



A history of municipal housing

Owen Hatherley



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

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

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 Hunt Thompson, was a 'new urban' development, which set out a grid 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.

5. Greenwich Millennium Village, London, 1998-present



A history of municipal housing

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, but with more radical ideas than Le Corbusier and Mies van der Rohe. 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

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 living part of a capital city.

2009-10-21

written by Owen Hatherley on behalf of Axis Design Architects
<http://axisdesignarchitects.com>
<http://nastybrutaliststandshort.blogspot.com>

made with www.bookleteer.com from proboscis

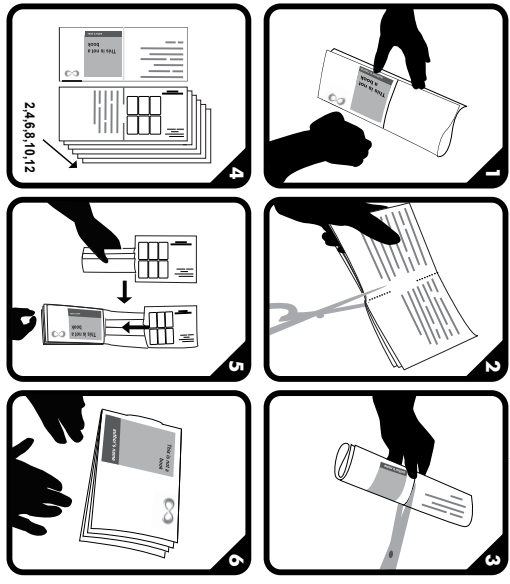


Fig 2 - Gleadless Valley showing Holy Cross Church by Broadbent & Martins-Smith, 1964

2. Gleadless Valley, Sheffield, 1955-1979
 Fig 1 - Gleadless Valley, Lewis Womersley, 1955



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 the architect Hans Scharoun, Prussia Berlin. 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.

Fig 3 - Sternwald, Berlin, Hans Scharoun 1929

The last of the estates built under the Weimar Republic is Sternwald, 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 heights. The estate is still very 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 population. Gleadless Valley is still one of the most spatially exciting and visually idyllic places in post-war England.

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

blocks of flats curving round the site with deck access from the hill, and two enclaves of towers to provide visual drama that might otherwise be lacking. Brick is used throughout, and the planning is more impressive than the detailing.

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 Britain. Span Estates were the 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 red roofs, white boarded fronts, 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,





Fig 3 - South Row, Eric Lyons for Span 1963

you get to Helligate, where the design becomes more formal - terraces enclosing shared courtyards, entered through communal passageways. Meanwhile, on the Heath itself, South Row is a similar strong, with a comparatively imposing design based around a concrete frame. What is notable in all of these Blackheath estates is the way in which they are designed to be enjoyed by the middle class housing, modernist design, large windows, communal, shared squares and greens, a lack of private, 'defensible' space - are what make them such enjoyable and desirable places to live. Aside from the comfortable lifestyles of their inhabitants, another reason for the Span estates' success must be their active tenants' associations, which are obligatory for all residents, and which lead to a sense of belonging which doesn't rely on aggressive fences or security to create valued places.

4. Alexandra Road, Camden, London 1973-1978

Brutalist architecture is often used as a pejorative term. It's a phrase frequently employed to dismiss huge swathes of 1960s architecture which ignore any kind of human context, which are 'brutal' in the sense that they are inhuman. The term Brutalism was a movement towards truth to materials which could - though didn't always - mean *brut*, unpainted concrete, hence the name) and buildings as monumental, instantly memorable statements rather than the informal, picturesque approach taken in places like Gleadless and Blackheath. Moreover, Brutalism was one of the first movements in architecture to try and create a pedestrian city, in contrast to either speculative developments clogged up with garages and parking space or stark modernist vistas of highways and concrete. Brutalism was a way of creating a city that was easy for walking in designed not in a rural or suburban manner but rather with an urbane dash.

Fig 1 - Rowley Way, Alexandra Road Estate, Neave Brown 1978

One of English Brutalism's lesser known works is the Alexandra Road Estate, built for Council in the 1970s. Created by a team of some of the most imaginative architects' departments in the country, employing architects such as Neave Brown and Benson & Forsyth to design low-rise but formal schemes in areas ranging from an impoverished Kings Cross to an affluent Highbury (their subsequent fate has often been dependent on their place in the urban pecking order). Neave Brown designed and lived in a private block of flats designed to the same specifications as his council housing, to prove the point that these were places anyone could happy to live in.



Berlin and Blackheath photos by the author. Gleadless photos by Steve Parwell. Millennium Village photos by Nina Power. Alexandra Road from Flickr and Millennium Village Phase 1 from Wikipedia.

Yet, rather than being an alternative to social housing or an example of learning from its past mistakes, it seems that it hasn't learned from the earlier successes in Berlin, London and Sheffield. Rather than serious council housing it is dominated by private housing - 65% sold on the open market, only 24% social rented, and the rest a mix of private and council housing. It is a far cry from the social housing of the 1960s and 1970s. Meanwhile, though the earlier parts of it are imaginative enough, the aesthetics of it seem almost patronising in their eagerness to please. Yet, the earlier examples here show that a distinctive, popular Modernism can exist, and can be a means of housing both council tenants and Blackheath intellectuals, without condescending to the poor or flatterring the affluent.

first phase, which convincingly mixes nature and architecture in a placidly Scandinavian fashion; and the second, where the greater diversity leads to dynamic contrasts between the low-rise and high-rise sections, although the former are never really allowed to make up a rhythm, meaning that the place often comes across as a mish-mash, lacking the courage of its convictions.

Fig 3, Tavatt and John Thompson, Millennium Village Phase 3, 2008

Architecturally by far the weakest part of the development is the newest blocks, which though finally giving the area the central square it has long needed, brings an obvious hierarchy to the place, with the elegant terraces, apartment blocks, and the opening over of the old houses, and the high-rise blocks of the second phase of colour and contrast. Meanwhile, the 'affordable' parts of the development are easily picked out, too, negating the idea that the phase is genuinely 'mixed' - the low-rise sections in the second phase have a markedly more working class feel than the rest of it. The Village also has very poor transport links to the rest of Greenwich, and its original 'sustainable' aims were rather mocked by the two huge retail parks built adjacent at the same time. Greenwich Millennium Village is about as good as recent housing has got, but it is still a long way from the social housing of the 1960s to its many wood-and-render clad imitators crammed into London. Leeds or Manchester's brownfield sites and waterways. It has a genuine abundance of real public space in the form of well-used nature reserves, parks and squares.

