In post-war propagandist discourse, Coventry became «a twentieth century icon» of British resilience and prosperity whose esteem stretched beyond the British isle.⁷

A firmly entrenched Labour and Trade Union hegemony shaped Coventry's political culture during the 1940s, although other ideological groups secured a sustainable position in urban governance too.⁸ Backed by the relatively affluent working class, Labour officials were at the vanguard of emergency politics after the blitz and dominated the subsequent redevelopment of the city. Fitting the mounting narrative of Labour's post-war New Jerusalem, Coventry seemed to fulfil the promise of a «better Britain»: It swiftly presented a bold, modernist reconstruction plan, which harked back to pre-war initiatives of modernist urban regeneration, and was able to sustain high levels of welfare as the austerity of the 1940s yielded to consumerist affluence in the 1950s.

Linking it to the wider context of British reconstruction politics, Coventry may be seen as a showcase of Clement Attlee's post-war reformist Labour administration, which aspired to «plan from the ground up» and produced the centralist frameworks of post-war welfarism relating, among others, to health care, housing and economic regulation.⁹ This national planning agenda, too, provoked criticism on the Labour government that was allegedly employing a mode of «socialist authoritarianism». Political opponents, intellectuals and also representatives from the voluntary sector accused Labour of according primacy to its administrative and planning apparatus and thus employing a system of state planning that was «inefficient, unjust and undemo-

4 T. Mason / N. Tiratsoo, «People, Politics and Planning: The Reconstruction of Coventry's City Centre, 1940–53», in: Diefendorf, *Rebuilding Europe's Bombed Cities*, 94–113; N. Tiratsoo / T. Mason / T. Matsumura, *Urban Reconstruction in Britain and Japan, 1945–1955: Dreams, Plans and Realities*, Luton 2002.

5 S. H. Walford, *Architecture in Tension: an Examination of the Position of the Architect in the Private and Public Sectors, Focusing on the Training and Careers of Sir Basil Spence (1907–1976) and Sir Donald Gibson (1908–1991)*, PhD thesis University of Warwick, 2009.

6 On this, see: N. Tiratsoo, *Reconstruction, Affluence*

and *Labour Politics: Coventry, 1945–1960*, London 1990.

7 A. Smith, *The City of Coventry: a Twentieth Century Icon*, London 2006; L. Campbell, «Paper Dream City / Modern Monument: Donald Gibson and Coventry», in: I. Boyd Whyte (ed.), *Man-Made Future: Planning, Education and Design in Mid-Twentieth-Century Britain*, London 2007, 121–144.

8 Tiratsoo, *Reconstruction*, 46–52.

9 M. J. Daunton, *Wealth and Welfare: an Economic and Social History of Britain, 1851–1951*, Oxford 2007, 594; K. O. Morgan, *Britain Since 1945: The People's Peace*, Oxford 2001, 232.

cratic».¹⁰ Recent historiography has however shown that the perceived distance between Labour-endorsed expert planners and the people should not be taken at face value. Nick Tiratsoo has convincingly argued that the bold planning statements in post-war Britain do not reflect the practices, in which public opinion, national policy as well as wishes from the citizenry constituted the complex nexus of British planning.¹¹ More recently, Susan Cowan has systematically disclosed the wide range of public consultation practices that paralleled the design and implementation of modernist town plans in Britain's blitzed cities.¹² The work of Peter Larkham and Keith Lilley, among others, stresses that officials and planners were acutely aware of the public, which translated into a series of promotional strategies, for instance the public exhibitions of plans.¹³

In the particular case of Coventry, Tiratsoo has underlined the political pluralism that, despite Labour's dominance, generated substantial political debate, resulting in amendments to Labour's policy agenda and fluctuations in electoral appeal.¹⁴ Other studies have also probed into the social aspects of wartime and post-war life in Coventry and elsewhere, allowing for less partisan narratives of reconstruction politics in the 1940s and 1950s.¹⁵

The case study presented here entails a private endeavour of community planning during the experimental interlude between the blitz and the coordinated reconstruction of Coventry from the late 1940s onwards. It shows how a private planning project emerged from within Coventry's civil society that became known as the Family Health Club Housing Society Coventry (FHC) and promoted a type of community and mode of citizenship that increasingly conflicted with the post-war hegemonic agendas of British recovery.

2. Positive Health, Housing and Democracy: The Idea of the Family Health Club

In August 1944, the radiologist Kenneth E. Barlow, together with a group of prominent Coventry citizens, founded the Family Health Club Housing Society Coventry, which was registered under the Provident Societies Act in April 1945.¹⁶ Under this banner, a

10 Cited in: N. Tiratsoo, ««New Vistas»: The Labour Party, Citizenship and the Built Environment in the 1940s», in: R. Weight / A. Beach (eds.), *The Right to Belong: Citizenship and National Identity in Britain, 1930–1960*, London 1998, 137.

11 N. Tiratsoo, «The Reconstruction of Blitzed British Cities, 1945–55: Myths and Reality», in: *Contemporary British History* 14 (2000), 27–44.

12 Cowan, *Planning to the People*.

13 P. J. Larkham / K. D. Lilley, «Exhibiting the City: Planning Ideas and Public Involvement in War-time and Early Post-War Britain», in: *Town Planning Review* 83 (2012), 648–668; P. J. Larkham / K. D. Lilley, «Plans, Planners and City Images: Place Promotion and Civic Boosterism in British Reconstruction Planning», in: *Urban History* 30

(2003), 183–205; P. J. Larkham, «Selling the Future City: Images in UK Post-War Reconstruction Plans», in: Whyte, *Man-Made Future*; K. D. Lilley, «On Display: Planning Exhibitions as Civic Propaganda or Public Consultation?», in: *Planning History* 25 (2003), 3–8.

14 Tiratsoo, *Reconstruction*, passim.

15 R. Cherrington, *Not Just Beer and Bingo! A Social History of Working Men's Clubs*, [S.L.] 2012; I. Buruma, *Year Zero: a History of 1945*, London 2013; D. Kynaston, *Austerity Britain, 1945–1951*, London 2007; J. Grindrod, *Concretopia: a Journey Around the Rebuilding of Post-war Britain*, Brecon 2013.

16 National Archives (Public Record Office), FS 35/80, Family Health Club Housing Society (Coventry) Limited.

group of Coventrians embarked on a particular kind of community planning that was informed by three categories: health, home and democracy. These three elements were not preconceived building blocks for a community, but were to be discovered through experiment, which made the FHC «an experimental community» first and foremost.¹⁷

The «social biology» often referred to in FHC publications, was an unimpaired subscription to what was called «the positive health» movement stemming from the interwar Peckham experiment at the Pioneer Health Centre in London. Barlow, who published regularly on behalf of the FHC, represented an intellectual current amongst British medics who explained health as a social category rather than a medical, pathological one. Health, argued Barlow, was about prevention and promotion rather than pathology: «Neither health nor the circumstances which are likely to promote health, receive adequate consideration, either by the medical profession or by the so-called Ministry of Health.»¹⁸ An annual family health overhaul, for instance, was a key feature of the FHC's health programme, as were the social activities in the planned health centre. But the FHC also proposed some feasible additions in order to sustain family health, such as securing good nutrition by practising organic farming.

These and other communal additions to the project, most importantly the nine-storey flat complexes, provoked critique from the milieu of urbanists and planners. The famous cultural sociologist Lewis Mumford, who knew Barlow as his former assistant, conveyed his doubts about the communal nature of the Coventry project to his friend, the urbanist Frederic J. Osborn.¹⁹ George Scott Williamson, the leading figure of the Peckham experiment in London, was concerned with the Coventry experiment too, as it resorted to housing solutions rather than his method, that is, to «grow homes, and not build houses».²⁰ High-rises denied the biological order of the family, the key social unit from which, in the holistic language of Williamson, «the heart of the home» would develop.

The title of the Coventry project indeed revealed its double agenda: It was as much about family health promotion as it was about housing. This combination of «positive health» and housing was a strategy to legitimise the FHC within the context of Coventry's post-blitz demands of reconstruction. The pressing housing shortages would elicit enthusiasm for private initiatives that would be able to contribute to a solution. Thus, regardless of its holistic discourse on the family and the home, the FHC in essence of-

17 Wellcome Library (hereafter WL), Archive Peckham Health Centre (hereafter PHC), B.5.25.2, Address by Kenneth Barlow for the West Midland Group on Post War Reconstruction and Planning (undated); K. E. Barlow, *A Home of Their Own*, London 1946, 85.

18 *The Medical Press and Circular*, 3 April 1946.

19 M. R. Hughes, *The Letters of Lewis Mumford and Frederic J. Osborn: a Transatlantic Dialogue, 1938–1970*, Bath 1971, 181; Barlow had been Mumford's

personal assistant after he had assisted the famous Patrick Geddes with editing *The Sociological Review*. See: E. Kirby, «Obituary – Kenneth Elliott Barlow, FRCR, DMR, MRCS, LRCS», in: *Nutrition and Health* 50 (2001), 75–76.

20 WL, PHC, B.5.25.1, G.S. Williamson to Family Health Centre Housing Society Coventy, [1945]; J. Lewis / B. Brookes, «A Reassessment of the Work of the Peckham Centre, 1936–1951», in: *Milbank Memorial Fund Quarterly*, 61 (1983), 307–350, 323.

ferred a much-wanted asset: dwellings. However, positive health and housing could only contribute to the creation of a sustainable community if it was cemented by democratic governance: people needed to have a say in the way in which health and housing were to be guaranteed.

The FHC explicitly sought to connect to the burgeoning gospel of democracy and democratic citizenship that developed in post-war Britain and linked up with earlier debates.²¹ Or as Barlow defined the essence of the experimental interlude: «The critical experiment is an experiment in democracy.»²² This democratic experiment entailed, above all, a high degree of citizen initiative and collaboration.²³ The FHC, consequently, depended upon «the initiative of its members», which an early brochure stated, was «characteristically British and democratic».²⁴ In front of a group of regional planners, Barlow argued: «The experiment consists of seeing just what the community will make of those opportunities and of itself in the setting which those opportunities afford.»²⁵ As such, Barlow believed the FHC was «far more radical and far more democratic» than any project the City Council of Coventry had promoted.²⁶

Planning, against the backdrop of this democratic conception of active citizenship, then amounted to something entirely different from state-led planning by experts and administrators: «To make a beginning with the cultivation of communities, the people and planners must come together. But to get the results that our communities require, the initiative and the purpose of the experiment must spring from the people and not from the planner [...] [w]hen the planner decides that is bureaucracy. When the people decide that is democracy.»²⁷ *The Observer* wrote in a similar vein that the Coventry project «is a non-profit-making enterprise in which local people, instead of looking for some Governmental authority to plan for them, are coming together to plan their own housing and community life».²⁸ Evidently, the FHC's grassroots initiative was consciously juxtaposed to what was understood as «socialist authoritarianism» and seen as the solution to reinvigorate the «castrated communities» of Britain – in the words of the Secretary of State Health, Aneurin Bevan.²⁹

Members of the FHC publicly distanced themselves from Labour's post-war planning agendas, particularly with regard to the emerging National Health Service (NHS).

21 For a recent, vivid impression of the celebration of victory and democratic discourse in post-1945 Britain, see the film documentary by K. Loach, *The Spirit of '45* (2013). For pre-war thoughts on citizenship in Britain, see: J. Harris, «Political Thought and the Welfare State, 1870–1940: An Intellectual Framework for British Social Policy», in: *Past & Present* 135 (1992) 1, 116–141.

22 Barlow, *A Home*, 85.

23 WL, PHC, B.5.25.2, *The Family Health Club and Housing Society* (Coventry) Ltd. (undated).

24 Ibid.

25 WL, PHC, B.5.25.2, Address by Kenneth Barlow

for the West Midland Group on Post War Reconstruction and Planning (undated)

26 K. E. Barlow, *The Family Health Club*, unpublished and undated manuscript, 45.

27 Cited in: M. Brooks, *The Family Health Club Housing Society (Coventry) Ltd 1945–1956*, MA thesis University of Warwick 1987, 45.

28 *The Observer*, 29 July 1945.

29 Quoted in: S. Fielding / P. Thompson / N. Tiratsoo, «*England Arise!*»: *The Labour Party and Popular Politics in 1940s Britain*, Manchester 1995, 104.

The head of the management committee stated in a local newspaper that «[s]tate control means the patients having no direct share in the administration of the new service [...] Health service should preserve for both patient and doctor freed from bureaucratic regimentation.»³⁰

In his study on Labour-dominated reconstruction politics in Coventry, Tiratsoo sees the FHC as part of the «pressure of the trade unions or others on the left».³¹ However, labelling the FHC as leftist is problematic when taking its ambiguity towards Labour's agenda of centralist welfarism (such as the NHS) and the varying backgrounds of its members into account. Alongside working-class families, one can find engineering workers, doctors, farmers, teachers, nurses and clerical workers within the organisation. The management committee comprised members of the Conservative and Labour parties alike, but also, to a lesser extent, Christian Socialists and Communist Party members.³²

3. The Rise and Demise of a Newly Planned Community in Practice

The aims, ambitions and language of the FHC's alternative route of community planning were in place by the end of 1945. The realisation of the project, however, proved far more troublesome. After having generated sufficient enthusiasm for the FHC among Coventry's families (350 families had allegedly registered, but numbers of 657 were mentioned in early 1948), four discussion groups (the nature of family life according to the Peckham experiment, agriculture and nutrition, social activities, and housing and finance) were installed to further the plan.

The FHC's ambitions were clear: «We want so to associate 2000 families that will constitute a community that will be capable of creating a neighbourhood which will effectively be their own: wherein they themselves will meet their own housing needs, where they will create their own health centre as the pivot of their community and where they will provide for their own most critical nutritional needs.»³³ A series of lectures and meetings in Coventry and its surroundings spurred enthusiasm.³⁴ Margaret Brooks has restated the perceived prospects of interviewed FHC members: «The estate [...] would be compact and totally self-sufficient with its own modern shops «solely for pedestrians», schools, churches, cinemas, playing fields, amenity land and own farm, and underground parking facilities. The houses would have their own gardens and to ensure privacy and maximum sunlight, all blocks of building would be staggered. [In the Health Centre] would be a swimming-bath, the gymnasium, the ice-rink, the theatre, dance-halls, social rooms for indoor games nurseries for young children and self-service cafeteria.»³⁵

30 Brooks, *The Family Health Club*, 67.

31 Tiratsoo, *Reconstruction*, 47.

32 *Coventry Evening Telegraph*, 4 June 1947.

33 WL, PHC B.5.25.2, Publications K. E. Barlow 1944–1948, note 1944 [no further date specification].

34 I. H. Pearse, *The Quality of Life: the Peckham Approach to Human Ethology*, Edinburgh 1979, 179, appendix 13; Barlow, *A Home*, 86.

35 Brooks, *The Family Health Club*, 68–69.

The FHC's energetic frontman, Barlow, was constantly looking for money to finance the purchase of land, as shareholders had only generated a capital of 132 pounds by August 1945. In early 1946 Barlow had secured a mortgage from the Liverpool Victoria Friendly Society.³⁶ This enabled the FHC to purchase an estate just east of the city of Coventry, in Binley. The acquired land had an additional challenge to it. It had not been cultivated for years and the two existing farms (Binley Common farm and Roseycombe farm) were largely idle. The FHC's aim was to prevent the property (Brandon Wood as the 461 acre estate was mostly referred to) from «degenerating into a rural slum» and to turn it into a thriving community with its own agricultural food production.³⁷

Although most Coventry City and Rugby Rural District officials were enthusiastic about the plan, no political or financial support was gained as long as the FHC could not submit fully detailed plans.³⁸ With the help of Arcon architects, particularly the famous prefab architect Raglan Squire (who charged a reduced rate), the plans progressed from spring 1946 onward.

Meanwhile, the first feasible activities of the FHC were initiated. Members organised a host of social activities on the estate. Some arable farming (organic growing) was undertaken and Barlow's family, together with two farm workers and a farm bailiff moved permanently to the Binley Common Farmhouse.³⁹ The citizens of Coventry became increasingly aware of the project as a ten-day exhibition at Trinity Hall was opened on July 6, 1946. It displayed the spatial layout and the interiors of the buildings. Lewis Mumford gave a stimulating opening address, in which he declared that the FHC started «at a point which the town planner and Government bodies never reached – the family».⁴⁰ The local press published positively on the FHC: «British people are showing signs of turning social experimenters, working out for themselves new patterns for living, working or playing together [...] The really important thing is that they are being tried, not under official inspiration or to order, but spontaneously.»⁴¹

Finally, on 7 March 1947, the FHC submitted its plans to the local and regional authorities. The first stage of the housing plan would provide 139 dwellings, including the first complex of 68 flats. All designs had been subjected to FHC members' opinion. The entire Brandon Wood Estate Scheme was sketched out too. It included housing for all income groups and family compositions, including single elderly people, amounting to 2000 homes for about 8000 people in total.⁴²

The submission of the plan proved to be the starting point of a series of lengthy discussions and negotiations with all authorities over the approval and progress of the scheme. Coventry's Housing Committee refused to give final consent as long as it was unclear whether the scheme would interfere with the pending municipal housing pro-

36 Ibid., 52.

37 Cited in: *ibid.*, 59.

38 Ibid., 61.

39 Ibid., 85–115.

40 Cited in: *ibid.*, 77.

41 Cited in: *ibid.*, 65.

42 Coventry History Centre, CCD/AP/1/36/5/52 and 53, Family Health Club Housing Society (Coventry) Brandon Wood Estate layout plan, 15 September 1947.

gramme.⁴³ Coventry was still awaiting government regulations on the allocations of labour and materials for public and private housing enterprises.

Lying just outside Coventry, the territory of the FHC fell under the jurisdiction of the Rugby Rural District Council and the Warwick County Council. However, the new Town and Country Planning Act of 1947, effectuated on 1 July 1948, reinforced the Coventry City Council as the responsible authority for planning in the particular area of Brandon Wood.⁴⁴ Initially promising some financial support, the Rugby Rural District Council fuelled a seemingly minor debate over the height of the housing complexes. On behalf of the FHC, Barlow argued that the preservation of farmland, so necessary in the context of food shortages, nutrition and the lack of buying power to import food from abroad, called for the inclusion of nine-storey high-rises in the plan. In a meeting with the Planning and Redevelopment Committee of Coventry in June 1947, Barlow persuaded the committee members. The famous Labour alderman George Hodgkinson recalled: «Some of us felt a little adventurous [...] We were prepared to make an experiment.»⁴⁵ However, ultimately the Rugby authorities were supported in their rejection of the high-rises in such a rural environment. The Coventry City Council overruled all political support by disapproving of the scheme. No «skyscrapers» were to emerge in the rural area of Brandon Wood. Hodgkinson, a persistent supporter of the FHC, concluded: «Some of us felt a little adventurous apparently, we were in fact being revolutionary.»⁴⁶

A few months later, the FHC's appeal to the minister of Town and Country Planning proved unsuccessful too.⁴⁷ A new building request for farm cottages was rejected in 1948 – only the construction of two proof buildings was permitted.⁴⁸ Moreover, new food regulations prohibited the sale of fresh, unpasteurised milk from the farm directly to the public. Even the planned annual health overhaul, which was initiated from October 1949 onward, could not be organised without the assistance of the British Medical Association in Coventry; the intended health centre would never be built.⁴⁹

The FHC's vigour was smothered by the new political realities of the late 1940s: national legislation and regulation narrowed the scope of private initiatives, whereas local and regional authorities promoted their own schemes and agendas in the new frameworks of housing, planning and health. Consequently, the FHC had to accept disappointment as their plans for housing, food production and amenities were largely crushed by state planning programmes and local Labour opposition, a conclusion Barlow was willing to accept acrimoniously only in hindsight.⁵⁰

43 Brooks, *The Family Health Club*, 57.

44 Tiratsoo, *Reconstruction*, 39.

45 Brooks, *The Family Health Club*, 91.

46 Cited in: *ibid.*, 97.

47 *Ibid.*, 105.

48 K. E. Barlow, *Recognising Health*, Plymouth 1988, 117; *The Family Health Club Review*, 25 December 1948.

49 P. Conford, *The Development of the Organic Network: Linking People and Themes, 1945–95*, Edinburgh 2011, 173–175.

50 Barlow, *Recognising health*, 119; Barlow, *The Family Health Club*, 160.

In the early 1950s, the FHC did not amount to more than the family health overhaul, some meetings of its board members and the publication of the *Family Health Club Review*. The farming results in Brandon Wood proved disappointing, inciting Barlow to fire the farm bailiff who was incapable of organising the farm on «business like lines».⁵¹ The farms were put up for sale not much later. The FHC solely continued its social activities, albeit on a modest scale. In 1956, after more than half a decade of relative idleness, the formal bankruptcy of the FHC was inevitable.⁵²

The FHC adhered to a fundamentally different relation between the planners and the planned compared to the subordinate role citizens played in the design of the formal reconstruction plans. After the FHC had lost its momentum, this relation continued to resonate in Coventry's reconstruction politics. For instance, the sociologist Leo Kuper, hired by the Coventry municipality to pursue social surveys, recognised the value that the FHC had attached to the people's expressions of their needs and wishes. In his final recommendations, Kuper wrote: «Our final suggestion is therefore to shift the emphasis from the physical determinism of the expert bureaucratic plan to the activities of the residents themselves.»⁵³ Kuper explicitly declared his indebtedness to the FHC, as it had promoted participation in planning «not only in the actual plan» but also as a later stage, during which «a share in the responsibility of the neighbourhood» was projected.⁵⁴

4. Rebuilding Post-war Rotterdam

One year earlier, another experiment in community planning had also come to an end in Rotterdam, the most heavily bombed Dutch city during the Second World War. Rotterdam's inner city was completely destroyed by German bombs on 14 May 1940. Other bombardments and German sabotage followed during the war causing more damage in residential and port districts.

As was the case in Coventry, Rotterdam's reconstruction frenzy amounted to bold modernist projections of a completely reshaped inner city. The demolitions ushered in an outburst of urbanists' ambitions, reinforcing their interwar modernist vistas for the resurrection of «the world port city».⁵⁵ Reconstruction prompted an instant rivalry between various competing local groups of modernist architects and planners, who obtained positions at the heart of public debate and governance structures, despite the Nazi occupation of the Netherlands.

Although local interest groups, particularly port entrepreneurs who were specifically interested in town planning and architecture, successfully enforced their visions

51 Brooks, *The Family Health Club*, 112.

52 *The London Gazette*, 27 April 1956.

53 L. Kuper, «Blueprint for Living Together», in: idem (ed.), *Living in Towns. Selected Research Papers in Urban Sociology of the Faculty of Commerce and Social Science University of Birmingham*, London 1953, 1–202, 179.

54 Ibidem.

55 H. Meyer, «Rotterdam: the Promise of a New, Modern Society in a New, Modern City: 1940 to the Present», in: J. Ockman (ed.), *Out of Ground Zero: Case Studies in Urban Reinvention*, Munich 2002, 84–97.

on the final reconstruction plan (1946), ultimately, Rotterdam was (re)built by a firmly established apparatus of top-down operating technocrats that took limited notice of public accountability and responsiveness.⁵⁶

In contrast to the blitzed cities in Britain, a social dimension of reconstruction, whether in the guise of public consultation or the inclusion of neighbourhood plans, was largely absent in Rotterdam's reconstruction plan. Community discourse did not emerge publicly in wartime Rotterdam. As the intensity of German occupation gradually amounted to a complete *Gleichschaltung* of politics and society, access to the arenas of reconstruction politics depended on a highly contingent set of inter-personal relations and surviving local networks that were able to permeate Nazi-controlled governance structures.⁵⁷

Reconstruction politics was strongly predominated by the emphasis on the physical reappearance of Rotterdam's destroyed areas and on the recovery of the port district. The social dimension of reconstruction in Rotterdam, in contrast, remained underground until the liberation from German occupation in May 1945. From then onwards, the social aspects of reconstruction politics were heavily debated in public by a group of competing urban intellectuals.⁵⁸ Many of these intellectuals were wealthy port entrepreneurs whose families had already been engaged in public affairs since the late nineteenth century. They surrounded themselves with architects, planners and local officials, with whom they debated their private plans for the city, ranging from social housing and educational programmes to participation in industrial management.⁵⁹

During the last war years and particularly after the war, debates about community planning and social reconstruction were structured around the idea of the neighbourhood unit, the *wijkgedachte* in Dutch. In general, the debate advanced from the common analysis of social decay and alienation in the metropolis. Solutions were to be sought in the realm of neighbourhood planning, as was promoted by the American sociologist Clarence Perry from the late 1920s onwards. Neighbourhood units

56 On the technocratic nature of Dutch (and Rotterdam) reconstruction politics, see: C. Wagenaar, «Wederopbouw. Idee en mentaliteit», in: K. Bosma / C. Wagenaar (eds.), *Een geruisloze doorbraak: de geschiedenis van architectuur en stedenbouw tijdens de bezetting en de wederopbouw van Nederland*, Rotterdam 1995, 225–231; K. Bosma, «Het politiek-organisatorisch kader», in: *ibid.*, 231–241; C. J. M. Schuyt / E. Taverne, 1950. *Welvaart in zwart-wit*, The Hague 2000, 163–168. On the particular history of the Rotterdam *Basisplan* 1946, see: N. Mens, *W.G. Witteveen en Rotterdam*, Rotterdam 2007, 138–155; A. Tijhuis, «Vergeten stadsbeelden», in: G. Andela / C. Wagenaar (eds.), *Een stad voor het leven. Wederopbouw Rotterdam 1940–1965*, Rotterdam 1995, 21–58; Wagenaar, *Welvaartsstad*, 215–

236; L. de Klerk, *Particuliere plannen. Denkbeelden en initiatieven van de stedelijke elite inzake de volkswoningbouw en de stedenbouw in Rotterdam, 1860–1950*, Rotterdam 1998, 236.

57 For a recent summary of this entanglement of ruling elites, see: P. van de Laar, «Modernism in European Reconstruction-Policy and Its Public Reception: The Image of Rebuilding Rotterdam, 1945–2000», in: Wagner-Kyora (ed.), *Wiederaufbau*, 212–216.

58 C. Rooijendijk, *That City Is Mine!: Urban Ideal Images in Public Debates and City Plans, Amsterdam & Rotterdam 1945 – 1995*, PhD thesis University of Amsterdam 2005, 68–84.

59 De Klerk, *Particuliere plannen*.

reflected a (human) scale that would allow the social necessities of the urbanite to be realised in concordance with the alleged needs of the nuclear family.

The historiography distinguishes between two local groups that gave rise to ideas about neighbourhood and community planning in Rotterdam. The first, most noted group was led by the municipal director of housing, Alexander Bos, and consisted of civil servants, architects and planners who discussed the underpinning social and cultural values of Rotterdam's redevelopment from 1943 onwards.⁶⁰ The second group – less prominently discussed in reconstruction literature – was known as the *Rotterdamsche Gemeenschap* (RG), a voluntary association that was officially founded in September 1944 and aspired to foster active citizenship, which would produce community life that transcended the existing social and political cleavages in urban society.⁶¹

Despite adopting the framework of the neighbourhood for community planning, both groups differed fundamentally in the way they wanted to realise the neighbourhood communities. Bos's study group propagated a rather defined set of neighbourhood assets, which were to be carried out by public authorities. The RG took a somewhat different stance: The neighbourhood community had to define and articulate its own needs and interests.⁶² While the study group of Bos promoted an expert vision on neighbourhood planning, the RG, in strong contrast, propagated hands-on action by the citizenry from the very start.⁶³

5. Neighbourhood, Associational Life and Democracy: The Idea of the *Rotterdamsche Gemeenschap*

Most neighbourhood unit advocates postulated a certain spatial arrangement of houses and amenities, which would produce a sustainable neighbourhood community. The RG, on the other hand, prioritised grassroots activity and associational life. A socio-political reading of the neighbourhood unit underpinned the RG's agenda, as it aspired to establish «a new way of living together».⁶⁴ During its formative phase, from September 1944 until mid-1947, the RG represented a very ambitious agenda of civic participation and active citizenship within the association of the neighbourhood. The RG, thus, conceived of neighbourhood planning as a vehicle for principle democratic reform.

A quote from the RG's main initiator, the wealthy port entrepreneur and jurist J. Ph. Backx (1903–1982), illustrates how community-oriented the project was:

60 In 1946, the Group Bos published the much-quoted book in which the neighbourhood unit was thoroughly elaborated on. A. Bos, *De stad der toekomst, de toekomst der stad. Een sociaal-culturele studie over de groeiende stadsgemeenschap*, Rotterdam 1946.

61 Some references to the *Rotterdamsche Gemeenschap* can be found in: De Klerk, *Particuliere plannen*, 249–260; W. Vanstiphout, *Maak een stad. Rotterdam en de architectuur van J. H. van den Broek*,

Rotterdam 2005, 212–213; E. A. G. van den Bent, *Proeftuin Rotterdam. Bestuurlijke maakbaarheid tussen 1975 en 2005*, PhD thesis Erasmus University Rotterdam 2010, 8, note 7; T. Idsinga, *Architect W. van Tijen 1894–1974: 'Ik ben een rationalist, maar er is meer op de wereld ...'*, The Hague 1987, 121–124.

62 De Klerk, *Particuliere plannen*, 260.

63 Idsinga, *Architect*, 124.

64 *De Gemeenschap*, 13 October 1950.

«[R]econstruction is a question of [creating] a new popular community». ⁶⁵ Amongst an elitist group of industrialists and entrepreneurs, who assembled regularly to discuss the city's future in secret during the war, Backx refused to restrict the meetings' agenda to economic recovery. A few years later, when Backx withdrew from the elitist debates about the economic future, he created his own platform with the RG and wrote more specifically about the neighbourhood community: «The *Rotterdamsche Gemeenschap* wants individual humans to acquaint and to accept their responsibility towards the Community. It aspires to promote the neighbourhood unit [*wijkgedachte*], to allow a human being, who is lost in the metropolitan whole, to assert himself within a smaller association, without losing contact with the aggregate whole.» ⁶⁶ The institutional configuration, which would enable such social reform, comprised a whole new layer in urban governance. In its early correspondence, meetings and publications, the RG laid out an encompassing scheme of political representation and participation that acknowledged the necessity of decentralising urban governance, marking the neighbourhood – not the city as a whole – as the logical environment for urban, participatory democracy and citizenship. ⁶⁷

To accomplish this alternative urban polity, the RG combined a number of discourses that stemmed from interwar and wartime thought on socio-political reform. Firstly, the agenda of grassroots participation in public affairs harked back to Backx's interest – and experiments within his own company – in employee participation. Secondly, the RG underlined the trans-political nature of its project: ideological, confessional or partisan groupings were to be excluded from all neighbourhood affairs. This idea linked up with the so-called concept of breakthrough (*doorbraak*), a wartime, collaborative effort of detained Dutch intellectuals and politicians, aimed at transcending the ideological boundaries in politics, which gained national prominence after the war. Thirdly, the RG took the local particularities of Rotterdam into account. This implied that not only neighbourhood inhabitants were entitled to participate in urban democracy, but also that the historically established strong position of the industrial elite and the local voluntary associations were included in the RG's representative scheme. ⁶⁸ The neighbourhood, the milieu of industrial elites as well as the voluntary associations together formed the corporatist cells of the newly conceived urban *demos*.

The RG's alternative polity commenced at the neighbourhood level. In each of the 18 neighbourhoods that the RG had identified, a board (*wijkbestuur*) would be elected to articulate the particular interests of the neighbourhood. Notably, neighbour-

65 City Archive Rotterdam (hereafter CAR), Collection De erven de wed. J. van Nelle, inv.nr. 3317, J. Ph. Backx, «Over den achtergrond van het stadsplan: [On the background of the city plan] (1942); On Backx, see: G. Chr. Kok / F. A. Arnbak-d'Aulnis de Bourouill, *Rotterdamse juristen uit vijf eeuwen*, Hilversum 2009, 317–326.

66 N. N., *Wat wil de Rotterdamsche Gemeenschap?*, 1945, 52.

67 CAR, Collection Hudig, inv.nr. 1311, Minutes of the *Gezelschap Rotterdam 1943*, response by Anton Blom, treasurer of the RC, 20 February 1945.

68 N. N., *Wat wil*, 8–11 and 45.

hood interests were conceived of as interests *sui generis* and different in each particular neighbourhood in Rotterdam. Neighbourhood interests had never before been taken into account in political decision-making, the RG argued; no representative or legislative organ (such as the parliament and the city council) had ever allowed for the representation and articulation of neighbourhood interests. One member of each neighbourhood board, which de facto served as subdivisions of the general board of the RG, would then be delegated to the Assembly of Delegates of the RG (*Vergadering van Afgevaardigden*). Additionally, representatives of Rotterdam's industrial elite (organised in so-called *kringen*) and a selected number of voluntary associations would complete the Assembly.

Essentially, the RG tried to replace the pre-war system of local government by establishing the neighbourhood unit as the organising principle. No sustainable rearrangement of urban space and economic recovery could be expected without a sound organisation of the community whose particular needs and wishes were articulated within the setting of the neighbourhood. Therefore, the RG did not only relate to the typical community discourse that revolved around the restoration of social ties and bonds in the urban context, but it also addressed the regeneration of the political community, the *demos*. It attempted to foster a mode of political citizenship, based on a participatory and a developmental notion of democracy, separate from party politics, by means of a new institutional design. The RG even suggested that the City Council – formally the highest political organ in local government – could very well delegate (parts of) its legislative capacities (particularly with regard to public amenities, education, cultural life, sports and community centres) to the new self-governing institutions of Rotterdam, the neighbourhoods. However, as the local government was reinstated with the municipal elections of 1946 and the reconstruction politics became ever more structured in the late 1940s, the RG had to downsize its ambitions radically.

6. The Rise and Demise of Associational Democracy in Practice

At first glance, the implementation of the RG's scheme made good progress during the mid-1940s. Eighteen neighbourhood boards were installed, whose members were recruited from the growing number of RG members. Membership figures reached nearly 6000, including mostly middle-class people who were active in the voluntary sector.⁶⁹ Concretely, activities within the RG boiled down to myriad meetings of the separate neighbourhood boards and between the joint boards and the general board.⁷⁰ However, as soon as the organisational and administrative matters were finally settled, and the neighbourhood politics were ready to take off, the project was stymied by municipal interference.

69 CAR, Collection De Rotterdamsche Gemeenschap, no inventory, Annual Report 1946–1947, 6 and 28.

70 CAR, Collection RG, no inventory, Reports of the wijkraden 1945–1947.

The City Council had approved an experimental scheme, which provided for the establishment of representative neighbourhood councils (*wijkraden*), particularly in the remote residential districts. These councils, of which eleven were installed between 1947 and 1953, were appointed by the municipality and served as formalised advisory bodies with regard to the provision of amenities in each neighbourhood.⁷¹ The composition of the neighbourhood councils was entirely based on the proportional representation of political parties.

Evidently, the establishment of *wijkraden* was a blow to the RG. Firstly, in many neighbourhoods the RG boards had to compete with the municipal councils over a say in public affairs. Secondly, the municipal neighbourhood council scheme negated the trans-political, corporatist aspirations of the RG as it organised neighbourhood politics along partisan lines. Thirdly, instead of the envisaged Assembly of Delegates, composed of neighbourhood and civil society representatives, the City Council was affirmed as the main regulator of community and neighbourhood planning. With hindsight, the RG would later state, «the appointment of the *wijkraden* is deeply regretted, as the RG [...] had imagined it to develop differently».⁷²

The municipal neighbourhood policy urged the RG to reflect upon its role. In June 1947, the RG announced its transformation from a political reform movement to a promoter of neighbourhood-centred social activities.⁷³ In its periodical, the RG valued this transformation as the result of a «false start».⁷⁴ The neighbourhood boards (*wijkbesturen*) were now defined as coordinating bodies that would bring together all sorts of voluntary associations within the neighbourhood. This would foster collaboration and the articulation of common interests, in particular with regard to (new) facilities in the neighbourhood. To streamline this collaboration, neighbourhood boards were divided into functionalist sections, such as youth, culture, sports, education and socio-medical care, allowing all the relevant ideologically defined voluntary groupings (mainly socialist, catholic and protestant) to cooperate.

As such, the RG shifted from grand socio-political reform to feasible social and cultural activities for and by neighbourhood citizens (e.g. excursion trips, gardening, sports and amateur theatre). However, again, the new set-up was frustrated by municipal interference. In 1949, the municipality installed a Social and Cultural Council as the deliberative platform for the city's voluntary associations. Together with municipal delegates, the voluntary sector would deliberate over citizens' needs and wishes with regard to socio-medical care, leisure, religion, social activities and related amenities. Again, this clashed with the RG's ambition to coordinate the entire voluntary sector

71 CAR, Collection General Affairs, inv.nr. 34, Explanatory memorandum about the Neighbourhood Councils.

72 CAR, Collection Social Affairs (hereafter SA), inv. nr. 127, *Het Contact. De Rotterdamsche Gemeenschap*, 26 February 1951.

73 N. N., *Verslag van de werkzaamheden van de Stichting 'De Rotterdamsche Gemeenschap' over de periode 1 September 1946 – 1 Juni 1947*, Rotterdam 1947.

74 *De Gemeenschap*, April 1948.

along similar lines at the neighbourhood level, pushing the organisation's activities even more into the direction of simply providing leisure programmes. Consequently, the number of RG boards decreased. In March 1948, only eleven RG boards existed, of which three were considered inactive.⁷⁵

Meanwhile, the RG approached municipal authorities to attune both trajectories of community building. In the Commission for the formation of neighbourhoods (*Commissie voor de wijkvorming*), which convened regularly between September 1947 and 1949, municipal officials acknowledged the existence of the RG neighbourhood boards but simultaneously stressed the supremacy of the neighbourhood councils.⁷⁶ A small victory for the RG was the award of an annual municipal subsidy of 50.000 guilders to cover its expenses, as it could no longer depend on its voluntary contributions and gifts.

During a lengthy meeting on 19 January 1950, a socialist alderman and former secretary of the RG in the early stage, proposed a probationary period to the RG, to see whether the public neighbourhood councils and the private neighbourhood boards could coexist or not. Until then, the municipality would not install new councils. Biannual meetings between councils and boards were introduced too.⁷⁷ During the probation, however, the situation worsened for the RG, which it seemed to recognise, employing a much less confident language: «The work of the RG is still one of searching and sensing, as it is an experiment.»⁷⁸ Its reputation suffered from the increasing stigma of being regarded as moral crusaders. In Katendrecht, for instance, one of the districts in which port workers and seamen dominated much of the public life, the RG neighbourhood board had warned the police about the deterioration of women's moral values. Their letter was leaked to the local press, exposing the writers – two shopkeepers, a pastor and a clergyman (all RG members) – who were subsequently neglected and ostracised by the neighbourhood.⁷⁹

Moreover, in neighbourhoods where municipal councils had been installed, the presence or foundation of an RG board was increasingly deemed unnecessary and unwanted.⁸⁰ The renowned first secretary of the RG in 1950, the former municipal housing official and neighbourhood planning advocate, W. F. Geyl experienced many disappointments as he saw the RG losing grip on its aspirations: It had failed to regulate and coordinate social and cultural activities at the neighbourhood level, mostly due to absence of confessional and communist voluntary associations.

Geyl, who had considerable experience with the municipal fabric of community building, became convinced that the municipal policy would do much more for the amelioration of community life than voluntary enterprises, particularly with regard to

75 CAR, SA, inv.nr. 127, Letter secretary RG to board of Social and Cultural Council, 6 March 1948.

76 CAR, Collection Secretary, inv.nr. 28, minutes of the Commissie voor de wijkvorming.

77 CAR, SA, inv.nr. 127, Report of meeting between alderman Van der Vlerk and RG delegation, 19

January 1950; J. Grandia, *De arbeider-wethouder Dries van der Vlerk: een leven van dienst aan de gemeenschap*, Amsterdam 1990, 370.

78 *De Gemeenschap*, 13 October 1950.

79 *De Tijd*, 4 November 1947.

80 *Het Vrije Volk*, 16 March 1951.

the provision of feasible amenities such as neighbourhood centres. One of the naive ambitions – in his eyes – of the RG was the aim to transcend ideological divisions within Dutch society. To him, this pillarization had to be accepted as an immanent feature of Dutch community life. Boundaries between Socialists, Protestants and Catholics, had deep-rooted historical origins, he believed. In the end, the RG was «an ambiguous absurdity», an «anaemic wench», which was only viable because of the financial support of the municipality.⁸¹

In January 1951, Geyl resigned as RG secretary, leaving the board in dispute.⁸² As in 1947, the RG decided to reorganise itself again in 1952. The neighbourhood boards were replaced by loosely organised contact commissions, which would serve as platforms for associational collaboration.⁸³ In essence, this reorganisation was a final surrender to the municipal neighbourhood councils. Even by the end of 1953, the RG claimed that its work was «only in the first stage of trial and error».⁸⁴

Continuous conflicts alienated the neighbourhood branches from the central board. Geyl's successor, the well-respected reform socialist J.M. de Heer, had to resign as secretary in March 1954. He had secretly reported internal RG affairs to the local reform socialist party.⁸⁵ Furthermore, another voluntary party manifested itself in Rotterdam's neighbourhoods from the early 1950s onward. Subsidised community work bodies (*wijkopbouworganen*) took up the gauntlet of social work, giving rise to yet another force that would prevent the RG from growing to full stature. And as the RG was unable to convince neighbourhood initiatives to associate with them, many new neighbourhoods that were built south of the river Maas in the 1950s established their own associations to coordinate socio-cultural neighbourhood affairs.⁸⁶

A few neighbourhood divisions of the RG were able to extend their work until the summer of 1955 when the RG was formally discontinued. Urged by some neighbourhood branches, the RG accepted its dismantling in early 1955. The local socialist newspaper wrote: «The *Rotterdamse Gemeenschap* has been buried without show.»⁸⁷ Its remaining activities (vacation programmes and some social activities) were transferred to other voluntary associations at the neighbourhood level.

7. Conclusion

The experimental interlude of the 1940s catalysed and sharpened pending ideas and ideals with regard to the reconstruction of urban society. In Coventry, the London-based interwar experiments with «positive health» were extended to an integral community scheme including housing, amenities, organic farming, nutrition, health care

81 *Het Vrije Volk*, 12 March 1954.

82 De Klerk, *Particuliere plannen*, 253.

83 *Het Vrije Volk*, 27 October 1952.

84 *De Gemeenschap*, November 1953.

85 *Het Vrije Volk*, 4 March 1954; *De Maasbode*, 5 March 1954.

86 CAR, Collection Poor/Social Council, inv.nr. 46, overview of community work and voluntary associations in Rotterdam founded in the 1950s, arranged by neighbourhood.

87 *Het Vrije Volk*, 2 September 1955.

and democratic governance through direct participation in public affairs. In Rotterdam, the experimental interlude gained momentum as soon as the Nazi occupiers were removed from public office. Here, pre-war precedents of planning by voluntary groupings nurtured an alternative conception of urban governance based on neighbourhood organisations. Both projects aimed at, whether explicitly or implicitly, transcending the social and political cleavages and divisions of pre-war society.

The transitional period of the mid-1940s thus witnessed the manifestation of experiments in community planning that emerged from civil society. Particularly in blitzed cities, the need for housing, food and amenities fostered a series of private initiatives that promoted highly idiosyncratic visions of the planning and formation of the urban community. The experiments of the FHC in Coventry and the RG in Rotterdam embodied a belief in planning that denounced the hegemony of public authorities and championed some form of self-government. Moreover, they distinguished and distanced themselves from urban planning by public authorities.

However, as the experimental interlude yielded to the age of centralist planning, and to an increasingly coordinated regulation of society, including the voluntary sector, the rationalities of social reform inscribed into both projects lost ground and support. In the late 1940s and 1950s, public authorities almost exclusively determined the planning agenda, pushing the struggling planning experiments stemming from private initiative to the margins of reconstruction politics.

Experimental Planning after the Blitz. Non-governmental Planning Initiatives and Post-war Reconstruction in Coventry and Rotterdam, 1940–1955

ABSTRACT

This article probes into two non-governmental planning initiatives in the bombed cities of Coventry and Rotterdam. It articulates planning practices by non-state actors at the local level during the 1940s and early 1950s. These practices comprise a set of alternative visions on urban reconstruction and the regeneration of the urban community. Most of these social planning experiments were thwarted by the authorised planning schemes of public authorities from the early 1950s onwards. However, in engaging with recent historiography on post-war urban planning, these non-governmental experiments disclose that urban reconstruction and planning was not an uncontested or monopolised top-down endeavour that was initiated exclusively by public authorities and professional planners in the 1940s.

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