Review: After The Man Before By Alan Mahar Essay, Research Paper

Messages behind the panellingAfter the Man Before by Alan Mahar 246pp, MethuenIt is Birmingham in the 1980s, and urban renewal has arrived like spring. Streets ring with the woodpecker tap of joyous hammers, the whistle of cowboys on the make, the collapsing rumble of interior walls. To make Victorian houses bloom again in all their original nouveau-riche bad taste (funereal mantelpieces, curly plaster, chandeliers), the dead growth (plywood panelling, fake coal fires, fluorescent strips) must be hacked back. Estate agent Hilary is looking for a quick investment, but her sister Elizabeth has nobler plans for their joint property – reviving its 19th-century soul, wiping out the efforts of The Man Before. Elizabeth, a social worker, is equally zealous about renewing the human spirit, and drafts in a mentally unstable artist to do her restoration work, assuming that anyone who spends their spare time digging around in skips for old bits of rubbish to make into art will happily adapt to the process in reverse. But what about The Man Before? What were his dreams and ambitions when he lovingly smothered outdated plasterwork in clean, fresh beauty-board? Is 1970s DIY allowed its own integrity, however grim it seems to new Victorians? Could it be that The Man Before had a soul of his own? Elizabeth’s artist keeps discovering plaintive messages from the past, touchingly tucked behind the panelling which The Man Before guessed posterity would despise. Restoring old houses makes for great dinner-party conversation among the over-thirties, but supplies a less gripping subject for this novel, despite an oddly dramatic twist of plot. More rewardingly, Alan Mahar dreams up intriguing personal histories to inhabit the solid bricks and mortar of his style – enlarging the theme of recycling and renewal, he addresses with genuine success the making and breaking up of homes. Mahar founded Birmingham’s Tindal Street Fiction Group, and is publishing director of the award- winning Tindal Street Press. His first novel, Flight Patterns, was well reviewed, and he is now writing his third. The successful elements of After the Man Before suggest it will be well worth reading.· Helen Falconer is the author of Primrose Hill (Faber)