

THE INEQUALITY OF ARCHITECTURE

How can the production design of *Parasite* be used to reveal the inadequacies of social housing in Korea and the UK?

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PREFACE

“

Design is a discipline deeply entangled in the dynamics of inequality. It enacts and enforces them; it is both a producer of these mechanisms and is informed by them”

(Canli, 2017).

By using set design within film, the viewer can be informed about the inequality of architecture in a modern-day society. The film *Parasite*, by Bong Joon-Ho, depicts two families living in Seoul, Korea, who contrast in wealth, status and class (see Figure 1): the impoverished Kim family and the upper-class Parks family. Lee Jung, the set designer, explores semiotics within his design, the physical and social proxemics, materiality, and mise-en-scene in the film alongside real-life architecture in a contemporary society. It is evident that Jung uses his production design skills to create a set that highlights major issues surrounding class.

In contrast, it could be argued that many architects, for example Bruno Taut, have considered the fact that architecture is classist and allowed this to influence their designs to create a landscape of equity. However, it is evident that this is intrinsically political, and many countries, including the United Kingdom, are still plagued by inequality via the built environment. The set design in *Parasite* has a very powerful effect on the audience despite being somewhat subliminal. Jung's decisions when designing the set for *Parasite* are aimed at subconsciously informing the viewer about the inequality of modern housing.

Figure 1

Movie poster of *Parasite* in Korean, the poster shows the two families, the Kim family and the Parks family.



01

PROXEMICS

The meticulous planning of proxemics in the set design of *Parasite* creates a filmic metaphor for class separation. Proxemics can be translated into physical hierarchy in social class which defines as “a system in which people are arranged according to their importance” (Cambridge University Press, 2020). The way in which the architecture of the film has been placed physically represents a reflection in class. For example, the Kim’s house and Parks’ houses are at different levels on a hill (see Figure 2). This factor has been used to represent the historic elements of classism in a Korean society as well as current circumstances that are major problems in the world today, such as the Grenfell Tower tragedy in 2017 (Preston, 2018).

02

Figure 2- Artist Marie Bergeron





Figure 3- Kim family in search of Wi-Fi (03,10)

The use of proxemics to highlight inequality allowed production designer Lee Ha-Jun to “show the increasing density that reflects the class difference between elevated areas and lower ones” (Jun, 2019). The film starts with the impoverished Kim family beneath the toilet in their semi-basement reaching up their phones. This snapshot shows the Kim family in search for wealth above the ground level - a reach for hope and prosperity in the form of free internet connection (see Figure 3) - to feed off a higher up family’s Wi-Fi consequently becoming the ‘parasite’. The set design of the Kim family’s house exposes the historic classism in Seoul where Korean war bunkers were converted into semi-basement flats during the 1980s housing crisis (see Figure 4 and 5). This meant that people of a lower economic status, who could not afford proper housing, were offered as their only choice to live in these dilapidated bunkers which are unsafe and massive reminders of the Korean war time. Karl Marx theorises in the Communist Manifesto, that: “The history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles” (Marx, 1848: 2). In relation to *Parasite*, this not only exposes the inequality through architecture and classism, it highlights how history is essentially repeating itself – people continue to live in inadequate housing, surviving on very little.



Figure 4- Semi-basement flat in Seoul



Figure 5- Render of the Kim’s flat

But there is more to be drawn from this film than just the historic classism presented through the cinematic elements; the film can be analysed in terms of the implications of the British housing crisis. Arguably, the Grenfell disaster could be seen as fundamentally political considering that “[in 2017] the Conservative Party voted down a bill that would have required to make landlords provide liveable housing” (Baker-Jordan, 2017). The fact that “39% of Conservative MPs are landlords” meant that this bill would have gone against their personal financial interests (Foster, 2016). Grenfell exposed “a systemic pattern of poor people being put at risk when the state houses them” (Peston, 2017: 272). This idea is represented in *Parasite* by the proxemics of spatial sizing. The Kim family are set in a very cramped and low-ceilinged semi-basement, presumably housed by the Korean government, whereas the Parks family are set in a very spacious clutter-free mansion (see Figure 6). This portrays that the social difference between the two households is vast and hierarchal. This can be backed by the figure-ground theory by Peter Brooke, where the use of spatial sizing and arrangement allows for positive or negatives space. He argues that a clutter free squared off room is positive space and a cluttered small apartment is negative space; this creates correlating emotions for the occupant (Brooke, n.d.).

Figure 6- Floorplan of the Park’s house





Figure 7- Floorplan of a two-bed apartment in Grenfell Tower, 75m²

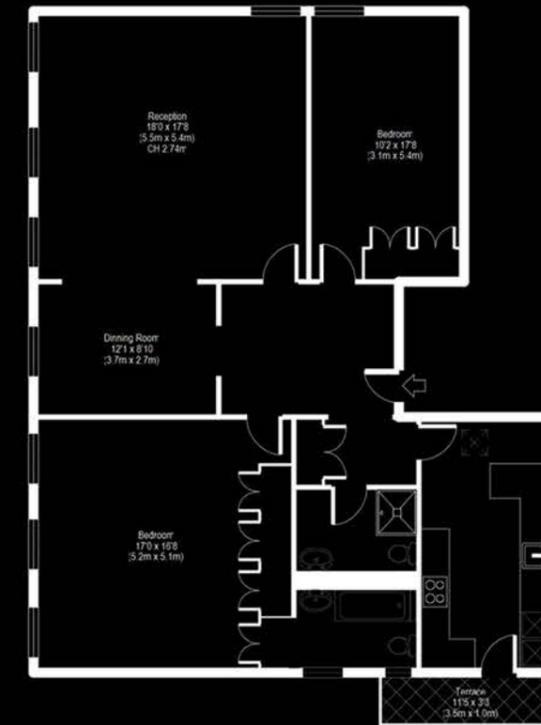
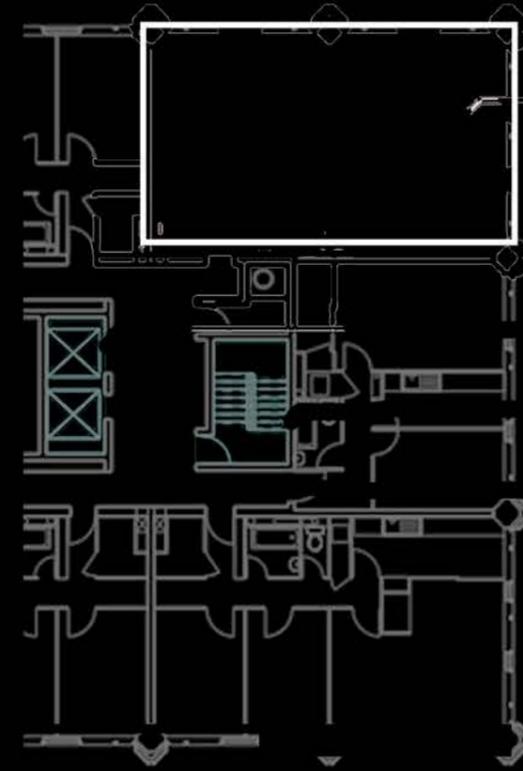


Figure 8- Floorplan of a two-bed apartment in Holand Park 119m²

Grenfell Tower was built by the government with the intention of placing a multitude of people in a small space, ironically in the richest borough in London (Baker-Jordan, 2017). These small spaces create a lot of negative space with negative connotations in the figure-ground theory which allows for people to have a very strong opinion against the occupants. The sheer comparison of the size between the Brutalist style modern piece of architecture with the Victorian style in the W11 postcode area shows an obvious class divide. This is evident in the square metreage of two-bedroom apartments in the borough (see Figure 7, 8) in proximity (see Figure 9) – something that is also represented in *Parasite* by placing these dramatically different households on the same hill. Conclusively, it is evident that the use of proxemics in *Parasite* highlight historic and current issues surrounding class divide with reference to the British housing crisis as well as the Korean war.

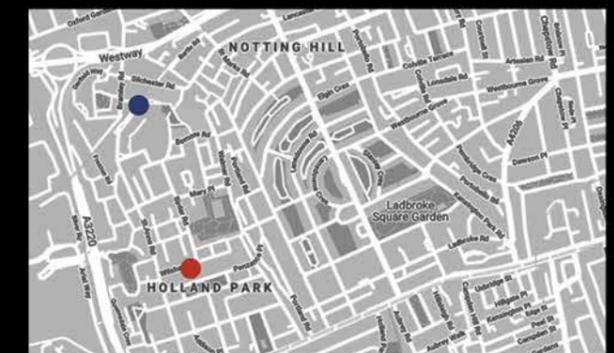


Figure 9- Proximity of Figure 7 and 8, blue is Grenfell Tower and red is Holland Park.

MATERIALITY



Furthermore, materiality has been used within *Parasite* to explore the dynamics of inequality and classism. There is an immense contrast between the Kim's basement and the Parks' house (see Figures 10 and 11), which is represented through the choices of materiality in the design. The Parks' house is designed with the intention of communicating wealth and family stability, whilst the Kim's house is curated to look like it could fall to pieces (Han-Jung, 2019). However, at the end of the film everything falls apart in the Parks' house where many characters are murdered (see Figure 12). Classism is therefore underlined by the differences in materiality alongside the differences in social status, which can be applied to real circumstances worldwide today.



Figure 10 (top left)- The Parks' Household taken at 00:16:06

Figure 11 (bottom left)- The Kim's Household taken at 00:03:37

Figure 12 (right)- The ending scene of *Parasite* taken at 1:53:06

The series of sets, designed by Lee Han-Jung, are considered to be an “architectural marvel” (Finn, 2019) because the Parks’ house is so convincingly similar to a real house in Korea. Jung “didn’t look at specific architectural styles, rather [he] took inspiration from minimalistic, modern houses with great spatial arrangements” (Han-Jung, 2020). It is evident that the design took many cues, like large glass windows and a minimalistic style, from modernist architecture and artwork, such as modernist artist László Moholy-Nagy’s work (see Figure 13), where the lines reflect the movement and colour reflects the materials of the space. The Parks’ house also considers the work of architects such as Miles Van de Rohe and Frank Lloyd Wright. Jung imitates this within his design and parodies upper-class architecture. Whereas, he wanted history and real-life circumstances of the lower economic class in Seoul to influence the design of the Kim’s semi-basement. Arguably, this contrast highlights a realistic depiction of what people in one part of the city have in comparison to

each other. The choices in materiality expose a classist society where expensive glass and white materials are used to build an affluent-looking house surrounded by a concrete wall for protection. In contrast, cheap and unreliable materials are used to house the lower classes. According to, architectural theorist, Jonathon Hill suggests that white was once “a marker of social position” (Hill, 2006: 19) which suggests that if one were of a lower social position one would be considered ‘dirty’. This highlights a level of inequality in architecture due to the materials and colour choices used that are still in general circulation today. However, it could be argued that some architects, specifically Bruno Taut, acknowledged the classist approach with materiality and tried to create progressive design of the Hufeisensiedlung in Berlin (see Figure 14). By using better quality, more sustainable and safer materials, Taut managed to create a landscape of equity, which now is a world heritage site (UNESCO, n.d.). But many architects have not taken this lead, which has inevitably lead to disasters in social housing.

Figure 13- László Moholy-Nagy’s work

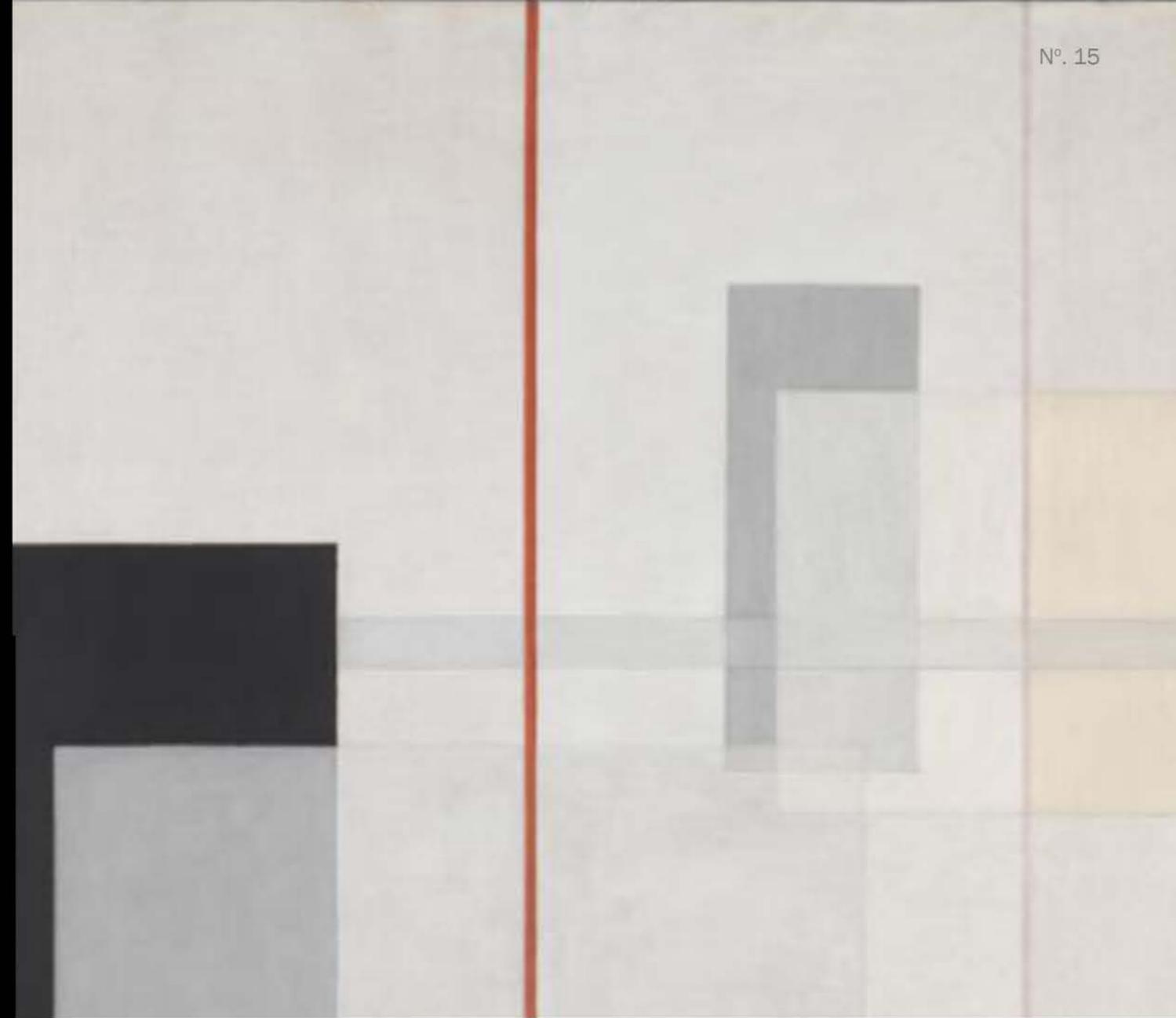


Figure 14- Harvey Bestwick’s panorama of the Hufeisensiedlung, Berlin

Unsafe and cheap materials have been used to house the lower economic class in Britain. Unfortunately “more than 160 social-housing blocks have failed tests and been proven unsafe” (Peston, 2017: 272) which has led to fatal disasters, like Grenfell Tower. The use of the unsafe King span K15 insulation alongside Celotex RS5000 in unsafe combinations indicates the coalition government’s cutting of corners in their policy of austerity and budgeting measures on buildings in which the disadvantaged would be housed. This neglect is evident in Parasite when the houses get flooded (see Figure 15) because the lack of quality in materials in keeping the community of semi-bunker renters safe. These characters in the film are still subjected to danger due to the lack of consideration from the government about their welfare. This is very common in a capitalist society and indicates classism not only within the film but in a wider context using materials on site.



Figure 15- The Kim's house gets flooded
taken at 01:37:21

LIGHTING

More can be drawn from the set to highlight inequality and classism, more specifically, the clever use of light and shadow. Consideration of brightness and colour of the lighting in *Parasite* adds to the overall mise-en-scene of the film and allows the viewer to empathise with the disadvantaged Kim family. An example of this is the use of “yellow toned practical lights to create a sophisticated and warm atmosphere” (Han-Jung, 2019) in the Parks’ house in contrast to the dimly lit and white tones alongside the natural lighting used in the Kim’s house (see Figure 16 and 17). This contrast highlights that the “poorer you are, the less sunlight you have access to, and that’s just how it is in real life as well” (Ho, 2019).

04



Figure 16 (top right)- the lighting in the Parks’ house is warm

Figure 17 (bottom right)- the lighting in the Kim’s basement is dull. Taken at 00:12:33



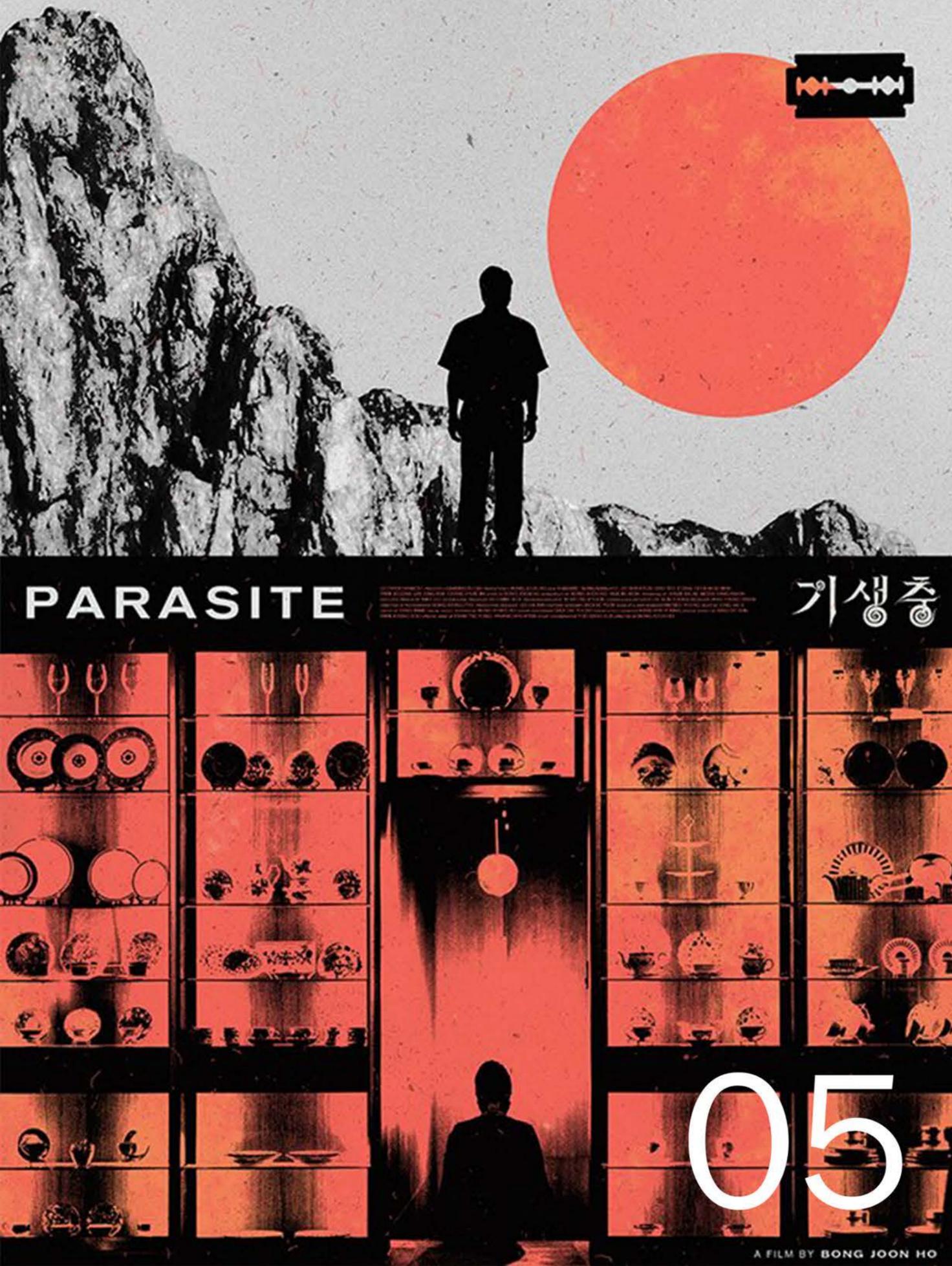
The use of natural and artificial light to highlight inequality also allowed the production designer to give the Kim's family a sense of hope. By setting them in a blue toned semi-basement it gives them the sense that they are still overground in some respect, suggesting that there is hope as they still have "access to some sunlight" and haven't wholly fallen into the basement yet. (Ho, 2019) This creates a mixture of fear and hope that as a citizen one can fall even lower in status. The blue and white tones in the lighting accentuate the classist and non-affluent atmosphere using colour theory. Colour theorist Faber Birren stated that "colour is rich in meaning" arguing that blue has a "disorientation through absence of light" (Birren, 2015). This therefore indicates that the Kim family are in absence of wealth and live in a cold, damp and dark state, creating a chilling atmosphere to the audience. The Kim family home is representative of real-life conditions in South Korea. In a piece of writing called *Colour and Human Response* Birren highlights that it is the human perception of colour that effects our emotions and responses to colour in light (Birren, 2015). Semi-basement homes in Korea have very limited hours of sunlight within a day, between 15 and 30 minutes; because of this, there is an obvious class divide as there has been no consideration of the position of these homes and the lighting leaves a dark perception of the occupants (Han-Jung, 2019). In contrast, the Parks' house was built with consideration of the sun's direction and windows and sizes were built accordingly (see Figure 18). Jung requested "sophisticated indirect artificial lighting to warm the space" (Han-Jung, 2019) which, within lighting theory, suggests that the Parks are affluent and of a higher status. This represents a level of classism in which richer families can afford more sunlight even though it is a natural form which should be free and available to everyone equally.

Figure 18- 00:14:16 - the warm tones taken from the Park's house.

Figure 19- South Kensington and Stella McCartney store.

The concept of natural light being more expensive can be applied to social housing in the UK too. Bee Grigsby, a student who lives in Kingston, describes the social housing situation in London as “extremely classist and full of poverty” (Grigsby, 2021). Grigsby highlights that in South Kensington there is a vast class divide even in one building on Fulham Road, a council housing estate which is on top of an upper-class Stella McCartney store (Grigsby, 2021) (see Figure 19). It is evident from photographs of the site that the store beneath the flats has shockingly bigger windows and is flooded with natural light to help sell the items in store. However, only metres above lie council flats with very small windows and loggias with roofing systems that shade the interior. This shows an obvious consideration of classes and the people that would occupy the spaces. Stella McCartney, an upmarket brand selling luxury commodities, sits shamelessly beneath rows of inadequate council flats, which are far from adequate, let alone luxurious.





SUMMARY

Arguably, *Parasite* creates a filmic metaphor for class separation in a capitalist society using theatrical semiotics, more specifically, proxemics, materiality and lighting. Exploring this alongside theorists Karl Marx, Faber Birren and Johnathan Hill justifies the notion that Jung curated a set that highlights classism and inequality within the film and in real life. To build upon this research, further analysis of sustainable solutions to help reduce this social difference would add further depth to the argument to highlight that many architects acknowledge this divide and favour reducing the impact on the lower-economic class. However, it is evident that capitalist governments are approving the build of upper-class areas before the consideration of the welfare of the over end of the class spectrum (Foster, 2016). An example of this is evident in the tragic disaster of the Grenfell Tower in 2017 which burnt down purely because of the neglect of the occupants by the council. This has been explored alongside *Parasite* in terms of proxemics, materiality and lighting. The exploration of proxemics highlights a close link between the sizes of apartments in Grenfell and in the semi-basements in Seoul in relation to the size difference of houses just down the street; materiality showed a clear neglect in both sources, where both Grenfell and the Kim's home were struck by disaster; and finally the lack of natural lighting in both places highlighted how it seems to be a privilege to have sunlight in a lower-economic class. *Parasite* therefore reveals the class divide in housing where capitalist governments continually fail to provide adequate housing.

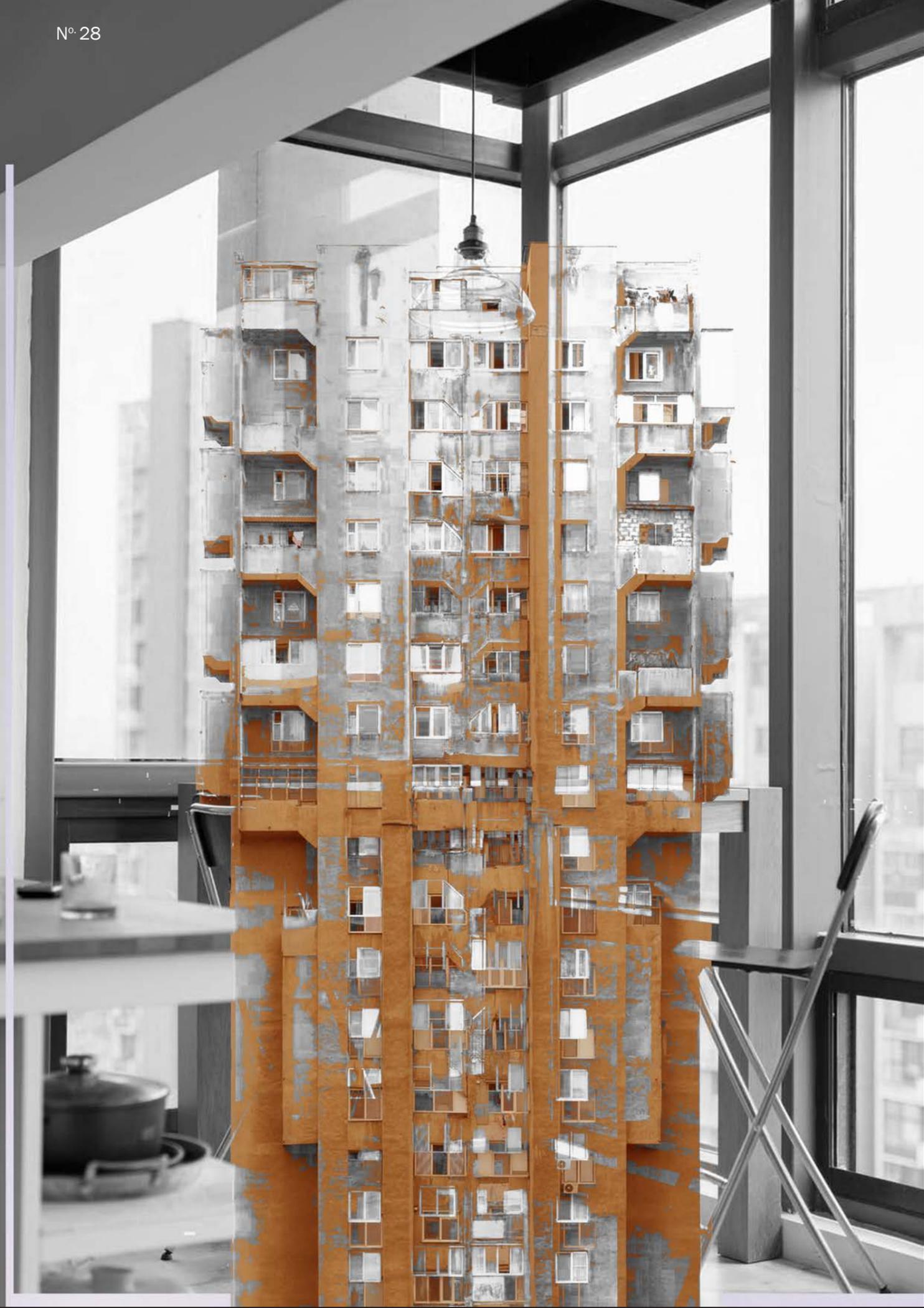
Figure 20-
Movie poster for
Parasite by Matt
Needle for
Needle Designs.

A manifesto by Daisy King



06

**WE
NEED
TO
TAKE
CONTROL**



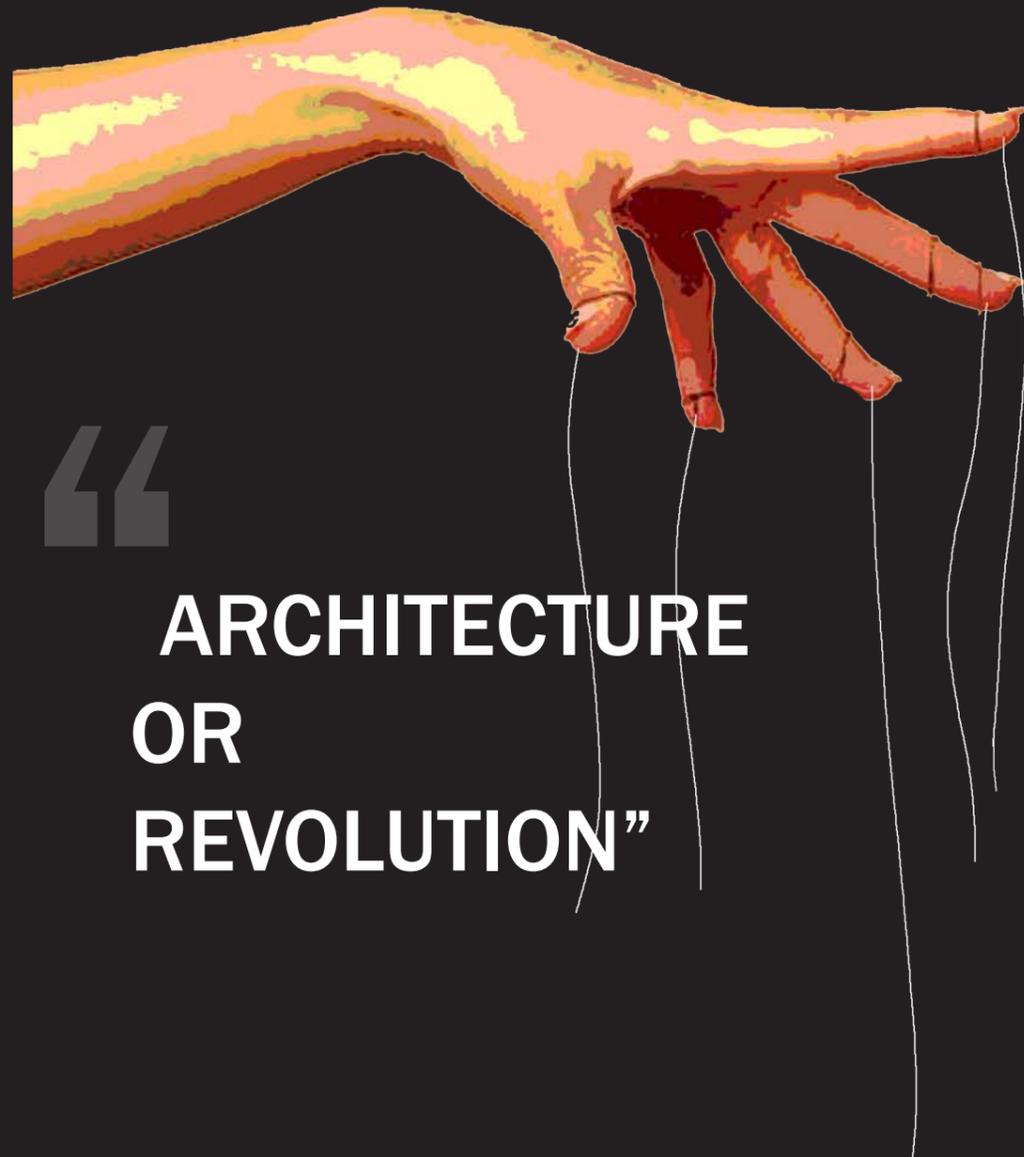
“

ALL PEOPLE DESERVE TO LIVE IN A WELL DESIGNED WORLD”

(Montreal Design Declaration, 2017)

As a designer, I believe I have the professional obligation to address inequality within my work. I have the responsibility to provide the same quality of spaces to everyone regardless of their background or social class. Inequality in architecture is evident in the design of residential buildings like social housing. The frequency of certain design features (such as materiality and light) often denotes the social class of the occupant. An obvious classist feature of design which falls into the categories of materiality and light could be the concept of large glass windows; it is essentially a lot more expensive to create spaces which are lighter with bigger glass features to let

natural light into the space. However, because nature is something to be experienced equally, it could be argued that this is a classist design feature as it is not allowing people of a lower class to experience nature in the same way as the upper classes. The Montréal Design Declaration of 2017 stated that it is the role of a designer to create a world that is “environmentally sustainable, economically viable, socially equitable, and culturally diverse” (Design, 2020) Therefore, it becomes the responsibility of the designer to create a space of egalitarian design where design solutions allow the space to be tangible for everyone regardless of who they are.



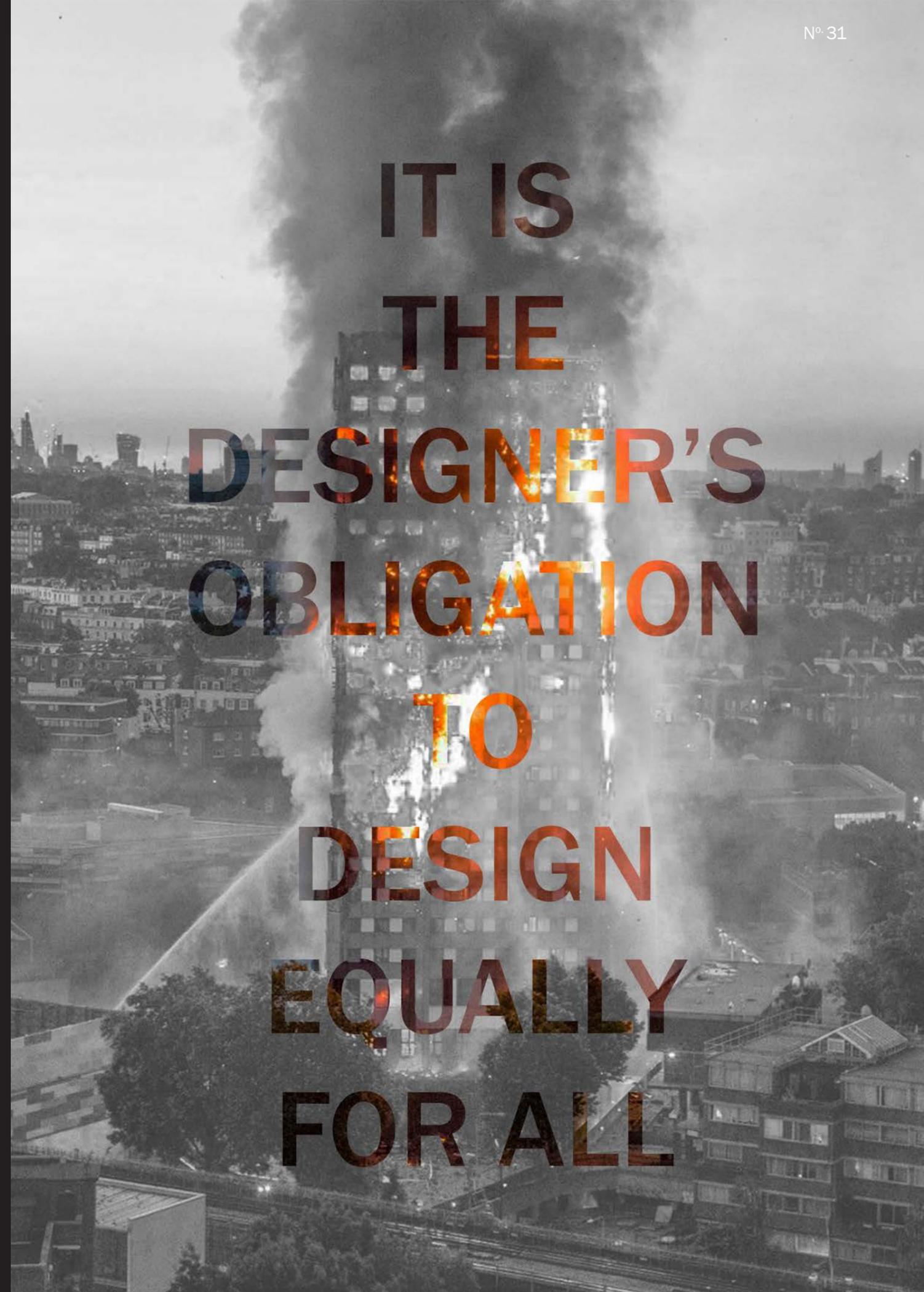
“

ARCHITECTURE OR REVOLUTION”

(Corbusier, 1922)

It could be argued that design will forever fail to be equal because budgeting for social housing is never enough to sufficiently cover materials and labour costs. Robert Peston argued that “Grenfell has exposed a systemic pattern of poor people being put at risk when the state houses them.” (Peston, 2017: 272), suggesting that design could never be equal until politicians understand and consider the lower class as equals to themselves. Therefore, I believe it is important as a designer to have the responsibility to design equally. This provokes a new line of enquiry that questions how materials are present in design depending on the social status of the people who will live there as many have the association of materials to different classes.

I believe that materiality should not define a social class; materiality should be defined by the rules of sustainability. Sustainability is a very current common ground between everyone of all social classes. Therefore, as a designer, sustainability must be considered in all future design to eventually blur the lines of inequality in architecture. Everything should be ruled by sustainability. This should be a way to look forward in future design- materials should not be designated via expense and for different social classes- materials should be chosen based on its ability to improve sustainability in all social classes. This new perspective could highlight that future life could become equal if the design intentions were based around sustainability and full inclusivity, therefore reducing the impacts of existing systematic inequality on the user of the design.



IT IS
THE
DESIGNER'S
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TO
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FOR ALL

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THE INEQUALITY OF ARCHITECTURE

This literature review explores how the production design in the film Parasite, by Lee Han-Jung, reveals the inadequacies of the social housing situation in Korea (where the film is based) and in the United Kingdom. Produced alongside a manifesto which uses the theories and ideas which are explored in the critique to highlight a new way of design-thinking. Sustainability and inclusivity is the centre of the manifesto and backed by the exploration of classism in the critique.

A Literature review and
Manifesto by Daisy King

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Interior Architecture and
Design Final Year 20/21

Module 6110

