

# Seher Shah & Randhir Singh *The Barbican Estate*

Olivia Laing

All works from the series *Studies in Form (The Barbican Estate - London)*, 2018

Commissioned by the Samdani Art Foundation for the Dhaka Art Summit, 2018. Courtesy the artists and Green Art Gallery, Dubai

This isn't what I can see from my window. What I can see is a concrete planter full of geraniums and, behind it, a school playground and assorted twenty-first-century towers, one of which, at the Old Street roundabout, turns pink at sunset, a compensation for facing east. The children have just flooded out, their shouts lapping the third-floor balconies. "Where are you going?" "SIT DOWN."

Living in these buildings is a mystery. Sound moves in odd ways. At intervals, a man sings opera, his voice as resonant as if he were standing in the stairwell. The Barbican looks like a fortress, but it's actually designed on a principle of permeability. There are dozens of ways in and out—staircases, ramps, lifts, walkways, tunnels. Inside each flat, there's an ingenious row of cupboards. You put your rubbish in the bottom one, and at 8 AM it's opened from the other side and whisked away. Parcels announce their arrival via pink slips in the next cupboard up. They're reclaimed from the car-park attendants, the secret rulers of the estate.

*Studies in Form* is a 2018 collaboration between the artist Seher Shah and the photographer Randhir Singh, both of whom are based in New Delhi. It uses cyanotypes to explore the abstract qualities of four architectural developments around the world, among them the Barbican Estate in London, where I live. These photographs focus on the repetitive, sculptural qualities of the estate: the lipped balconies, the concrete vents that look like funnels on a ship. In these beautiful, enigmatic images, my home appears massive, elegant, austere, a little unfriendly.

What Shah and Singh have captured in their cyanotypes are the clean lines and sculptural heft of the place, the belief that utility and beauty don't always have to cancel each other out. There are lots of different ways to live, and so there are lots of different types of available accommodation. The Barbican's architects, Chamberlin, Powell and Bon, believed it was their responsibility to make each space work, no matter how small. The shipshape kitchens in the F2A studios, the kind I have, were designed by the yacht makers Brooke Marine.

The whole estate is a master class in urban planning, a fantasy of what a city could be. There are three cinemas, an arts center, bars, a tropical conservatory, restaurants, residents' gardens, and a library, but the design isn't so precious or managed that there isn't room for real people's lives. Kids do illicit parkour on the walkway. Some of the planters have been co-opted as makeshift garden allotments, bursting with onions and ruby stems of chard. On summer evenings, I often see a bat, zigzagging through the blue air in search of flies as the buildings exhale the day's accumulated heat.

The place seems so solid that it's easy to forget it only exists as a consequence of the near obliteration of the City of London. I keep a copy of *Bomb Damage Maps, 1939-1945* on my desk: a 288-page reproduction of the intricate, beautifully colored bomb-damage maps compiled by London County Council during the Blitz. Almost everything hereabouts is purple, code for "damaged beyond repair," the result of sustained bombardment on the night of December 29, 1940.

London's bomb sites were rapidly reclaimed by plants, what my friend Leo Mellor once described as a "mesmerically enfolding verdancy." Within months, the wreckage was transformed into a wilderness of rosebay willowherb, Oxford ragwort, coltsfoot, charlock, groundsel, and Thanet cress. The Barbican has kept that spirit, the commingling of the human and the wild. It's a fertile utopia, a concrete kingdom in which tomatoes, lavender, and figs all thrive.

Olivia Laing's latest collection of essays is *Funny Weather: Art in an Emergency* (2020).













