

Is it time to bring back council housing?

This question comes to prominence for a number of contemporary reasons. The first and most obvious is the shortage of social homes i.e. those which carry subsidy from the taxpayer.

Second is the excellent work by Janice Morphet and friends at UCL researching the growing extent and range of methods by which councils are now procuring social housing (SEE page 46 of the last issue).

The change of government and its priority on building more houses is another but above all the catastrophic policy which has emerged over recent decades of getting private housing developers to use market homes to subsidise social homes, threatening their viability, raising costs and extensively delaying development.

As Paul Finch has said more than once, if the government forced bakers to give away one loaf at half price for every loaf of bread they sold at full price, we would have bread queues. This mirrors what has happened in the housing market especially in London.

A recent book by Jack Young "The Council House" is a paean to the building of council homes over the last century. Started in 1900 when the LCC built Arnold Circus in Shoreditch – still very impressive – it became an established phenomenon under the Addison Act of 1919. Examples

from the book and the author's introduction I reproduce alongside. These are heroic examples and the author illustrates 68 of them. Their declining reputation was down to poor management rather than their designs.

The architects are all named and many are now famous, a proportion of them having been staff of local architects departments rather than consultant architects. Post-war public architects often built empires which tended to exclude consultant architects. This in the end became their downfall. But like so many a swing of the pendulum it has gone too far because local authorities deprive themselves of the architectural skills and talent needed to be able to properly select and instruct consultant architects.

This needs to be rectified and the Borough Architect should be reinstated not only to be able to direct consultants in an expanded house building programme but also to advise the planning department on design matters, as used to be commonplace.

It is easy to blame the right-to-buy policy for some of the demise of council house building but this is not entirely fair. Building magazine used to carry dramatic headlines of how the maintenance of the postwar housing estates would bankrupt the country. Selling homes to their occupiers at a dis-

WATERS



Brian Waters is joint publishing editor of Planning in London and chairs the London Planning & Development Forum

count so passing on the maintenance liability away from the taxpayer was actually quite a smart move. Its failure was not using the proceeds to build more social homes as was the original stated aim – as usual we can blame HM Treasury for that.

So where does this take us now? Local authorities own extensive land banks, most of them previously developed or 'brown land' and where it is already housing, as many estate regeneration schemes demonstrate, there is good scope for densification.

The Morphet research provides guidance to the considerable range of options in this regard, but we should resist future Borough Architects wanting to keep all the work in-house.

As for funding, the billions spent on housing benefit should be redirected with urgency to a new local authority homes building programme topped up by a tax on the actual profits of private house-builders (rather than commuted payments on hypothetical and expensively contrived viability exercises) and the new CIL tax should do what it says on the tin, namely only be charged for infrastructure directly necessary for the carrying out of the development and no more. Section 106 agreements likewise and "affordable housing" taxation abolished. ■

The book demonstrate the involvement of distinguished architects, here including Denys Lasden [LEFT], Berthold Lubetkin [TOP RIGHT] and many who started their careers at the LCC [under Leslie Martin at Roehampton for example]. Odhams Walk in Long Acre was one of the last to come out of the Greater London Council. By Donald Ball it is based on designs for the courtyards in the aborted scheme for Hounslow Heath by Paul Rutter, Mike Fiertag and your author!

46 Keeling House

TOWER HAMLETS, E2



Peer through the security fence that surrounds Keeling House and you might struggle to believe that this unusually shaped tower has ever been anything but luxury apartments. A concierge now sits within its glass entrance lobby, accessed by a bridge across a reflective pool.

These additions make Keeling House feel rather removed from its East End roots, but the building has always had strong connections. Designed by Sir Denys Lasden, better known for his work on London's National Theatre, it was used for its commissioned purpose as council housing up until the 1990s. Lasden's innovative 'skate-black' layout of four 10-storey towers linked by a central lift shaft breaks up the mass of a typical tower block, allowing more light into the building while also providing greater privacy. Condemned to demolition in 1993, the awarding of its Grade II* listing saved it from the bulldozers but instead handed it over to the open market. Tower Hamlets Council being unable to afford its costly upkeep, Munkenbeck + Marshall oversaw its transformation, and Sir Lasden lived to see the block's concrete and Portland stone glow once more.

BUILT: 1957-59
ARCHITECT: Sir Denys Lasden



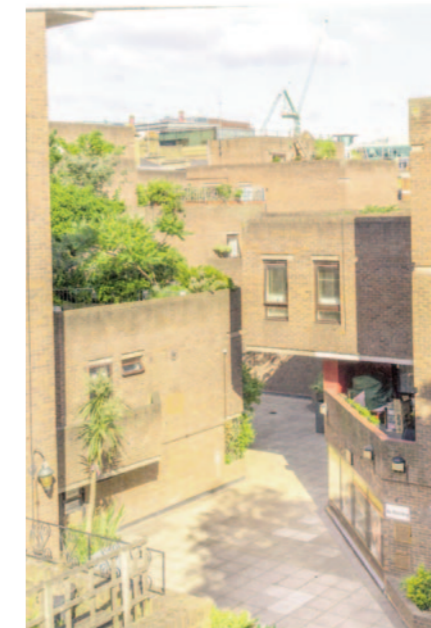
Odhams Walk

CITY OF WESTMINSTER, WC2H

In the late 1960s, a proposal from the Greater London Council to redevelop Covent Garden caused public outcry. The plans for new shopping facilities, hotels and an international conference centre threatened to tear a rift in the fabric of the local community, displacing businesses and residents, and prompted the formation of the Covent Garden Community Association. In 1973, continued pressure by the Association finally led to a successful revision of the proposal, ensuring that the development would prioritise housing provision for local families.

The dissolved former premises of Odhams Press was a central component of this provision: it was subsequently transformed by architect Donald Ball into Odhams Walk. A groundbreaking example of a mixed-use development, the estate encompasses 102 flats above high street shops that surround a central piazza. Abundant greenery gives the interspersed flats a nest-like quality as they sit perched above the goings-on of the neighbourhood; the community atmosphere that was so integral to this estate's development still prevails.

BUILT: 1979-81
ARCHITECT: Donald Ball, Greater London Council Department of Architecture & Civic Design



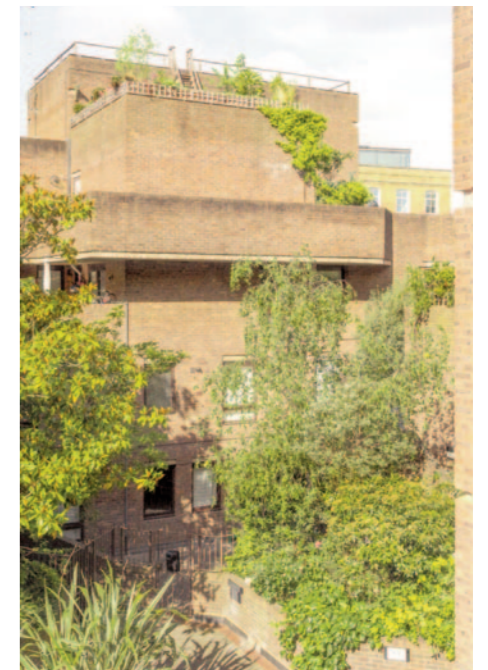
Bevin Court

ISINGTON, WC1E

A private driveway snakes through trees towards an imposing entrance with the name 'Bevin Court' proudly sculpted above the door: a description perhaps more easily associated with a sprawling country estate than an inner-city council one. But for all its perceived grandeur, this Grade II-listed building actually shows many signs of post-war austerity.

Berthold Lubetkin designed this estate in conjunction with Francis Skinner and Douglas Bailey following the dissolution of their former practice, the Tecton Group. However, budget cuts meant that plans had to be scaled back during construction. Despite (or perhaps because of) this, something brilliant was created. Lubetkin's original plan outlined a series of three blocks; when this became too expensive, he was forced to join them together into a three-pronged building. A central staircase was added to connect the three wings, and it is in this vibrant red masterpiece that Bevin Court truly shines. Reaching from the ground to the sixth floor, the freestanding staircase offers views all the way from the top to the bottom. Lubetkin believed that 'his staircase is a dance'; this one is a balletic masterpiece.

BUILT: 1951-54
ARCHITECTS: Skinner, Bailey & Lubetkin



Jack Young's introduction to the book

My fascination with council estates began with the multicoloured Modernist architecture of Golden Lane Estate (no.19), which I started exploring on my lunch breaks in 2018 while hiding from an ever-mounting workload by day, I'm a digital product designer. It wasn't long before my weekends were spent searching out and photographing more of these playful, surprising buildings that weave their way through the city. Sometimes I would have a destination in mind, but more often I would simply set out from my own home on Camberwell's Lettsom Estate, camera slung over my shoulder, hoping to discover something exciting; it was very rare that I didn't. In my search I got to know London more intimately than ever, navigating its streets by the now familiar tower blocks on the skyline.

Since starting this project I've become increasingly accustomed to the confused stares of onlookers as I take these photographs. Sadly, my enthusiasm for council housing isn't universally shared. Where once these were pioneering projects, undertaken by passionate architects dedicated to providing quality homes to those most in need, today many of London's remaining estates have sadly slipped into disrepair - the public's view of them largely following suit. That is really what has inspired this book. It is my hope that in showcasing and championing the beauty and intelligence in these buildings, I can help to restore some of the rightful pride that was once felt in them. Many of the residents I met while taking these pictures invited me into their lives and their homes. The tales of community they told me often restored my faith in what can feel like a rather isol Hoxton Mini Pressing city. As we bonded over our shared appreciation for their home (or they laughed at me as I obsessed over their ribbed-concrete staircase), their pride in these estates was joyfully clear.

The 68 buildings featured in this book aim to illustrate the endless individualism of London's estates that initially hooked me - the selection revolving around council housing's golden era after the Second World War. Flipping through these pages, hope you too will agree that council housing is beautiful, inventive and inspiring - and as integral to London's architectural make-up as Buckingham Palace or Big Ben. — Jack Young. Hoxton Mini Press £19.95