



A history of municipal housing

Owen Hatherley

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written by Owen Hatherley on behalf of Axis Design Architects

1. Modernist Housing Estates, Berlin, 1924-1933

Fig 1 - Horseshoe Estate, Berlin, Bruno Taut, 1928

Recently awarded the honour of becoming UNESCO world heritage sites, the *Siedlungen* - estates - built in the Weimar Republic are possibly the finest examples of social housing anywhere in the world. These were designed between 1924 and 1933 under the Social Democrat administration of Martin Wagner, a planner and architect influenced by the English garden movement, but with more radical ideas than the English garden movement. They were built either under the auspices of GEHAG, a trade union building society or directly by the city authority themselves.

The first examples were designed largely by Bruno Taut, an architect and utopian thinker. They're most notable for their combination of extreme modernity and lush planting. The first of them, the *Hufeisensiedlung* or Horseshoe Estate, is centred around a curved terrace of houses with entrances and exits mixed up, the middle framed by restaurants and local facilities. Taut's architecture is, with its flat roofs and brightly artificial colours, as modern as a Mondrian painting, yet the surrounding planting, by the gardener Lebrecht Migge, is richly overgrown, creating a sharp contrast between nature and the machine aesthetic.

Fig 2 - Wood Estate, Berlin, Bruno Taut, 1928



5. Greenwich Millennium Village, London, 1998-present

Fig 1 - Greenwich Millennium Village Phase 1, Ralph Eskine, 1999

The 'Millennium Village' on a brownfield site in south-east London, the only one of the various 'Millennium Communities' planned a decade ago to have been substantially completed, is often hailed as a model for new developments, correcting the alleged mistakes of the past. As we have tried to show, either social housing can't be reduced to the usual litany of suburban or high-rise bleakness, but Millennium Village's claim to a new approach - in mixing of classes, in the diversity of its design - needs to be taken seriously. Millennium Village has had three phases. The first, by Ralph Eskine and his colleagues, was a 'pilot' phase, designed to be a 'test case' against a 'nature reserve'; the second, more urban section is based around squares and play-spaces and has a greater diversity of form from tall flats to low houses, designed by Proctor Matthews. The third, nearing completion, is by John Robertson and Tovatt in a simplified version of the first phase.

Fig 2 - Proctor Matthews, Millennium Village Phase 2, 2000

Early on, one of the architectural firms involved, Hunt Thompson, resigned for two reasons, one social and one architectural. First, they quit because they felt that the 'social' part of the development was being set apart from the rest rather than mixed in, and second because of the use of brick on the facades, a gesture imposed by the builders who were evidently nervous about the modernity of the design. As it is, the most immediately memorable parts of the Village (a strange name for this very urban, industrial site) are the



Alexandra Road was the largest-scale of his works for Camden, a huge concrete terrace in the straggling central district of Swiss Cottage, contrasting favourably with some drably designed tower blocks nearby.

Fig 2 - Howley Way, Alexandra Road Estate, Neave Brown 1978

The pedestrian space at Alexandra Road is notable for its complete lack of cars, which are segregated off into the basement car parks. Now, when 'streets' are designed they are invariably clogged up site for pedestrians, as well as considerably more aesthetically pleasing for motorists, but here the area is entirely free of the noise of garages, cars and driveways. The design of the buildings' elevations, which are stepped in form, with the maisonettes and houses having balconies and staircases as lookouts onto the street - again without the need for an ugly, paranoid security apparatus. Neave Brown considered Alexandra Road to be a modern equivalent to the Georgian terrace. This might be an off-used architectural comparison, but here the suave urbanity, strength and consistency of the design makes it genuinely convincing, an example of an English Modernism that isn't obsessed with the past or the countryside, but a thriving part of a capital city.

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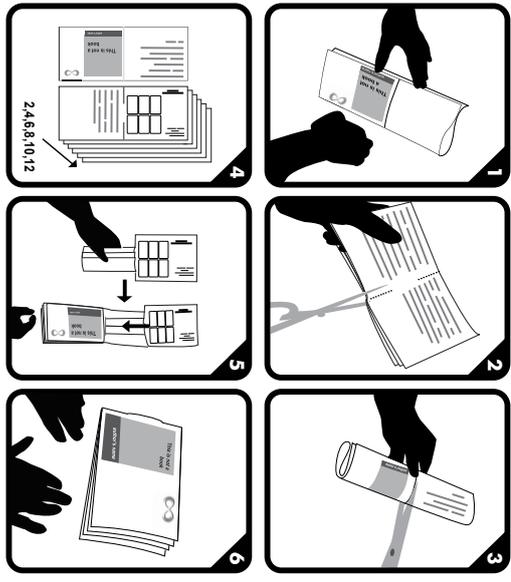


Fig 2 - Gleadless Valley showing Holy Cross Church by Broadbent & Martins-Smith, 1964

After 1945 many British architects and thinkers appropriated the idea of the Picturesque for 'Modernist' purposes. Schemes like Gleadless Valley in Sheffield were developed in the 1950s and 1960s are the most well-known of this attempt to create a specifically English integration of architecture and landscape, but Gleadless shows this aesthetic at its most stunning, set in a dramatic natural landscape and with an equally dramatic abundance of green space. Built into a steep valley, the buildings make similar use of the contours and contrasts of the landscape to Park Hill, only in low-rise, low-density form. The estate has a variety of different building types adapting to the site: terraces with monopitch roofs catching slopes and steep inclines of the hill, parts provided with no levels, with entrances from different parts of the hill, more straight-forward



Fig 1 - Gleadless Valley, Lewis Womersley, 1955

2. Gleadless Valley, Sheffield, 1955-1979

Sheffield City Council's housing was once world-famous, publishing a retrospective in the 60s in French and Russian. After a '30s in which the Labour Council had mainly built traditionalist, suburban estates, after the war it became along with London the most architecturally progressive city in the country, under the city architect Lewis Womersley. The most famous of their estates from this time is still Park Hill, a high-density inner city scheme, but at the time Gleadless Valley was equally famous, a large estate on the city's southern outskirts.



Fig 3 - Sternwerdt, Berlin, Hans Scharoun 1929

This went even further in Taut and Wagner's next project, the Waldsiedlung or Wood Estate, better known as 'Onkel Toms-Hutte' after the local U-Bahn station, designed by Otto Salvendy as part of the estate. Here, the area was heavily wooded, so the architects retained the tall, exotic trees that marked the area as part of the development. The estate was designed by Hans Scharoun, the son of a Prussian nobleman. Here, too, the architects' use of colour is extraordinary, using purples, yellows and greens, yet with a stylistic consistency and care that never makes it seem merely garish.

The last of the estates built under the Weimar Republic is Sternwerdt, the first estate designed directly by the City Council. The architects here included the Bauhaus director Walter Gropius and the pioneer of 'organic architecture' Hugo Haring, under an overall plan by the expressionist Hans Scharoun, who also designed the two central buildings of the estate. These, with their curved balconies and their curvaceous contours are a break with the straight lines and sobriety of classical modernism, presenting instead a mish-mash of different styles under an overall plan of mid-rise flats with balconies, terraces and a variety of building types. The estate is still very relevant. The Berlin Estates are examples of Modernism that isn't reliant on size or 'iconic' shape-making but on a careful, sensitive approach to urban design. They are still social housing today, and are set well apart from the fashionable centre, surviving as well-kept but rather quiet enclaves in the big city.



Fig 3 - Deck Access Flats in Gleadless Valley, Sheffield City Council 1978

New parts were added to the estate up until the 1970s, with the most idyllic of them being a series of timber-framed blocks of flats, again with deck access from the street, with planting on the balconies which makes them seem a combination of the aesthetics of south Yorkshire and southern California. Since then, sadly, the estate has been neglected, and the only major change has been the replacement of the original brick towers with modern concrete towers. Despite the extraordinary architecture and planning of the area this is one of Sheffield's poorest districts, and though this is for reasons - employment, education - which have little to do with the architecture, the poor maintenance of the estate may have contributed to this. Also, the success of Sheffield's Council housing until the '80s was based on the very wide cross-section of the population living in council flats and houses, meaning that they were not the enclaves of last resorts created by the property owning class. Gleadless Valley is still one of the most spatially exciting and visually idyllic places in post-war England.

3. Span Estates, Blackheath, 1957-1963

Unlike the other examples on this list, these never pretended to be social housing. The architect Eric Lyons helped set up the housing company Span to purchase modern design and to make some of the most beautiful flats in South East London, the site of a high concentration of their housing, which was aimed squarely at people from middle or high incomes.

Fig 1 - The Priory, Eric Lyons for Span 1957

The first thing to be noted about them is that they very closely resemble social housing from the time, with their tiered roofs, white boarded facades, and small, built-in, communal, public, spaces and often without private gardens, these are very modernist estates. Yet visiting them now, they appear to have been preserved in aspic, closely resembling what they may have looked like when they were constructed in the early sixties, with original signage, fences, window frames and other small details all helping to create an overall effect of affluence and care. Among their Blackheath estates the most interesting are Haligate, the Priory, and South Row.

Fig 2 - Houses in The Priory

The Priory, tucked away at the back of the development, is relatively loosely planned. Some of the houses are semi-detached, most of them in tightly packed terraces and flats, all of them around village-like squares, giving them a very English appearance also signified by the use of tiles and boarding. Walking north from here,



