

## [The unintended consequences of socialist architecture](#) [1]

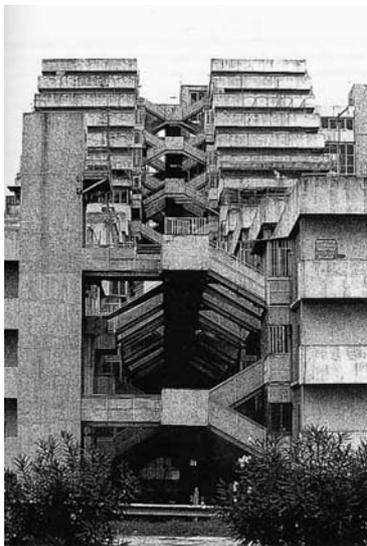
Written by [Tom Clougherty](#) [2] | Thursday 20 October 2011

An article in [Planning in London](#) [3] makes a fascinating point about this summer's London riots:

It has been suggested by others that there is a link between riot locations and the nearby presence of social housing. We think this can be more accurately defined.

Hillier's earlier work suggests that the proximity of riot activity to large post-war housing estates may not be the result of social housing in itself but the type of social housing: most post-war estates have been designed in such a way that they create over-complex, and as a result, under-used spaces. These spaces are populated by large groups of unsupervised children and teenagers, where peer socialisation can occur between them without the influence of adults. This pattern of activity, and the segregation of user groups, is not found in non-estate street networks.

The trouble with so much architecture from the post-war period is that the state was the client ? architects designed housing projects with little or no concern for the people who would actually live in them. The design of housing estates did not reflect the way people lived, worked and played. Rather, it reflected a utopian socialist ideology which central planners wished to impose upon them. Of course, that attempt failed miserably.



Opposition to post-war architecture tends to focus on aesthetic concerns. And, certainly, much of it is appalling ugly, almost to the point that merely looking at it fills you with despair. But its mostly deeply pernicious effect is surely the way in which it has affected people's behaviour, by forcing them to live in an environment which is cold, desolate and practically inhuman. Naturally, I am not suggesting that post-war architecture *caused* the riots. But the idea that it was a contributory factor certainly has the ring of truth about it.

Incidentally, the picture I've used here is not actually from a post-war London housing estate. It is a photo of the Vele di Scampia estate near Naples, which was the setting for the stunning, shocking film *Gomorrah*. If you're sceptical about the social consequences of bad architecture, I'd challenge you to watch that film and, bearing in mind that it is based on real events, ask yourself whether many of the things depicted

would be possible in a traditional street layout. For me, it's a shining example of brutalist by name, brutal by nature.

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[3] <http://www.planninginlondon.com>

[4] [http://disqus.com/?ref\\_noscript](http://disqus.com/?ref_noscript)

[5] <http://disqus.com>