



democratic book # 28
„Prefabulous“

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Prefabulous

Photography by Elisabeth Blanchet

"I love those prefabs and all this post-war period that goes with it. All the prefabs in the estate were built by prisoners of war from Germany and Italy. With a little bit of expertise, one can distinguish the "German" ones from the "Italian" ones. I really love them, you know. If they were to be pulled down, I would lock myself inside!"

Linda, Catford.

"I remember a very stimulating social life. We used to organise parties and garden competitions. One of the tenants had beautiful strawberries in his garden. In his lane, neighbours started to compete. It then was called the Strawberry Lane".

Diane, Newport.



The 30 prefabs on Dolphin Road in Redditch were built from the melt down aluminium of crashed war planes. They were aimed at housing ex-soldiers and their families. Jack settled in his prefab when it was built in 1952. He never had any other house. He is the symbol of this small community in Dolphin Road which fights against the will of the Council to destroy the prefabs in order to get better returns on the ground.

Prefabulous

After the Second World War, 150 000 prefabricated homes ("Prefabs") were built in the most heavily bombed towns in the UK. Targeted at, and designed for, homeless young families with young children, these "palaces for the people" (as they were called at the time) were synonymous not only with comfort and luxury but also with freedom from the cramped and unsanitary urban housing of pre-War Britain. At the time of construction, many municipalities introduced the estate layouts that they intended to use when replacing the temporary accommodation a decade later. These estates were arranged following the formal geometry then popular in municipal design: large greens, crescents and other attractive features. Such planning innovations contributed to the instant sense of community that many felt upon moving into their 'temporary' homes.



Down the road from Newport, the estates of Bishpool and Treberth looked like little villages similar to the Catford estate. When I met Ray and Jean, they had bought their prefab 12 years before, thanks to the Thatcher's "Right to buy". Even prefabs tenants had the opportunity to become home owners. There used to be around 60 prefabs in the Treberth and Bishpool estates 4 years ago. There is none left today.



Intended to be a temporary solution to the post-war housing crisis, the Prefabs were supposed to last only ten years. But, sixty years later, all around the UK, hundreds of prefabs are still lived in. Prefab residents have been struggling for years to save their bungalows from premature demolition. The residents love their Prefabs, and they are not very fond of the alternative usually offered to them. Swapping a mini-palace for a one bedroom flat is not a preferred option. However, there are also some estates where things have been very well handled: in Newport the residents are being moved in clusters, keeping their neighbours and hopefully the sense of community of the estate.



Ted and Stan, father and son, were among the "forgotten few". They used to live in on Kimberley Avenue. Now, there is only one prefab left there. His owner, Robert, nicknamed "Bubbles", died 2 months ago. The other prefabs were pulled down 18 months ago and replaced with new bungalows.



Gertrude's dining room, Winnie for friends, lives in a bath of light, despite the bad weather outside. The prefabs have the privilege of enjoying a lot of light.



“What I like most in the prefab is the sound of the rain on the roof. It’s like I am on holidays in a caravan”

Richard, Redditch



Four years ago, Rosina asked me : "Are you from the Council?" She looked scared. She used to live in the last remaining prefab on Underhill Road in Dulwich. She stayed there more than 30 years, witnessing in the last years the spread of wastelands replacing prefabs around her.

When I went back down to Underhill Road in Spring 2006, her prefab had just been pulled down. Only the rectangular concrete base of the prefab, abandoned flower pots and the garden shed were left. Nobody in the neighbourhood could tell me what had happened to Rosina.



Edward James Lawson is 81. He settled in his Catford prefab 11 years ago. After his wife had a stroke, he needed a bungalow. Since she past away, Ted has been living on his own with his memories. Among them, a black and white portrait of his wife covered with hints of colour watering.





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Jean is a character in the Catford Estate, also known as the Downham prefabs. She is a member of the Excalibur, the prefabs tenants cooperative. The first time I met her, she modestly told me that she was there to make tea and serve biscuits during the meetings... She is actually very active to try to save the bungalows: with the other residents, they are trying to get the estate into a conservation area, so that the prefabs can't be touched by the Lewisham Council...

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North of Redditch, in Derbyshire, there are still prefabs, here and there, in Chesterfield, North Wingfield, Staveley and certainly in other towns. Graham Burton lives in one in North Wingfield and is very fond of his. In August 2005, he took me for a wonderful prefabs day tour in Derbyshire.



Dorothy and Bert live in one of the new bungalows on Kimberley Avenue, at the same place where their prefab used to stand. They used to like their prefab but are very happy with their new bungalow too.

“When the wind blows, the prefab moves...
To be honest, some have come to the end
of their lives”

Alan , Newport







"I wouldn't swap the place for Buckingham Palace, even if it included the Queen!"

Edmund, Catford

