

## INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

ERL - 11  
Serendipity or:  
The Luck of Peterlee

c/o 69 Ram Gorse,  
Harlow, Essex,  
England.

20 February 1968

Mr. R.H. Nolte  
Institute of Current World Affairs  
366 Madison Avenue  
New York 10016

Dear Mr. Nolte,

Last summer I made a subjective impressionistic tour of some of the British new towns. En route to London from Scotland I stopped in Newcastle and made a day trip to one of the least known towns - Peterlee. I went from a sense of duty more than a hunch I might stumble on something interesting in the Durham coal fields. The tortuous bus ride from Newcastle winds into Peterlee via the back door, and a depressing door it is, a bleak extension of the aesthetically inglorious mining tradition. Scaffolding around the town center made it difficult to imagine what it might look like when finished. Jostled from the bus ride, blown by the North Sea's gale force winds which are as strong in July as January only slightly less cold, and generally uninspired by the prospect of yet another round of defensive interviews with assorted civil servants, I was further irritated to discover that I'd come to the wrong place. I was in the Town Center and the Development Corporation headquarters are at the other far edge of town in an old mansion called Shotton Hall. It was a half mile trot to the appropriate bus stop, and naturally the bus left just as I got there. Thoroughly aggravated I was prepared to sulk away the twenty minute wait before the next bus when I realized the surroundings had changed dramatically and I was now at the edge of a stunning housing area unlike and more enticing than anything I had seen in England. By the time I finally got to the Development Corporation I was convinced that Peterlee was bound to be an interesting new town if only because in the middle of nowhere someone was really experimenting with housing. 'South West' it turned out is just a visible clue to a dramatic continuing story.

The pureblooded English new towns of the immediate post war variety have fine philosophical parentage. They evolved intellectually from the Garden City gospel - the thoughts and work of Ebenezer Howard and his disciples. Ideally they were to be self contained, self sufficient, well balanced communities with a range of employment opportunities, protective as well as aesthetically pleasing and economically productive green agricultural belts around them. The Abercrombie report of 1944 suggested overspill sites for such new towns around London in the south east. The suggestions for implementation which became the New Towns Act of 1947 were the Reith reports. By contrast to those towns of thoughtful breeding - Crawley, Harlow, Stevenage, Basildon among them - Peterlee was born a bastard.

At the beginning of the 19th century County Durham was a modest agricultural region where life centered in small villages and slightly larger market towns. The population was stable - life was neither particularly bleak or particularly squalid. Then came the wherewithal of the industrial revolution - the mines.

Within forty years the population doubled to 200,000 and then in the next forty years nearly doubled again as workers for the mines and iron works poured into the area from all over England. Life centered around the action which was in the mines, not the villages or market towns. The newcomers were housed in fifty "village extensions" and 180 new settlements around the individual mines and iron foundries. The settlements, which didn't and don't deserve to be called even villages, took the names of the mines. Physically they were straight rows of small, dark, ill built, ill equipped houses. According to tradition miners were given the houses either free or for nominal rents, and an annual coal allotment to cover their needs. In the late 1940's 35% of the miners paid less than ten shillings a week rent, 65% paid between ten and fifteen shillings per week, and, as you don't get ketchup with one meatball, you don't get any amenities for that kind of rent. Time and management did not improve conditions although some families, at their own expense, added civilizing as well as personalizing touches, like sinks and toilets. By mid twentieth century Durham county had a record comparable to the state of Mississippi; worst and/or last in everything. The 1951 housing census showed that 13% of all houses in Britain were without sinks, yet in one district of County Durham the figure reached 45%.

The mining tradition had an almost feudal stranglehold on the entire area. It absorbed and held practically the entire labor force, and if you didn't want to go into the mines the only alternative was to leave. One, possibly one of the few, positive aspects of the mining monopoly was brought to my attention by the manager of the second oldest mine in the Easington District. Looking up from a page of current statistics on mining employment he abruptly remarked, "Y'know the mining industry has always looked after the idiots of these villages, them and the weaker minded. They're steady workers, never lose a shift, and we've always taken care of 'em. All the mine managers know 'em. Mostly they work on the surface or at a fixed point below - can't let 'em wander, but we get years of faithful service from them. When the mines close we always find 'em jobs - have a word with someone because they are so steady". He went on to tell me of a few working in the Wheatley Hill mine - one man in his mid fifties who still lived with his mother went into the mines at 14, and had never missed a day's work, and others younger and older.

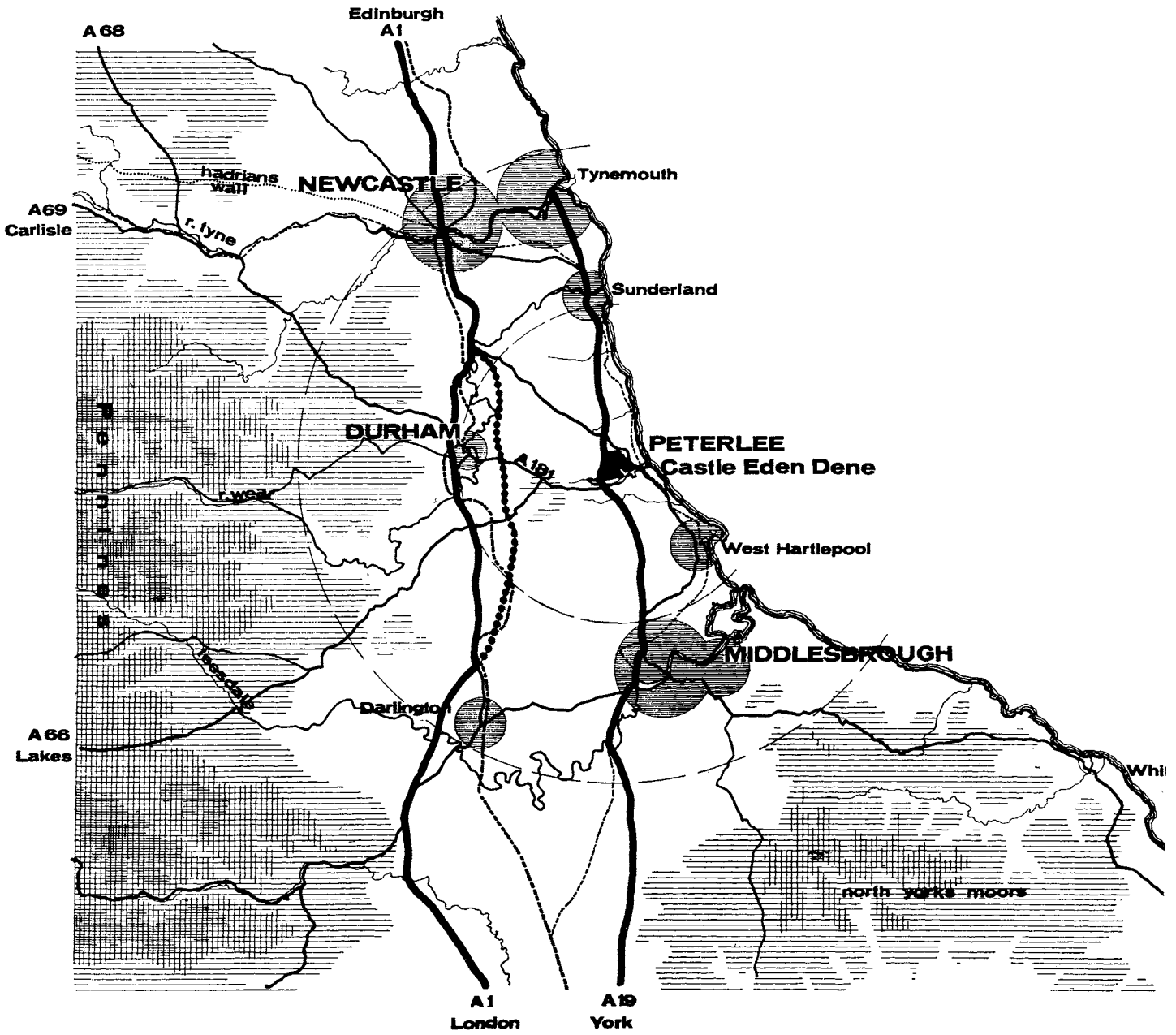
When the New Towns Act was passed 90% of the men in the Easington Rural District worked in the mines and most lived in colliery housing. There was no high flown theorizing about community balance, social mix, aesthetic green belts or future social change. The situation in 26 communities whose population ranged from 200 to 16,000 had reached indecent lows yet none of the communities acting alone could afford to rehouse their citizens, let alone provide recreational or commercial amenities. New town designation was urged as a vehicle for rehousing pure and simple. The arguments were summed up in a booklet called "Farewell Squalor". The site the District Council proposed to have designated for a new town was at the hub of the 26 settlements and it looked like a virgin site. That was the situation when Peterlee was born. It was named for a famous miner, prominent local politician and evangelical preacher. The natives still talk respectfully of Peter Lee, who came from gypsy stock. Only an outsider speaks of the town as though its name were one word, not a man's full name.

While the new towns in other parts of England were busy facing up to the brave new world, King Coal still ruled Durham County. The new town for miners had three straightforward tasks. It was to provide new decent housing for the miners first and foremost. Then, it should introduce commercial and recreational amenities for them and hopefully provide a few industrial jobs for the hitherto housebound women. Although the truth of the matter (that even in the late 40's the mines were declining) lay close to the surface, Peterlee was not conceived as a key to the redevelopment of the North East. Yet despite its simplicity of purpose Peterlee nearly died a-borning.

Stumbling block number one was a beaut. It didn't surface prior to designation, it didn't emerge from the public hearings held after designation when, among other things, miners complained that it was not in their tradition to commute to the pits so why live in a new town anyway. The truth was not known until AFTER the Corporation was established, AFTER a famous architect was appointed, and AFTER a tentative master plan was produced which included some fine sounding high rise-high density dwelling units. Only then did the Coal Board remember, or discover, or re-discover what they surely must have known. The pretty virgin site of Peterlee was sitting smack on top of a virgin site of practically solid coal ... 30 million tons of it, 90% of the subsurface. A quick check showed that every other possible, even if less desirable site in the area was in exactly the same condition.

Negotiations over what would be mined and what wouldn't - and in what order, what could be built on and what couldn't - and in what order, dragged on for three long years. Meanwhile local redevelopment came to a complete stop and other new towns in England worried about implementing their already approved master plans. The very first house in Peterlee was not completed until the end of 1951. The site plan of the more or less final master plan for land use was published in 1952. It is based on what looks like a very complicated jig saw puzzle, but really is a site map showing nearly acre by acre how the mining was to proceed underground and the dates when above ground construction might begin to begin, and, even calculating a time lapse for initial earth subsidence, Peterlee had to be built with a new set of, forgive the pun, ground rules.

The town's existence is an engineering masterpiece, flawed perhaps, but a masterpiece nonetheless. It is the largest construction project ever to be carried out on top of a living coal field. Despite precautions restrictions had to be carefully observed. There could be no high rise construction, except in the town center which is on solid ground. There could be no long inexpensive rows of housing for if one cracked or slipped the whole terrace would come tumbling down. The list of negative commandments goes on and on. Secondary subsidence is still a problem. Shotton Hall stood peacefully on a low ridge from the time it was built in the 1770's until the last decade. It has sunk TEN FEET in the last EIGHT YEARS. Happily it has gone straight down, and, with regular patch work is still habitable and continues to function as the Development Corporation headquarters. A large maintenance crew has steady employment mending the damage around the town. Last month three houses were standing empty because of major subsidence; one family had to be evacuated because the subsidence happened so abruptly. In advertising for industry, a few years before the site was expanded to include an industrial zone on solid ground, the Corporation had to minimize



the risks. Luckily the "women's industries", like the potato chip factory and the textile mills, didn't use delicate equipment most susceptible to subsidence damage.

If all the details could be learned from all the agencies involved, a history of Peterlee would be a splendid case study of institutional bungling, wool pulling, and short sightedness. The fact that there are only four long life coal pits in the district was not top secret. Yet for years Peterlee was denied Board of Trade assistance in attracting industry because it might distract the miners, and other older communities objected to preferential treatment for the new town. Peterlee wasn't even on the automobile club maps until 1964 though its population by then was 20,000 or nearly as large as Durham. It didn't have a registered hotel so no one noticed it. Nationally, even at a time when the government is straining to entice and if necessary force industry north, the instinct is to overlook Peterlee because it is supposed to be a miner's town. Yet the miners and many of the fatalistic locals who are bitterly grieved because in ten years 8,000 miners know they are going to lose their jobs but haven't the slightest idea of what to do about it, resent Peterlee. A recent book on the North mentions Peterlee and calls it, in the eyes of the local politicians, "a cuckoo in the nest". They can't figure out how they got something so unlike what they expected. It Peterlee is anything today it is its general manager, and, if A.V. Williams is cuckoo, he's cuckoo like a fox.

When he enters the drawing room of Shotton Hall, which is decorated with antiques he has personally selected over the years, A.V. Williams looks like a country squire. Rather short, a trifle plump in late middle age with a thick shock of yellow white hair, deep set snapping blue eyes and a clear ruddy skin, it is both natural and proper that he is decked head to toe in tweeds and carries his pipe from one room to another. A.V. Williams is not the very model of a model general manager, let alone a country squire, which, in an outsider's opinion is so much the better for Peterlee. Model general managers are not flamboyant, arrogant, garrulous, outspoken, bellicose, patronizing, witty, or so stubborn. Model civil servants take and give orders quietly - A.V. Williams doesn't and won't. Model civil servants assume the genteel credit for such niceties as smooth staff operation. A.V. Williams takes perverse pride in the rough winnowing that has produced the present Peterlee staff. A.V. Williams is a first class boat rocker. The most important clue to the way he insists on running Peterlee is the fact that he is not a northerner, and has little use for the northern creed of leaving things alone, leaving them the way they have always been around the mines. From the Midlands, well educated, well trained, competent, as time goes on he is in more and more of a hurry to get things done.

After a firm handshake tea is poured and he seems to settle into a wing chair by the coal fire. Within ten minutes the hypnotized first time interviewer abandons all hope of note taking and just listens and watches. Even if he were not a dynamic, well organized and witty speaker his audience would be compelled to pay close attention from fear alone. His habit is to strike wooden matches continuously, ostensibly to light his pipe, but really, I decided, to give himself a flaming pointer to emphasize his already emphatic statements. As soon as the match is lit he starts gesturing, often violently and occasionally in the direction of his pipe. The match relentlessly burns closer and closer to his finger tips, grazing the chairs, papers in his lap, then just missing his nose, eyebrow and pipe again. Finally, in

the nick of time, he hurls it into the fire and strikes another. Having disposed of a full box of matches in less than a half hour, he pours another cup of tea. But the brimming cup has less dramatic properties than the burning matches so he puts it down and bolts to the phone. "Bessie" he barks, "more matches....please." Towards the end of the second box of matches he somehow gets the pipe lit and his conversation grows less assertive and more philosophical.

We talked at length about "South West", the reason I had come back to Peterlee. How had this remarkable jewel happened here on top of a coal field? Who had the idea of inviting a well known British artist like Victor Pasmore to try something architectural?

The Tate Gallery in London offers an easy index to the status of Victor Pasmore in the hierarchy of modern British art. Only four living painters, Ben Nicholson, Graham Sutherland, Francis Bacon and Victor Pasmore rate room listing by name on the gallery charts. Of the four Pasmore is probably the least known in the United States. A doctor's son, who displayed early artistic promise, after his father's death he served a ten year stint working for the London County Council. Then, largely through the patronage of Sir Kenneth Clark, he was freed to full time painting and teaching. Pasmore was a founder of the pre-war Euston Road School which was notable by its realistic approach to painting. Pasmore's reputation was built on a succession of beautifully composed, thoughtfully executed landscapes which were heavily derived from the Impressionist school. He had always openly acknowledged his careful studies of the French artists and the debt his early work owes to them. He wrote that the thoughtful artist reaches an abyss in development from which he must either jump or retreat. After experimenting with a number of styles and approaches to painting, as a fully mature artist Pasmore turned to abstraction around 1948. He jumped, and having jumped he has, in the past twenty years, evolved an independent vocabulary in totally abstract paintings and constructions.

In 1954, at the time Pasmore became Master of Painting at King's College, Newcastle, (a post he no longer holds) the first feeble few hundred houses at Peterlee were on the ground. Charitably one might say that the old section of Peterlee blends well into the eastern part of County Durham - it is as least as horrible, as grim, and as dull as most of the totally unplanned colliery housing. Relentlessly grey and cut from the same unimaginative wholecloth as most Council housing it has, as far as the eye can see, no other praiseworthy characteristics. Internally however the houses were built to modern standards and the residents no doubt appreciate the amenities ... like plumbing.

"It had to be STOPPED! My Gawd, the situation was desperate ... just go look at Yoden Road today and you can see what Peterlee was becoming. No of course I didn't know WHAT to do, but I couldn't let THAT continue." This sounds almost modest, but



This was the beginning of Peterlee.  
The house (above) shows evidence of minor subsidence repairs.



A.V. Williams was not as naive of art or aesthetics as he might sometimes pretend. In his younger days as a Town Clerk in the Midlands he had stirred up considerable hue and cry when he decided to have murals painted in a town hall. "Well I was interested in abstract art in those days because I didn't understand it although I liked some of the shapes. I knew of Victor Pasmore as a semi impressionist. I didn't know him, and I didn't know he was doing abstractions. OF COURSE it was a risk! A big gamble in fact. I didn't know what could happen, but one thing was certain, it couldn't be any worse than what was going on here. So I just made a point of meeting Pasmore and I asked him point blank."

"Look, I said, you understand landscape. You are an artist. Could you work with a ream of architects? If any of them knew anything about architecture it's been knocked out of them by the rules and the bureaucrats who enforce them. You can start from scratch, I'll give you an absolutely empty area away from the rest of the town, it's a beautiful site ... will you have a go?" Pasmore agreed to be a "consultant" as opposed to an "adviser", a nicety which assured him greater sematic authority, and that was the beginning of a most distinguished partnership.

After fourteen years three housing areas are finished, a fourth is under construction and plans for the fifth have just been sent to the Ministry for approval. Before trying to explain what South West is and why it is so exciting that I braved the January winds to go back and see it again, it's useful to mention some of the factors operating against any experimental large scale housing project. First last and always is the budget; and in the British new towns, which spend public funds and have been doing so in a period of national economic difficulties, no budget has ever been generous. None of South West could be duplicated today as each section would now be considered too "expensive". Though low, unit costs have doubled. The architectural and planning tendency in large projects - be they housing estates, new towns, private suburbs, or public housing projects as we know them in the States, is to concentrate whatever talent time and money available on the obvious, which is not the actual housing but the commercial or town center.

The commercial center is not only the biggest thing in sight, which theoretically everybody is going to use, it is also a traditional design problem. Architects trained to think of single buildings or groups of buildings, as opposed to houses have had, until very recently, very few shining large scale examples to work from. In large construction projects where strict standards to maximise efficient use of space and minimize expensive use of money have prevailed, the easiest way to handle housing has been to find a repeatable or successfully used pattern and duplicate it all over the landscape. Everyone knows the "little boxes" that California songwriter Malvina Reynolds decried because "they all look just the same". If you build them straight up then they look like egg crates but they still look "just the same". Furthermore, especially in the early years of the British new towns, when the housing shortage was most severe, there were tremendous public and political pressures to build as many houses as possible as fast as possible. Most of the towns were caught in that frenzy and invariably the largest and most unimaginative districts in them date to the early fifties. There are exceptions to these tendencies to skip lightly over the actual housing and just get on with it fast and cheaply. The two most notable are Tapiola in Finland, and recently Reston in Virginia, but since they are exceptions under almost every category they don't disprove the rule. All of the factors were operating in Peterlee where they were coupled with the special inhibitions of subsidence.



True to his word, Williams gave Pasmore a beautiful rolling meadow, and successive teams of "fair haired boys" to work with. Moreover he defended fiercely their right to work out their plans as they saw fit and at their own speed.

If people know about South West Peterlee and have heard that Pasmore worked on it, the assumption, usually based on photographs rather than personal visits, is that Pasmore, as consultant artist, merely contributed the finishing touches that make the houses look so good. While those touches are definitely Pasmore, they are only a part of the story. The participants, Pasmore, Williams and the architects, all talk like Alphonse and Gaston, each acknowledging the contributions of the others. Individually and internally the areas reflect the most positive meaning of team work. Seen over all, South West Peterlee is a remarkable example of one man's developing ideas. South West One is a good beginning, South West Three is simply stunning - a finished statement. South West Four (and Five) take the lessons learned and start something related but quite different. I can't, off hand, think of another large contiguous area that shows the development of so many ideas, about the same basic problem, sub-urban high density housing, over such a long period of time. From the practical point of view Peterlee has already had its reward: the waiting time to get into a South West house holds steady at about four years, while houses in other parts of the town are available within three months of application. Even if it were a popular disaster it would be worth seeing as a set of ideas fully played out.

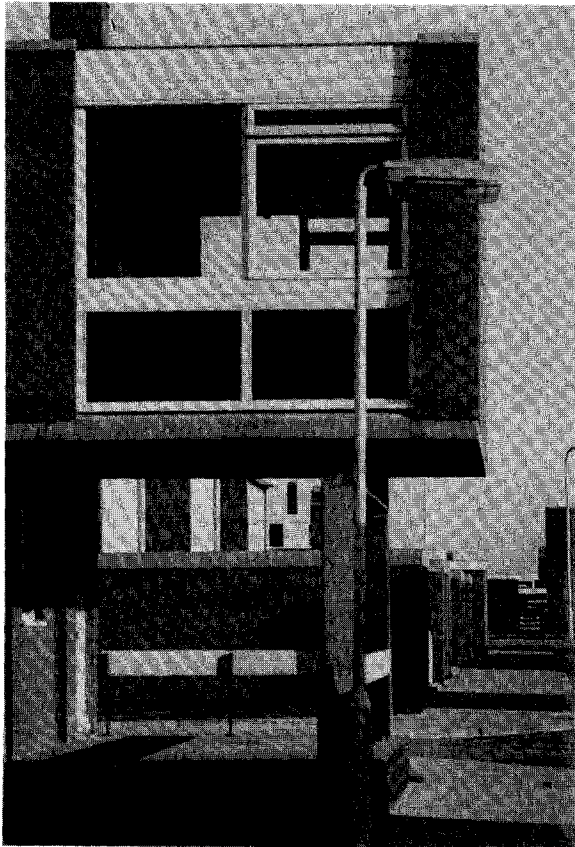
What is so unusual and so exciting and could have been built with so little fanfare? When he finally got his pipe lit and was musing aloud A.V. Williams said something that introduces the answer well. "Y'know sixty or seventy years from now I don't think they will hate Victor and the boys and me as much as they're going to hate some of the other big builders. Whether they like the houses or not we've given 'em a matrix, an organic use of space and they'll be able to do something about it". He said it more elegantly if less characteristically in a local newspaper article, "...the real test of design for the future lies not in the housing idiom itself, for that is destructible by time or change of taste, but in the way it is arranged within the landscape." That, then is point one. Given a lush rolling meadow site, a romantic, naturally graceful site, they disciplined it. As I've mentioned in other newsletters, the early British new towns handled romantic sites romantically as though they were extended villages, with winding roads and houses scattered with graceful intention but in practice often gracelessly on the pretty landscape. For the same reason that an overgrown village has little or no character and no noticeable integrity, the distortion of scale meant that the large pseudo village housing areas in new towns didn't have any either.

What this particular group of men have done to this particular piece of pretty land is approach it firmly, with short sharp straight lines and right angles. Not surprisingly the clean firm shapes and roads make you realize how very beautiful the site is. Secondly, as Williams said, future generations will be able to do something about it, if, by chance, they don't like the individual parts. It is practically impossible to alter the high density areas of the typically romantic districts because everything is tied into small curves or around wilful bends in the road. In South West units both large and small could be torn out or re-arranged without disturbing the whole or requiring heavy new investment in roads and sewage lines.

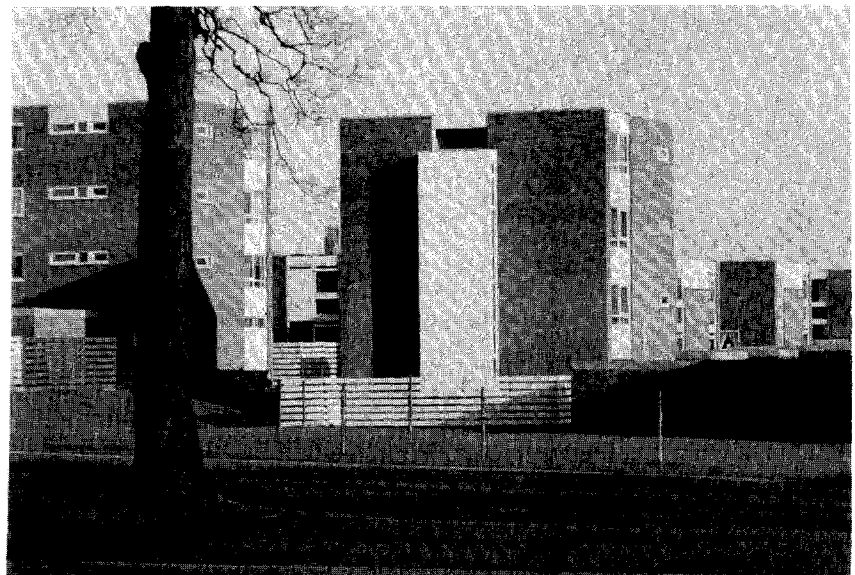
Having decided to impose discipline, they proceeded by using what a jargon specialist might approvingly label an analysis based on pleasurable functionalism. Ten cent words. With the daring innocence of a non professional, Pasmore insisted on treating each housing area as he would a painting and analysing every corner of it inside and out in terms of use and potential enjoyment. They paced the site until they had its details committed to memory. At first, before Pasmore was comfortable with the tools and methods of the architects, they built large wooden blocks and imagined the sites at a zany super toy scale so they could walk around and see how things worked. Pasmore told me "They (professional planners) write this space fiction language about services, about commuters and computers. It makes very nice charts, and it's grand for giving lectures, but it's not based on actual experience. You've got to walk. We tried to imagine going for a walk over the site. Every footpath is designed as a physical empirical experience. All this service business is taken into account but we tried to integrate it with what people actually do and see." Hooray for empiricism, hooray for not believing the charts, hooray for trying to prove that an experiment does not have to be uncomfortable to live in. So often in experimental housing projects, particularly Cumbernauld, one is convinced that no one ever "ran the plans through" a daily stress analysis. It is not only easy to get around South West by foot or car, it's fun. There is so much to look at. The houses are all cubes and rectangles, but beautifully finished. By South West Three the color and detailing had been distilled from simple to simplest. All the houses are a soft blue grey brick with plain white trim and unfinished board fencing. In any light, but especially in the late afternoon when there is dramatic shadow play across the lawns and paths, they stand in abstract harmony against the green. Every path goes someplace - leads to an interesting view. Every view from every house and courtyard is complete.

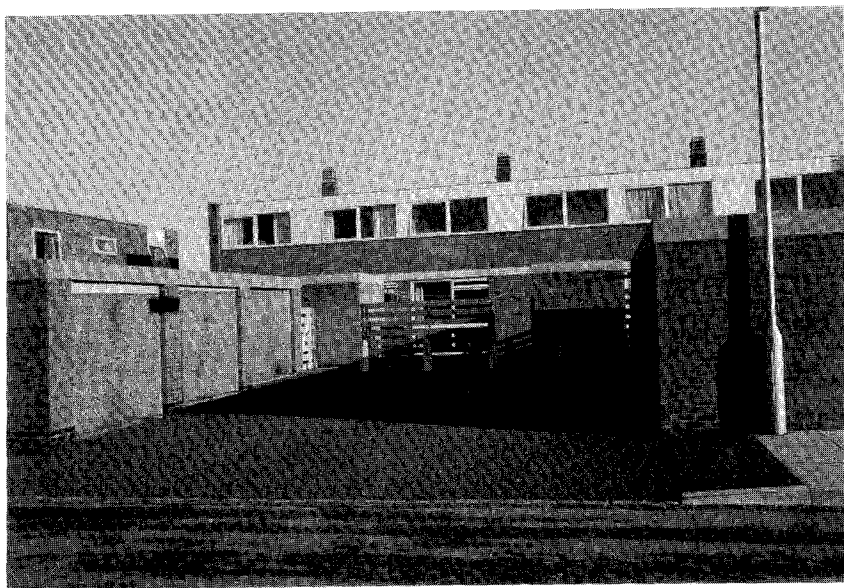
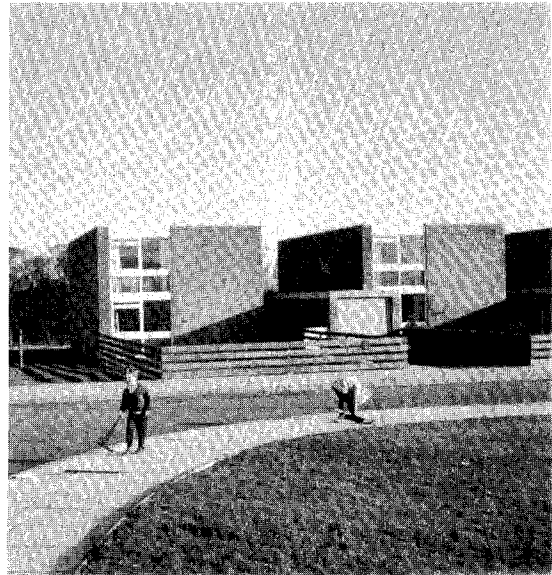
Inside the houses are small, but again, it is obvious that the designers thought about what people really do, what they see looking out, and where they would add space if they could. The houses themselves are as adaptable as possible. Some of the cantilevered houses have granny apartments at ground level. The courtyards could, someday, be extra rooms or garages. Meanwhile they are private and secluded from wind and prying eyes. Even though the density is undeniably high, space and status conscious middle class families are willing, even anxious, to live in South West because they can enjoy the outside and, on a relative scale, adapt the inside to their own taste and needs.

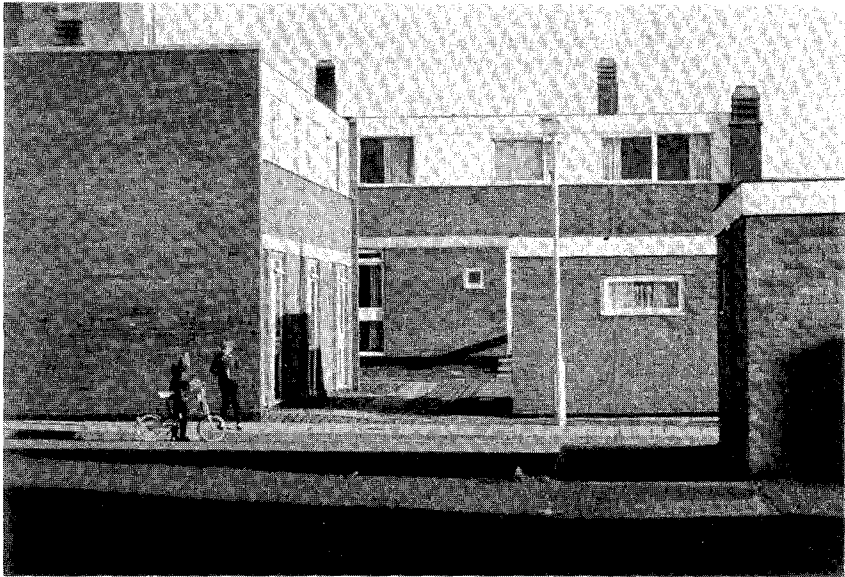
Nothing ever happens easily in Peterlee. The obstacle course put in the way of South West over the years, a course going through, over, around and under, bureaucratic, professional aesthetic and emotional roadblocks, reads like the script for a nightmare. It took four years to get approval for South West One. The Ministry was alarmed by its experimental qualities and unorthodox history but, in the tradition of fair play, finally called in an outside opinion (favourable) before allowing construction to begin. Even when that was finished the succeeding plans faced suspicious scrutiny. Simultaneously there was a succession of chief architects at Peterlee who were less than enthusiastic. One made the mistake of breezily announcing to Williams "Now that I'm here you can get rid of Pasmore". It is not clear if Pasmore knew just how the chap felt, but for a period of twenty two months he didn't turn in any plans, thereby avoiding the issue. One of the architects who worked on early South West became chief architect in another new town. Emancipated and exhilarated from his Peterlee, plus Pasmore, experiences, he discovered in his new post that the battles could not be fought alone, and not all general managers were willing to fight for unproven innovation.

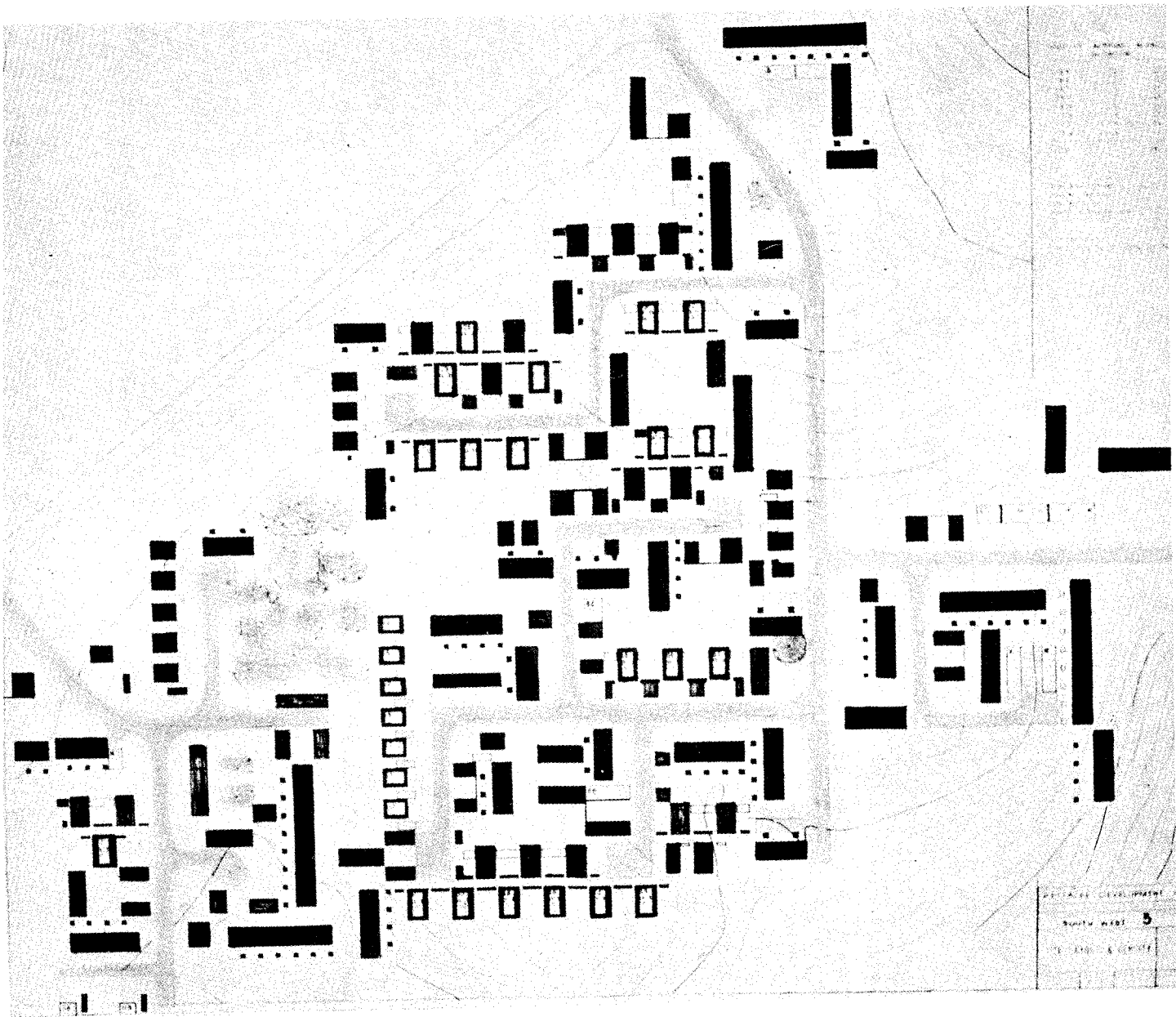


This is South West Three.









The Site Plan for South West Three  
showing housing and roads

The proper credit reads: Victor Pasmore with Harry Durell (Chief Architect)  
Colin Gardham and David Thirkettle

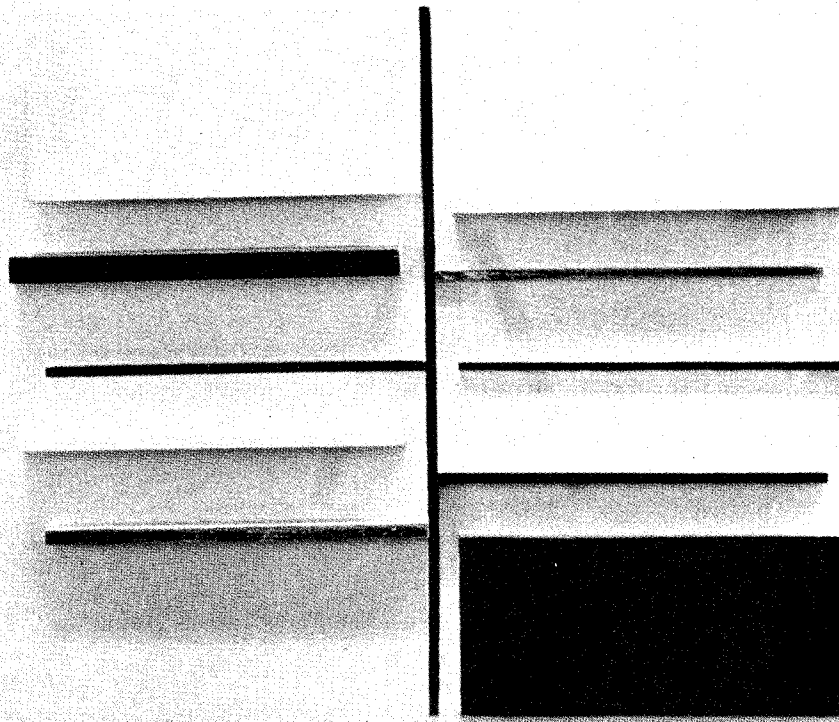
If South West Peterlee is so remarkable why doesn't anybody know about it? South West is mentioned in most official booklets, but I sometimes think they are written in understatement competitions. Part of the answer applies to the town as well. It is small, off the beaten path, in a depressed corner of the country where nobody expects to find anything out of the ordinary. It had such a miserable beginning many people just forgot it. Even more unfortunately, precisely the experimental qualities of South West have operated to keep it cushioned from the general public's attention. A.V. Williams has a healthy disrespect for planners and planning as a profession. He roars "I am NOT a planner, I am a professional administrator". Victor Pasmore is not an architect, he is a professional artist. Their collaboration with young unknown architects is entirely outside the "system" and, even now, mildly heretical. In order to get things going and then keep them moving they chose the path of least resistance, which meant keeping their activities pretty much to themselves, although there was a short article in an architectural journal last year.

There is another reason not to boast about Peterlee in professional circles, and it is a sad one. Pasmore is wistfully defensive about it. "It isn't modern architecture." Technically, as he explains it, he is right. "The big league architects today are all dealing with tension, new forms and new structures. You just can't do that with cross wall construction. And with new town budgets you can't afford anything else." Since that is the case I would argue that the distinction must be made between architecture and design. The design of Peterlee is utterly modern, and if the illusion has been created of modern architecture as well, it's that much more a compliment to the teams. In fact, as a high degree of industrialized construction (cement boxes erected on site a la Habitat) is being used at Sunny Blunts, the area now under construction, it is, broadly speaking, modern. Budget willing, Pasmore wants to build a "modern" pavilion, a kind of viewing tower, in the middle of Sunny Blunts next year and then, switching caps, paint and build a mural inside it.

This hope raises the obvious question. What effect has working on South West Peterlee had on Victor Pasmore as a practicing abstract artist? He has been developing a highly personal style in painting and sculpture over the years he has "consulted" at Peterlee. He says simply that Peterlee has reinforced his work as an abstractionist. I demur, and suggest that Peterlee has clarified his major work.

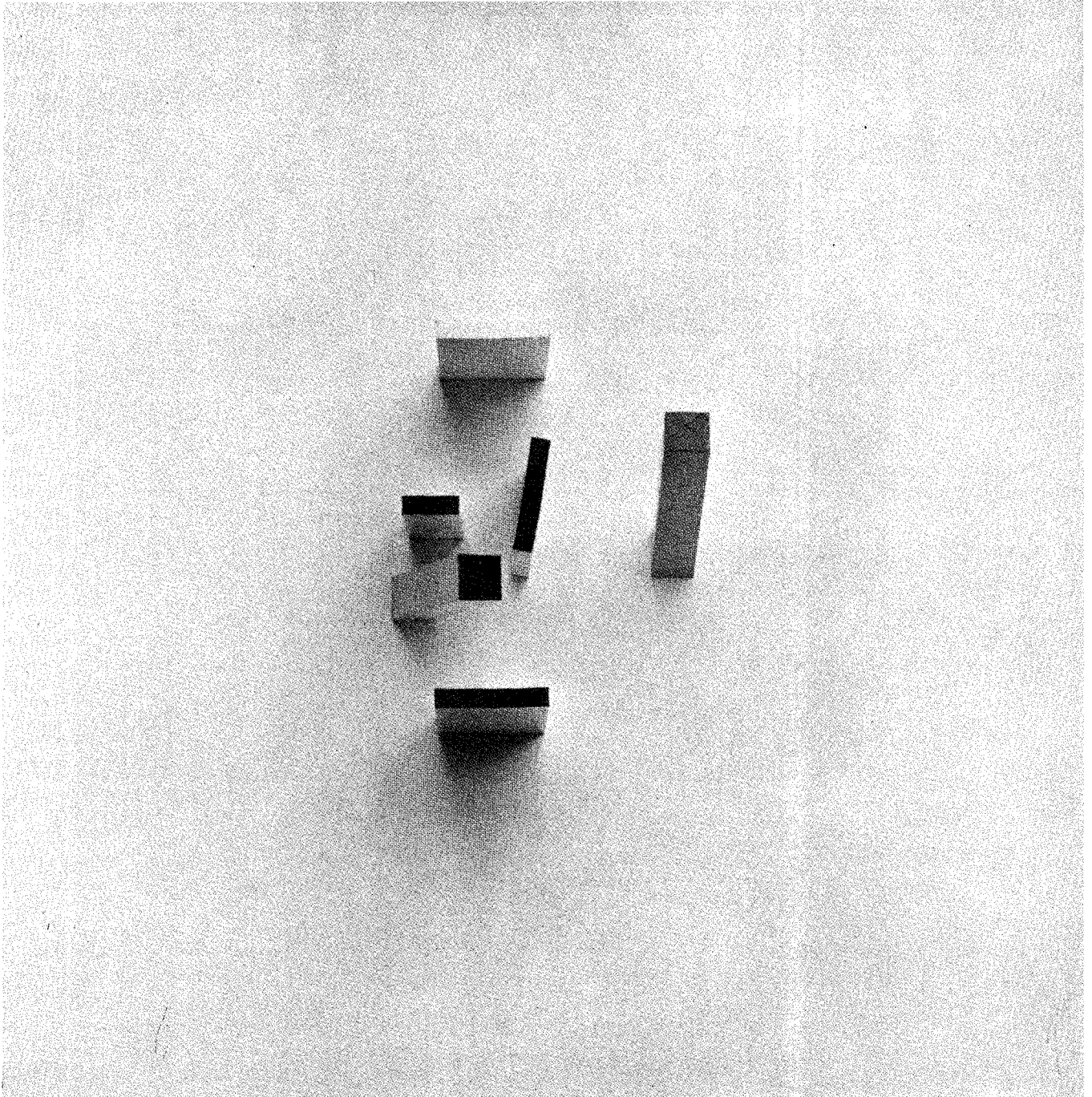
Pasmore has written that surface painting is the beginning rather than the end of abstract art -- moreover, that abstract painting is pure painting as a Mozart concerto might be called pure music. Explaining this he says that Giotto, for example, could not concern himself with pure painting as he had a primarily narrative responsibility in his work. Writing for the Sunday Times seven years ago, Pasmore went on to mention that in abstract art the painter must begin with a core and work outwards, whereas a representational artist must peel back onion layers looking for the core of meaning. Further, he said, in abstract art not only are form and content united but the relationship between subject and object, the object and space, is dynamic. I think it is clear both from methods used and an assessment of the finished products that Pasmore held his painting principles dear at Peterlee.





Relief Construction in White, Black, Maroon and Ochre 1956-57  
painted wood 27 X 29 in.





Projective relief in White, Black and Maroon 1963  
painted wood and plastic, 48X 48 X 10 ins.

Before he went to Peterlee Pasmore had begun to sculpt, or, rather, to make abstract constructions. The criticism of recent years looks back on those early constructions and calls them "painterly". In the roughness and individuality of execution, the natural materials used and the hand finishing, the description is apt. The materials of the later constructions are primarily plastics and synthetics; the finishing, done by machine, is precise and impersonal: the effect of their clinical simplicity is industrial.

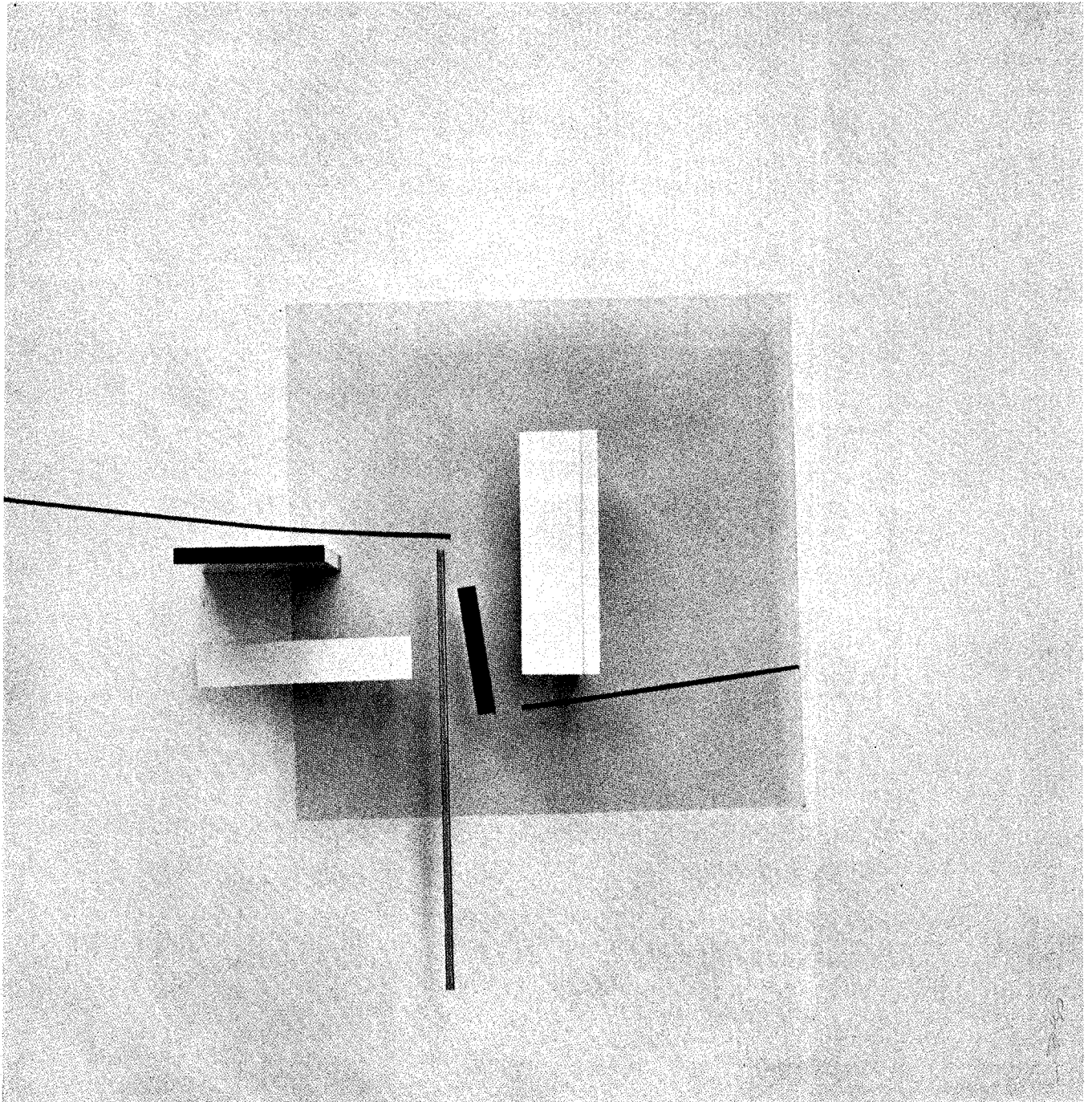
Some time ago Pasmore unhesitatingly wrote, "Like all great styles the content and meaning of modern abstract art are what the artist and society put into it". With that permission then, I think the later constructions, while pure and abstract are also urban, or at least sub-urban. Much as I've thought about it, I'm afraid I can't explain it well, but I'll try. My premise is that while there is inspiration to the abstract in nature, the geometry of the industrial city lends itself to the examination of naked shape and form. A Pasmore construction circa 1961 at the Tate seemed an artist's detailed analysis of something I'd seen before. Not a model of a plan for something, but a distillation. Then I remembered Expo.

The Canadian National Film Board scored a tremendous popular success last summer with a film experience, which I thought generally melodramatic and overrated, called Labyrinth. The first part of it took place in a horseshoe shaped theatre with the audience standing in tiers looking at two screens, one perpendicular to the other, each forty feet long. At one point both screens projected nearly abstract city film. It was twilight over an archtypical modern metropolis. I suppose it was Montreal. The vertical screen showed the straight on view from a slow moving low flying helicopter just missing the tops of skyscrapers. The floor screen was the birds eye view looking straight down at the buildings and streets. In memory at least that sequence blurred into an abstraction of light, shadow and pure shape. There was microscopic life scurrying about at street level, but it was less interesting than the arrangement of the buildings seen from this unusual angle.

Pasmore approaches each of the sections of Peterlee as a painting, applying landscape abstractions to the land at full scale. Perhaps then he approaches his constructions as if they were city sections at wall scale.

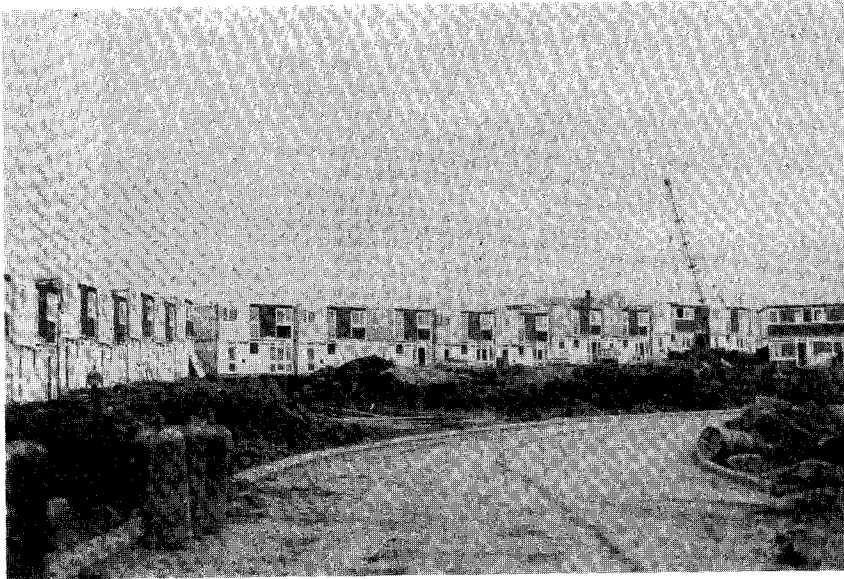
Looking at the catalogues of Pasmore's work and the large collection at the Tate, a parallel, to the career of another earlier 20th century painter, comes to mind. I'm not suggesting that their contributions are of equal importance, but Piet Mondrian also began as a romantic landscape artist and before turning to abstractions sampled many styles assiduously. In abstractions he was concerned with color theory and pure form. His last and best known paintings, however, drew their inspiration from the modern city. The title gives the point away, but think for a second about "Broadway Boogie-Woogie". Now look at the plan for South West Three, then at the constructions. Pasmore's work is very tight, no panoramic views or sweeping statements, but it has an ordered feeling that I think is urban as well as modern.

Going back to the notion of society's contribution to the artist's work, A.V. Williams told me that Pasmore once tried to explain what he wanted to do in South West. He talked about the Nash terraces in London and how awful they looked during the war; dirty, old, on the edge of decay. Then, after the war with just fresh paint, they reassumed their glory. "I'd like to design buildings so simple and so good," he said, "that as long as people living in them had consciences and white paint, they could never become slums".



Relief and Transparent Construction in White and Black 1965  
painted wood and plastic 48 X 48 ins.

SUNNY BLUNTS

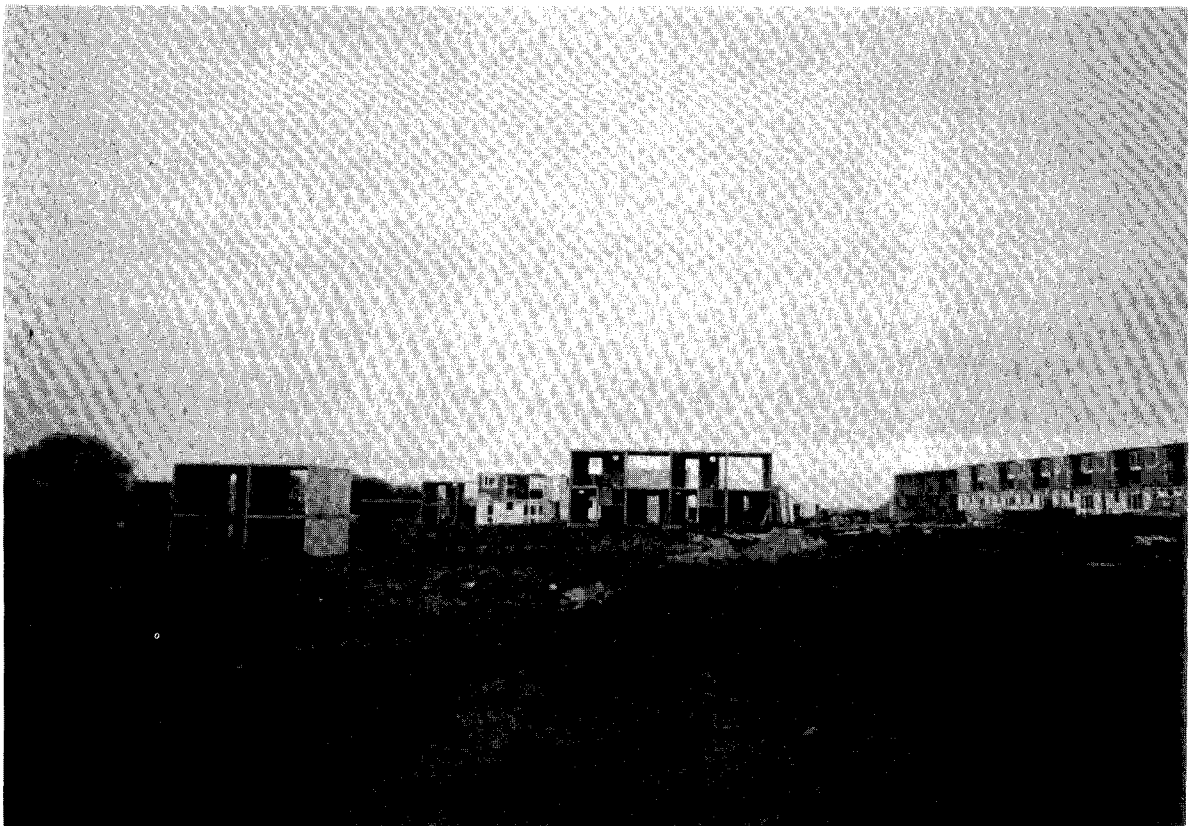


South West Four challenges the familiar planning gospel of tying roads tightly to housing. The road system runs between a long terraced curve and free standing one and two family houses.

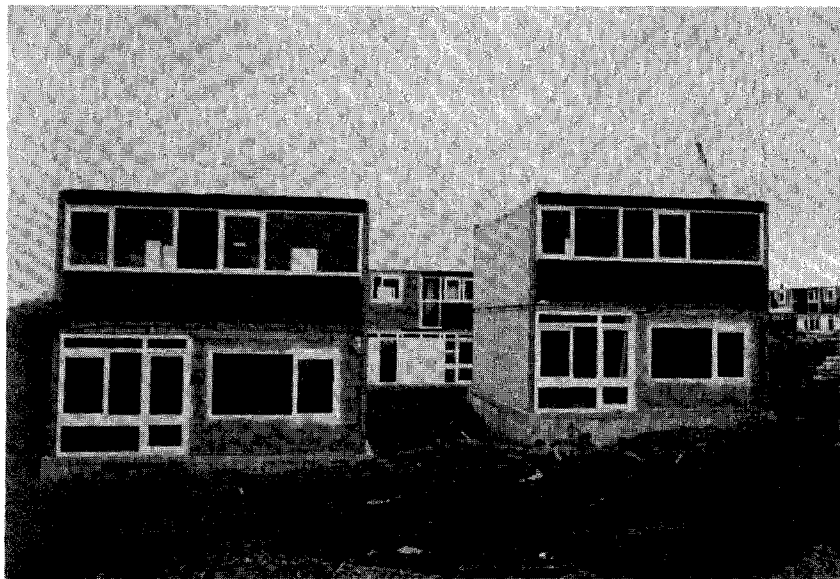
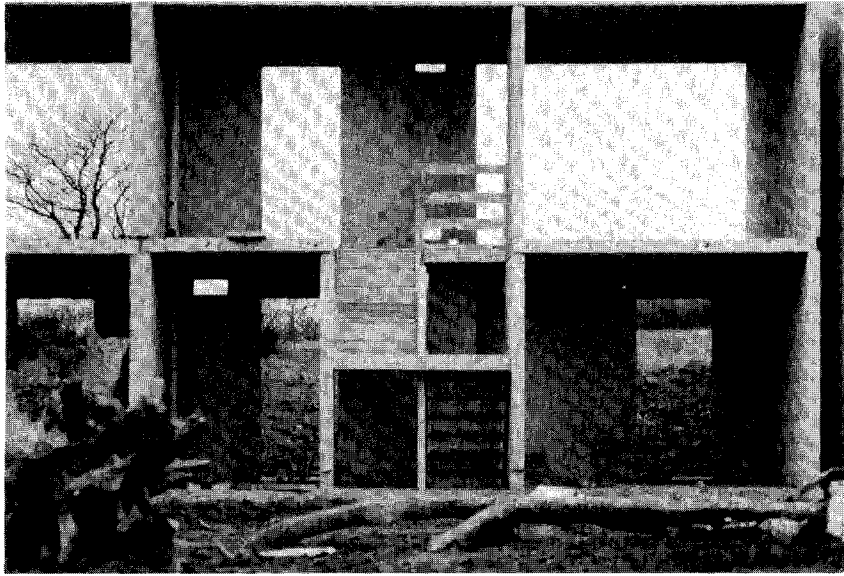
left: looking into the curve.

below: a panoramic primer in industrialized construction.

Six months ago this was a meadow, in another six months most of the houses will be occupied.







Despite the triumph of South West, and the Engineering miracle of the town itself, a history of Peterlee as declaimed by Williams is neither satisfied or mellow. He is quick to praise the movers and the shakers who have, at last, drawn attention to the North East and indirectly to Peterlee, but he is angry nonetheless. "This is an underdeveloped and underutilized region", peopled with "ostriches" (the Coal Board) "firemen" (the Board of Trade) and "diabolical blockheads" (bureaucrats generally). "Look, do you realize that Peterlee is the largest single social and economic investment that has been made in this part of the country? We've spent £25 million, but we aren't fashionable. They've just overlooked us. Without Peterlee there would be no Washington and no Killingworth (two recently designated big new towns in Durham). I never faltered. I never believed we could, or should, build a miner's town pure and simple. This town and Rothes (Glen Rothes another "miner's town" in Scotland which has also had a tortured history) were classic contradictions, whether anyone admitted it or not. Now they see it. I'm not a hard hearted man but I can't spend the rest of my life wringing my hands about the 7,000 miners who are losing their jobs. We have to do something about it. Has anyone told you about the Denes? As soon as they came on the market I wanted to buy them for the town. They thought I was crazy - we almost missed our chance when the price started to go up. But we got them for £60,000, worth hundreds of thousands today for the trees alone. Then they wanted me to use 'em, but I wouldn't. I'm stubborn, course I'm stubborn, but I was right, We'll take you down into the Denes so you can see for yourself, see what we're going to do.

Leaving Peterlee last summer I noticed a road sign marked Castle Eden. After wondering briefly what it was, believe it or not, I promptly forgot it. Driving into Peterlee last month I saw the sign again and this time determined to find out what it was.

Castle Eden refers to four things. The Castle Eden Denes, the largest of the coastal ravine systems of County Durham that feed into the North Sea, forms the southern border of Peterlee. South of the Denes is a nineteenth century English park. In the park is the castle itself, primarily an eighteenth century edifice built on the site of a twelfth century chapel, with a heavy nineteenth century ghastly gothic facade. In its latest incarnation it has been the district office of the Coal Board, but they moved out last fall and at the moment it is empty. South of the park is a tiny village of no narrative importance. The Denes, a remarkably beautiful and wildly forested natural formation, one branch of which runs north into the town center of Peterlee, were made a local Nature Reserve in 1954. Practically every view and every interesting limestone arrangement of the Denes has a name - Bruce's Ladder, Devil's Bridge, Pegjellima's Cave, Devil's Lapstone, White Rock and, inescapably, the Garden of Eden. The Denes are safe. There is no conservation issue. They belong to the new town which is carrying out careful re-forestation, tidying the public footpaths, and is determined that they shall not be despoiled. Preserving the Denes is not only good work well done in and of itself; the Denes are being used as a selling point, an added inducement for attracting what is hoped will be real change into the mining fields of Durham.

Look at it as game theory. Here's the problem. You've got a new miner's town and at long last everybody knows the mines are closing fast. What are you going to do? Look at your cards carefully. Assert your independence from the mining industry, don't get too involved in the wake because it is a waste of time and

energy. Establish a base of small industry to get things going. Take advantage of all the tax breaks and other financial inducements available to lure more new business. Your town is almost in the middle of the region and new roads will enhance that advantage, but location alone won't bring people, or, if they come, it won't keep them happy. When people were desperate for housing they would take any job they could get that carried promise of a roof with some walls and plumbing. Times have changed. Even when they didn't have cars the residents of this area had to go out of the district to do their shopping. Take advantage of delays in building a town center to design one for the auto age, then get cracking on it. Get the shops and recreational facilities started. Nag the schools - they're a big selling point. Push the technical college. When prospective residents and developers come to visit make sure they see the South West area where there is classy housing that overcomes the new town stigma and appeals to the middle income group - the managers and innovators.

Now check your hand again. What else have you got? A meadow, near the best housing but away from most of the town. It's next to a nature preserve which, in turn, borders on a park with a castle in it. Don't do anything hasty, don't turn that area into more housing, or open it for ordinary industrial development, it's too choice, there must be something special for it. Think about it. Mmmm... who, according to popular legend, work best and most productively when they are alone together with trees and squirrels to look at on their work breaks? Approach it from another angle. Check the government's White Paper "Challenge to the North". "Unless the important manufacturing industries within the region can be persuaded to undertake a substantial proportion of the basic development work which underpins their processes, there is a danger that the region will be condemned to mere productive activity of a kind which is becoming obsolete.... The present technological imbalance inhibits contact between university departments and industry, discourages graduates from considering a career in the North and seriously reduces the choice of employment available to school leavers with scientific leanings".

Begin thinking about science and change, about research and development. Ideas start to gel. Don't say anything yet, wait till you have a fist full of library back arguments and some specific plans. In practice, research and technological investment has bypassed most of the northeast. There is one research consultancy firm in Newcastle. In theory, if Britain ever gets into the Common Market, the north east should have competitive advantage due to its location on shipping routes and based on long commercial relations with northern Europe. There is no guarantee that research alone will bring change in the north east, but there won't be much appreciable change without it. Learn the truisms about science in addition to the squirrel in the tree notion; science based industries are attracted to areas where research and development is expanding; the efficiency of R & D increases when staffs have close contact with others working in the same fields; the more scientists working in an area the more the area becomes science minded. There are three basic kinds of research and development, closely interrelated, often overlapping, but still separable: industry based, government sponsored and university affiliated. Back to Peterlee: there are three universities each with increasing scientific emphasis within a half hour's drive of Okerside, the Blunts area next to the Denes: Newcastle, Durham and Teeside. In attracting an R.& D installation to Peterlee the Development Corporation has subtle and unsubtle advantages: it can

donate land, underwrite some costs, provide housing and amenities, as well as offer a beautiful and suitable site. There, you see, it was all written in the cards, now it just has to be done.

I've skimmed very lightly over what is actually happening. Although none of the people who have developed the R & D proposals for Peterlee have ever seen it, they have drawn heavily on the example of the North Carolina Research Triangle and other American models. Booklets have been discreetly published and a lot of quiet talking has reached negotiation stages. There is every reason to believe that with government and foundation assistance an announcement of a combined university affiliated research facility will be made sometime soon.

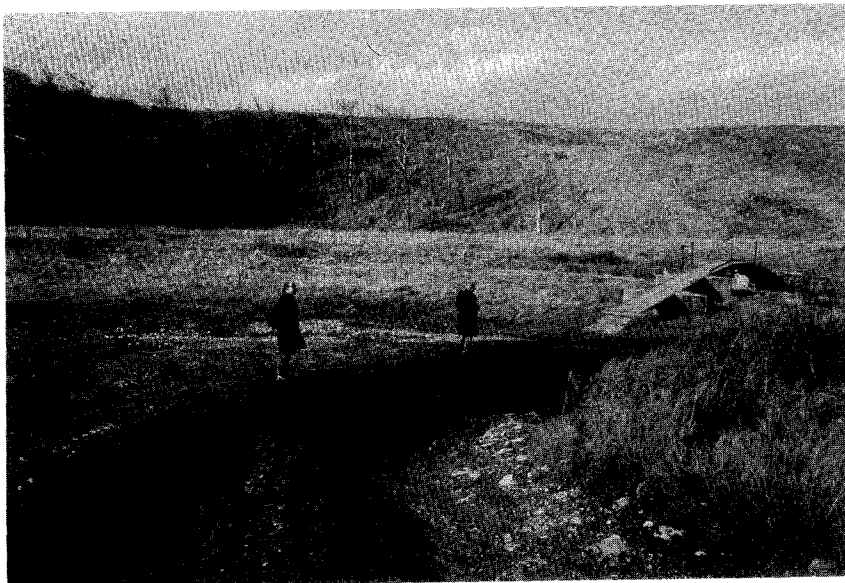
The Peterlee Development Corporation has slightly more than 2,000 houses left to build to fulfil its construction commitments under the New Towns Act, but as Garden Cities and miner's towns per se, are a thing of the past, the Peterlee Corporation is staking out a new role for itself and, in a small reasoned way, for the North East of England.

Five years ago twenty families a month left Peterlee and headed South for jobs and opportunities. The figure has dropped to five families a month. Jobs in the South are harder to find, but many who waited have left now convinced that new jobs will come to them. There has been insidious social change even in the local nest. When the miner ruled the roost, his home, no matter how small, was his castle, and his wife his slave. Almost 30% of the women in Peterlee are now working, at least part time. Not only do they go out and play Bingo, they have begun to visit the once exclusively male territory, the social rock of the North East, the working men's clubs and pubs. That is profound change.

You never know, when you get on a bus in Newcastle, what you will find at the end of the ride.

Sincerely,

*Eden Ross Hipson.*



While the conservation officer gazes at the North Sea, A.V. Williams hurries towards the foot bridge to point out the best views. Although windy, the Dene mouth is protected, and could be transformed into a recreation area complete with small marina.

Photographs of constructions by Victor Pasmore from the catalogue of the 1965 retrospective exhibit at the Tate Gallery, London.