



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 cities but with more modern ideas about aesthetics than his Anglo-Saxon precursors. 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 among the doorways, surrounding a landscaped green with a pond in the middle, flanked by restaurants and shops. The *Wohnstadt* or *Wohnstadttempelhof* is a more 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



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

5. Greenwich Millennium Village, London, 1998-present

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

The Millennium Village' on a brownfield site in south-east London, the only one of the various Millennium Communities planned a decade ago, is a model of modern urban development. It is a model of a model: new developments. Correcting the alleged mistakes of the past, as we have tried to show, earlier 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 Erskine and Hunt Thompson, is made up of tall, multi-height blocks up against a red brick reserve; the second, more urban section is based around a red brick street, with a mix of heights and styles; the third, nearing completion, is by John Robertson and Tootell in a simplified version of the first phase.

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 - Rowley 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 with the paraphernalia of motoring, but here the area is entirely safe for pedestrians as well as considerably more aesthetically pleasing than rows of garages, *cils de sac* and driveways. Yet the intimacy of the public space is matched by the confident futurism of the buildings' elevations, which are stepped in form, with the upper floors cantilevered out onto the street - again without the need for an ugly, parapet security apparatus. Neave Brown considered Alexandra Road to be a modern equivalent to the Georgian terrace. This might be an oft-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.



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

After 1945 many British architects and thinkers appropriated the idea of the Picturesque for Modernist purposes. Schemes like Frederick Gibberd's Lansbury neighbourhood and Harlow New Town are the most well-known of this attempt to create a specifically British aesthetic. The Gleadless Valley scheme, however, shows this aesthetic at its most stanning, 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 the steep incline of one hill, "pato houses" divided into two levels, with entrances from different parts of the hill, more straight-onward



Fig. 1 - Gleadless Valley, Lewis Womersley, 1955

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 city was known for its industrial landscape, the council decided after the war it became, along with London the most architecturally progressive city in the country, under the most 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.

2. Gleadless Valley, Sheffield, 1955-1979

Fig. 1 - Gleadless Valley, Lewis Womersley, 1955

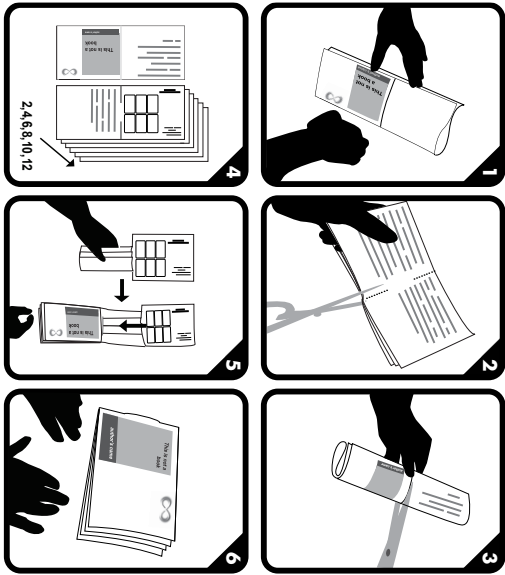


Fig. 3 - Siemensstadt, Berlin, Hans Scharoun 1929

This went even further in Traut and Wagner's next project, the Waldesiedlung or Wood Estate, better known as "Omkel-Toms-Hütte" after the local U-Bahn station, designed by Otto Salvisberg 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, giving it an almost tropical feel which contrasts with somber, Prussian Berlin. Here, too, the architects' use of colour is extraordinary, using pastels, yellows and greens, yet with a stylistic consistency and care that never makes it seem merely glib.

The last of the estates built under the Weimar Republic is Siemensstadt, built for the workers of the nearby electric factory directly by the City Council. The architects here included the Bauhaus architect Walter Gropius, who designed the estate's architecture. 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. Scharoun himself lived in one of the Siemensstadt flats for over 20 years. The Berlin estates are examples of modernism that isn't just an urban design, but a social approach to urban design. They are set well apart from the fashionable centre, surviving as well-kept but rather quiet enclaves in the big city.

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Fig 3 - Deck Access Flats in Greedless 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 tacky cladding and partial demolition of some of the estate's towers. Despite the extraordinary architecture and planning of the 1960s, the estate has been neglected and its original intentions 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 resort created by the 'property owning democracy' of the last 30 years. Yet in spite of its problems, Greedless Valley is still one of the most spatially exciting and visually idyllic places in post-war England.

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 popularise modern design and to make some money, and Blackheath in South-East London has the largest 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 flat roofs, weatherboarding and concrete frames, built around public spaces and often without private gardens, these are very modernist in style. The houses are very similar to those built in the 1930s in Spain, 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 Hallgate, 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 Hallgate, where the design becomes more formal - terraces enclosing shared courtyards, entered through communal passageways. Meanwhile, on the Heath itself, South Row is a similarly strong, with a comparatively imposing design based around a concrete frame. What is notable in all of these Blackheath estates is that elements which are so often considered dubious in working class housing - modernist design, large windows, communal, shared spaces and greens, a lack of private 'erasable' space - all work remarkably well. The reason for this is that the design is based on 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' - yet it originally had a more specific meaning. The New Brutalism was a movement towards truth to materials (which could - though didn't always mean - beton brut, unpainted concrete) and towards a more radical, pictorial approach to architecture. It was a movement 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 towers. Instead, Brutalism centred on walkways and plazas: a city for walking in designed not in a rural or suburban manner but rather with an urbane dash.

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

One of English Brutalism's lesser-known works is the Alexandra Road Estate, built for Camden Council in the 1970s. Camden had one of the most imaginative architects departments in the country, and the estate was designed by Neave Brown. Brown was a design low-rise but formal schemes in areas ranging from an impoverished Kings Cross to an affluent Highgate (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 Parnell. 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', meaning its effect on the capital's housing crisis as non-existent. Meanwhile, though the earlier parts of it are imaginative enough, the aesthetics of the newer almost patronising in their eagerness to please. Modernism can exist, and can be a means of housing both council tenants and Blackheath intellectuals, without condescending to the poor or flattering the affluent.



Fig 3 - Tower 2 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 large penthouses and 'uberhouses' dominating over the area. The detail is a cutesy, garish version of Erskine's language of colour and contrast. Meanwhile the 'affordable' parts of the development are a mess of low-rise sections, in the second phase are 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 in Britain, despite its compromises. It's undoubtedly superior to many modernist-tened council tenements crammed into London, but it's a far cry from the original idea of a high density, high quality, genuine abundance of real public space in the form of well-used nature reserves, parks and squares.