

Béton House



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Alumno
Park Hill Estate, Sheffield

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Béton House is the latest phase in the ongoing redevelopment of one of the UK’s most iconic post-war developments, the Grade II listed Park Hill estate in Sheffield. The project will rekindle the original social intentions of Park Hill, provide a new lease of life to an abandoned part of the original building and reinvigorate the student-housing sector for the 21st century.

“We first asked ourselves how we yield the original aspirations of Park Hill? What is a balanced community these days and who is in it?” So asks David Campbell, managing director of Alumno, on the decision to transform part of the estate into student housing.

After the first phase of the redevelopment was completed in 2013, the team sat down and took stock of how to approach the second phase with more variety and social openness that would hark back to the original ambitions of Park Hill. Campbell spotted its civic potential and struck upon the need for bespoke student housing in the city and its ability to provide a first, the student house within a managed block. “We’ve always believed that student housing can be a catalyst for change,” he continues. “I liked the idea that someone could enter into Park Hill as a student, graduate from university, get a job in Sheffield and then maybe move up into home-ownership in Park Hill.”



With ready-made accommodation units upstairs and a vast (but derelict) volume on the ground floor — ideal for creating an open-plan space for students to congregate in to hang out, socialise, eat and study — the building lent itself to the transformation.

Alumno brought in Ben Kelly of BK Design and Kevin Brennan, partner at Brinkworth to transform this 650 sq m of communal area, including a gym, cinema, private dining room, and study room. Tatham Studio worked on accommodation on the floors above and Sheffield born Andy Stevens of Graphic Thought Facility was approached to deliver a way-finding strategy. A Yorkshire native himself, Kelly first made his name designing the iconic Manchester nightclub, The Hacienda, in the early 1980s. To work on such an essential architectural icon of the north of England was a privilege and a passion. “The whole development sits up there on the hill looking out over Sheffield and is quite an extraordinary thing,” says Kelly.

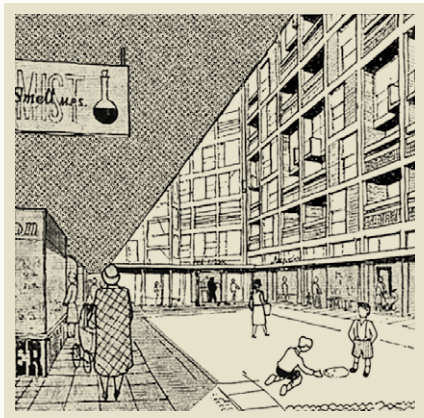
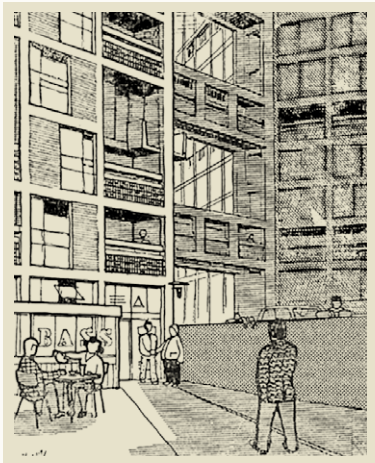
“I’ve known Park Hill estate since visits to Sheffield in the early 1990s and have sadly watched it deteriorate over time, so it was a real honour for me to be so involved with the resuscitation of this beautiful brute,” concurs Brennan. “Along with a stellar cast of architects, designers and, of course, working with David Campbell and his passion for modernism.”

Sheffield is a city built on learning. The ambition is that living in this icon will provide a more cultural side to student’s education. “If you look at it from a student’s point of view, they’re living in a very different building to the usual one. I like to think it might open their minds to society and to other ways of living — an extra part of their education” adds Kelly.

The architectural change of use

Designed in the 1950s by Jack Lynn, Ivor Smith and Frederick Nicklin, under the auspices of the city architect Lewis Womersley, as a Brutalist development providing almost 1,000 homes in 400 acres of high-rise blocks, the ‘streets in the sky’ of Park Hill ostensibly lent itself to creating student accommodation but was in a derelict state.

Local design practice Whittam Cox Architects worked in close collaboration with Alumno, leading the student accommodation design and building shell restoration, advocating an approach that saved as much of the original building fabric as possible with “well crafted visible mending”. Their recognition of the importance of the modernist mosaics and use of colour in the original design led to a sympathetic re-imagining of Béton House, with an emphasis on bringing the whole building together as a piece of art, that enriches the lives of its inhabitants and those in the surrounding area.



Original architect's sketches as reproduced in an article from the Sheffield Star newspaper announcing the scheme and lauding its 'Continental touch'.

Design details

The starting point for the design was the primary 'Polychromie' colour palette used by Le Corbusier, which was also found in a mosaic on the walls of the former Parkway Tavern pub and is now fully restored to the building's exterior. The team used it to offer a historical colour palette: burnt orange, bottle green, scarlet, and mustard.

These colours help divide the open-plan spaces into zones (reception, lounges, seating booths, and study areas), bringing in a bit of Ben Kelly's trademark palette while allowing the original concrete to sing. "To respect the integrity of the building, our approach was to tread very lightly to retain the building's original features. Despite the difficult acoustics and thermal conditions in the common areas, we have developed a concept that pays tribute to the original vision to become a modern, functional environment", says Brennan.

This colour palette extends into the upstairs accommodation. Each room within the town houses having a unique colour combination to provide a sense of individuality. Tatham Studio oversaw the design process of this aspect and designed specially commissioned, bespoke furniture which was manufactured in Sheffield as well as sourcing original mid-century and contemporary Scandinavian pieces.

The project was renamed Béton House (in respect of Béton brut, the French term for 'raw concrete') and exterior signage designed by Graphic Thought Facility is both cast in ribbed concrete slabs and water jet cut from bespoke mixes of rich red aggregates picking up on the polished glass tiles of the original mosaics. Way-finding signage is painted directly to the raw concrete or rendered in lustrous and long-lasting vitreous enamels.

Matthew Jarratt, curator, consultant and long-time collaborator of Alumno oversaw the public art provision, including the commissioning of Sheffield's poet laureate, Otis Mensah's poem *We Were Never Derelict*. The typeface *Park Hill* was commissioned from design studio Founded and extracts of the poem rendered in concrete and steel totems located in the Béton House landscape. The poem is juxtaposed alongside the quotes of former residents of Park Hill, co-ordinated by the team at S1 artspace, reflecting on their lives there, alongside texts from leading theorists & architects who saw the design of Park Hill & other projects as key to social innovation in 1960's and 70's.













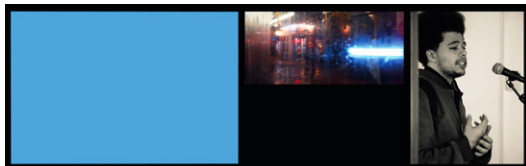












We Were Never Derelict

At the beginning of this year, a new short seven minute film on Park Hill was made by artist/ photographer Martin Gray. Park Hill itself is well documented but this is the first short film for some years and it includes real stories of real people that is full of heart and of Sheffield character. Martin approached Alumno with his idea and secured funding for the film.

Martin Gray says: "Like much of my work, the Park Hill film project reflects a fascination with the relationships we have with our physical and cultural environment. For many people, this is probably rooted in childhood, my own being a mix of places, nationalities, dialects and languages. A strong connection to place and shared space exists for most of us, however that evolves. The three-month Coronavirus lockdown, which began just after the film was made, put this into sharp relief.

"There is something very powerful about places with personal and cultural significance. This is what drew me to making portraits and interviews with construction workers who grew up in and around the Park Hill Estate in Sheffield only to find themselves, decades later, rebuilding and regenerating it.

“The project led me to meet Sheffield’s poet laureate Otis Mensah, who has written poems for Park Hill that will sit as permanent public art within the fabric of the building. It seemed interesting to intertwine some of the construction workers’ stories with Otis’s personal associations with the site. It was also fitting to title the film *We Were Never Derelict* after one of Otis’s poems. I hope the film conveys how the process of rebuilding Park Hill has caused workers to revisit their previous relationships with this iconic place.”



Opposite: Stills from *We Were Never Derelict* by Martin Gray.
Please scan the code to watch the film.

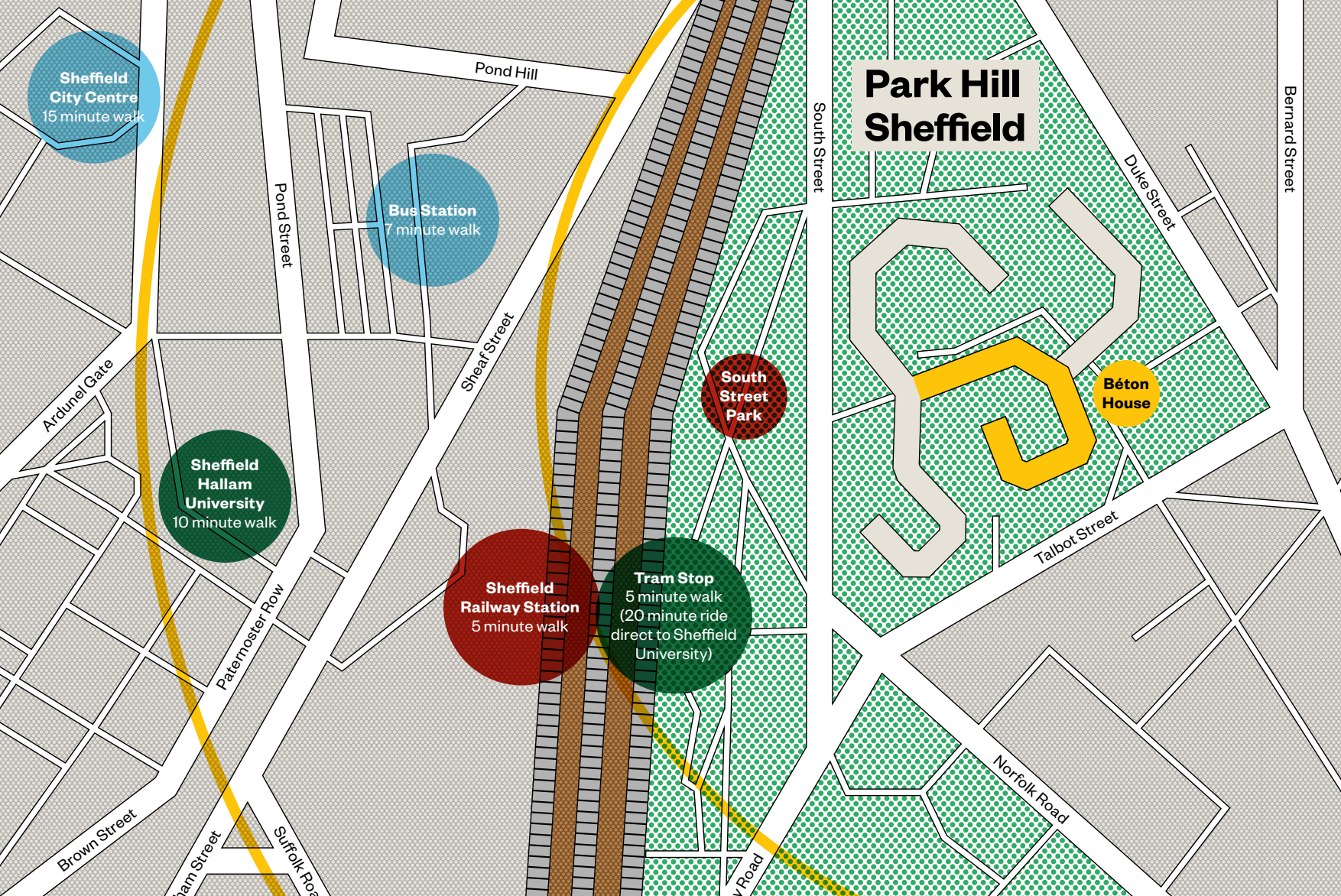


Alumno was established in 2006 and partners with universities, colleges, and other stakeholders to provide high-quality living space for more than 7,000 students to date across the UK including London, Birmingham, Norwich, Glasgow, Durham, and St Andrews.

Delivering distinct and sensitive designs, carefully engaging with local residents to integrate its developments to benefit the existing community. Its schemes introduce a mix of other uses alongside student accommodation.

Opposite: *We Were Never Derelict* by Otis Mensah
Typeset in *Park Hill* font which is available
to download for free at www.parkhilltype.com

POCKETS OF PEOPLE'S STORIES
CRADLED BY BRICK AND MORTAR
AMIDST THE RUBBLE AND MURMUR
LIVING CATALYSTS OF LOVE
PAINT GALLONS OF LIFE ON DREARY
DANCE OVER MUNDANE & VOID
SOLITUDE BIRTHED A SMILE
THAT SOUGHT COMMUNITY & GOOD
BUILD TOWERS OF NOISE ASIDE US
SUCH TRANSIENCE WON'T QUAKE
A SPIRIT, NOT STONE CEMENTED
BUT BLOOD & FLESH & FAITH
WE WERE NEVER DERELICT
JUST DISPLACED AND OUT OF SIGHT
CARRYING HOME INSIDE US
WHEN HOME THEY TRIED TO BREAK



Park Hill Sheffield

Sheffield
City Centre
15 minute walk

Bus Station
7 minute walk

Sheffield
Hallam
University
10 minute walk

Sheffield
Railway Station
5 minute walk

Tram Stop
5 minute walk
(20 minute ride
direct to Sheffield
University)

South
Street
Park

Béton
House

Alumno

Website: alumnogroup.com
Instagram: @alumnogram

Homes for Students

Website: [wearehomesforstudents.com/
student-accommodation/sheffield/
beton-house](http://wearehomesforstudents.com/student-accommodation/sheffield/beton-house)
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BRINKWORTH



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ARCHITECTS COX

S1 ARTSPACE
SHEFFIELD

TATHAM
STUDIO

Founded.

Design: Graphic Thought Facility

Text: Tom Morris

Photography: Oliver Hoosen, Roger Mayne and Louise Melchoir

