

# THE DEATH OF A CLIENT: THE END OF THE ENGLISH HOUSING ESTATE

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1.  
See Mark Swenarton,  
"Reforming the Welfare  
State: Camden, 1965–73",  
*Footprint: The European  
Welfare State Project Ideas,  
Politics, Cities and Buildings*  
5/2 (Autumn 2011), 41–48.

In 1978, in a desperate and misguided attempt to distance the Labour party from any possible backlash, Ken Livingstone, as chair of Camden's Housing Committee, launched a public enquiry into the Alexandra Road Estate. This was the coup de grâce that would end a golden era in design. The rise and fall of the British welfare state is often understood as synonymous with the ascent of Labour and its ultimate demise at the hands of Thatcher. However, this perspective disregards the groundwork and policy reform implemented by conservative politics at the turn of the century which, following the war, became Labour's platform for effecting true social reform. Specifically in the case of housing, it also denies the role of the new generation of Labour politicians who deliberately sabotaged their predecessors on their way to the top, obliterating the legacy of British social housing in their wake.<sup>1</sup>

Architects are usually the protagonists (whether heroic or villainous) in the tale of the utopian social experiment of English housing estates, the revolutionary Brutalist phenomenon that transformed London. Towers and slabs of raw concrete spread across the boroughs to re-build the destruction of the Blitz – architectural innovation and invention borne out of London's despair and misery.

While we marvel at the brilliant architects that concocted these concrete confections, we rarely acknowledge the clients behind these bold plans. Across London, partly out of ideological vision, partly out of desperation, borough-appointed architects and teams of talent were tasked with solving the city's dire housing shortage. One borough in particular would become the champion of the socialist dream.

Following the rent riots of 1960, the upstart Borough of Camden embarked on a housing programme dedicated to low-income citizens.

This young borough was the progressive vanguard of London Labour politics, for the latter saw Camden as an essential role model. Simultaneously intellectual and radical, extremely wealthy and devastatingly poor, Camden had the financial clout and political will to deliver, as stated in the council's 1964 manifesto, "effective housing policy . . . at rents you can afford".<sup>2</sup>

Driving the projects was Sydney Cook, who, as borough-architect, engaged a young, ideological band of recent graduates from the AA. Together they delivered over 47 housing estates in just eight years. The legacy of Cook's brief tenure are some of the most radical and exemplary housing projects in London. From the raw concrete and terraced courtyards of the Alexandra Road Estate, the Brunswick Centre and Highgate Newtown, to the oasis of privilege for Camden's poor in the Branch Hill Estate, to the bold simplicity and sheer size of Maiden Lane, Cook instigated one of most ambitious housing revolutions ever realized.

Cook's vision for the city is embedded in these projects. They are seminal works that embody his vision as a client by rejecting the vogue for standardized plans and mass production. Ahead of the backlash that would face many estates with their much-maligned towers and slabs, Cook fostered a "house style" focused on ideas of the context and the traditional street, and he garnered generous funds to ensure its high-quality execution.

The previous decade had popularized the post-war council estate tabula-rasa mantra of slab and tower blocks swimming in oceans of green. These projects, pioneered by followers of Le Corbusier, soon attracted heavy criticism with a strong movement against the reductive urbanism of the modernist model propagated by the CIAM and the Athens Charter. The new strategy was pushed by Team 10 (Smithsons in the UK) and fostered by the contemporary debate at the AA, which vehemently rejected the functionalist planning of the previous decades and the cult of the high-rise. It argued for high-density, low-rise street-connected family housing – a more considered and contextual approach prevalent in the work of architects such as Alvar Aalto. This shift was echoed in Scandinavia and the American schools of the east coast, particularly Cornell. Cook's new recruits were products of this discourse and were thus well versed in its ideologies, so they enthusiastically seized the opportunity to experiment.<sup>3</sup> As Neave Brown himself has said, "Where England and the architects of the AA were radical was in their identification with socialism and the idea of making a new

2. Enid Wistrich, *Local Government Reorganisation: The First Years of Camden* (London: London Borough of Camden, 1972), 202.

3. See Mark Swenarton, "Developing a New Format for Urban Housing: Neave Brown and the Design of Camden's Fleet Road Estate", *The Journal of Architecture* 17/6 (2012), 973–1007.

4.  
"Neave Brown in  
Conversation with Mark  
Swenarton and Thomas  
Weaver", *AA Files*, no. 67  
(2013), 75–91.

5.  
See Swenarton, "Developing  
a New Format for Urban  
Housing".

6.  
Neave Brown, "Siedlung  
Halen and the Eclectic  
Predicament", *Architectural  
Design* (February 1962), 62.

7.  
Stephen Games, "Cook's  
Camden", *RIBA Journal* 86/11  
(November 1979), 433.

society. And my god, I personally felt that England really did need a new society at that time."<sup>4</sup>

The inspiration for the new evocation of modernism came again from Le Corbusier: his later experiments with Mediterranean housing models diverged from his earlier manifestos and provided the basis for a new approach. Nestled within the architect's exhaustive *Oeuvre complète* were two unbuilt projects from the 1940s (published in 1953) that would prove catalysts for the provocative stepped section of Camden.

The schemes for the Cité permanente in La Sainte-Baume and the *Projet Roq et Rob* are some of Le Corbusier's first musings on the patio house and mat-buildings. These preliminary sketches would then be directly tested in built form in projects such as *Atelier 5's* *Seidlung Halen* in Bern with similar projects worked on in Weimar by such architects as Häring and Hilberseimer. These precedents became the centre of debate for the young architects of the AA, and they took this knowledge with them when they went to work for Sydney Cook in Camden.<sup>5</sup>

Central to Camden's transformation was the work of Neave Brown, who following graduation, after a brief period working at Lyons, Israel and Ellis and then trying to launch his own practice, joined Cook's team while sporadically teaching at the AA, Cornell and Princeton. Although often scathing about architects and their wilful ways, "seen to be more frequently an indulgence in individual virtuosity, rather than an attempt to correlate the problem at hand with the problem at large",<sup>6</sup> Brown absorbed many lessons from the new discourse emerging at the AA. This was translated into three formative works, all based in Camden and ultimately his only projects in the UK: Winscombe Avenue, the Fleet Road Estate and the Alexandra Road Estate. Exemplified in these projects are Cook's canons of high-density low-rises connected to the street, and they reflect Brown's personal manifesto as articulated in his 1967 essay "Form of Housing": "[B]uild low, to fill the site, to geometrically define open space, to integrate . . . to return to housing the traditional quality of continuous background stuff, anonymous, cellular, repetitive, that has always been its virtue".<sup>7</sup>

The bashful ambiguity of Fleet Road is often overlooked in favour of the brash confidence of the Alexandra Road Estate. However, in the more humble and hidden qualities of Fleet Road are all the ingredients and first synthesis of ideas that would clearly establish the new set of principles that became the Camden style. Fleet Road is the first time Brown was able to fully put into action the concepts that he had first explored on Winscombe Avenue, a project developed for himself and



Alexandra Road

four friends that was assisted by and financed through the Camden authority. Captured in these five terrace houses with communal gardens and an inverted living arrangement, with bedrooms below and living above, is the nascent exploration of a new housing prototype.

Fleet Road today, a bit shabby and the worse for wear, is hemmed off and handicapped by a tall metal fence that isolates it from the surrounding context. The large ramps and stairs at the end feel like a strange alien addition from another project, incongruous in their scale and language. As part of a larger strategy for a fully interconnected upper walkway spanning across several sites, these elements were neglected and forgotten by adjacent sites, leaving Fleet Road with this curiously over-scaled infrastructural appendage and denying it proper integration into the city.

As it stands, a discreet oasis in London's clamour, this complex tableau seems almost straightforward – a finite, closed composition. It's hard to discern the revolution contained within its selected sequence of spaces, or the profound transformation that is embodied within its form. The sensitivity of its materials, the pretty softness of its gardens and the quiet of its interior all belie its truly radical core. Fleet Road achieves what no social housing had before: high-density low-rise housing with front-door access – the sensation of a street and a true sense of ownership of shared spaces and community living.

Fleet Road captures a kind of ambiguity in Brown's architecture whilst cementing the template for Cook's future vision of Camden.

## Fleet Road



The stepped section, the patios and courtyard types, the high-density low-rise the L-shaped strip windows – all of these bear the signature of the Camden style, neatly packaged in this modest work. However, the project had yet to solidify into a more permanent, explicit architectural language, for it still teeters between the gentle contextuality of Scandinavian influences and the more rambunctious and intrusive stylings of Le Corbusier's *béton brut*.

Alexandra Road has none of this hesitation, explicitly stretching out in a low linear curve, inscribing itself heavily onto the ground, a large leviathan stranded in the city. The softness of Fleet Road – white with wood and gardens nestled against one another, a true descendent of the *Seidlung Halen* – has been excised from Alexandra Road. The rawness of brutalism has fully crystallized in the unyielding concrete that eludes the equivocality and timidity of Fleet Road.

The apparent contradiction of garden oasis and domestic bliss contained within a megastructure is latent in Fleet Road, but it is explicit in Alexandra Road. This 350-metre set piece sits in comfortable contradiction with the suburban street it forms: kids playing, neighbours chatting and every terrace and entrance now personalized with satellite dishes, lattice screens and garden sheds. All of this familiarity is juxtaposed with dramatic concrete walkways and industrial pipes, a curious combination that creates a world unto itself. Both projects share an incredible dexterity in terms of scale and proportion, understanding precisely the distances and sizes required to simultaneously

offer privacy, intimacy and interaction. Like a Georgian terrace, they operate as single monoliths that are at once legible as individual dwellings, presenting unequivocal street façades that synchronize with the traditional London street pattern.

Measuring 6.47 hectares, the site occupied by the Alexandra Road Estate was the largest left in Camden at the time, and the project marked an escalation in scale from a small development of 70 dwellings to a piece of city hosting 520 dwellings and 1,600 people: a large infrastructure of housing and Cook's showpiece. The estate's long, gentle arc carves a pedestrian street through North London, simultaneously mimicking and separating itself from the row houses that surround it, buffered by a communal garden to the south. Almost monotonous, it is somehow beguiling in its relentless repetition and its authority over the site. The apartments continue the logic of Brown's two previous schemes, with bedrooms sheltered by the terraces above, living spaces elevated above ground and outdoor spaces open to the sky.

It was a totally unprecedented scheme that proved baffling and incomprehensible to the planning department, for it obnoxiously ignored all the zoning and designations for the site yet met and exceeded all their quotas. Ultimately the numbers convinced them. While the original density for the site was 136 persons per acre (ppa) and the planners requested 150 ppa, Brown's scheme managed to yield a seductive 216 ppa. Politicians and planners were stunned and delighted as well as incredulous that a low-rise scheme with a maximum of seven stories could achieve such high densities while offering a huge variety of typologies and accommodation. Beyond this, it also conformed to minimum space and cost standards and managed to include social facilities, parking and a park. On the day of the project's presentation before the council's Housing Committee, the committee members rose to their feet to applaud.<sup>8</sup>

The project was plagued by a series of mishaps and delays that saw costs spiral out of control, and a mounting sense of dread and disaster surrounded the project in a miasma of misfortune and rumour. The unstable politics of the council undermined the progress of the project and soon there were rumblings of failure and excess. Halfway through construction the scheme was declared a disaster, an utter failure that no one would want to live in; the negative press the project received resulted in the crippling and exile of the council's architecture department. At the time, inflation was soaring, and a litany of delays, contract disputes and labour disruptions meant that the project came

8. Andrew Freear, "Alexandra Road: The Last Great Social Housing Project", *AA Files*, no. 30 (Autumn 1995), 35–46.

9.  
Ibid.

10.  
"Neave Brown in  
Conversation", 86.

11.  
The Housing Act of 1980  
legislated the Right to  
Buy, which allowed secure  
tenants of councils and  
select housing associations  
to buy their own flat at a  
highly discounted price.  
This resulted in vast  
quantities of social housing  
being re-circulated on the  
private market. The policy  
was a major part of the  
Conservative Party's policy.  
Interestingly, this was again  
originally a Labour Party  
policy that they launched  
as part of their manifesto  
for their unsuccessful 1959  
election campaign.

to be excessively over budget – from the initial estimate of 7.15 million pounds it had escalated to 20.9 million.<sup>9</sup>

Despite the maelstrom of controversy surrounding the project, people couldn't wait to move in. Outside of the UK, the project was garnering compliments and praise; in architectural circles it was heralded as a bastion of innovation and a vision for the future. Moving on from its beleaguered history, in 1994 English Heritage gave Alexandra Road Grade II\* heritage status – one of only a handful of buildings to be bestowed this privilege before being over thirty years old. Even in the face of its dilapidation, squalor and disrepair, this status secured the future of the building and ensured that the repairs and renovations taking place were in keeping with the original intent of the design.

In the late 1970s the project became a scapegoat for earlier excesses in housing policy, an example of the welfare state run wild under the aegis of a rebellious and renegade council whose architecture department had been managed by young, naïve and inexperienced architects. Surrounded by adversity and Cook's unfortunately early retirement (due to ill health), Camden's audacity withered, and the architecture department lost its defiant edge. As more and more of the department's projects were built, the cost overruns and excessive expense of the innovative and high-quality design became apparent, making social housing an easy political target. As Brown himself put it:

[O]f course the real reason Livingstone and the rest hated it was that they thought they would never be able to justify it politically. Remember[,] historically this was a resolutely right-wing area at the top end of St John's Wood. So while the site was bordered by all these barristers and lawyers in their detached eighteenth- and nineteenth-century houses, Alexandra Road represented a working-class enclave and Livingstone was desperate to maintain their Labour vote . . . The whole thing was pretty bloody awful. Years and years of work culminated in this miserably unhappy period of conflict. Furthermore[,] it ended my career.<sup>10</sup>

While Livingstone is now nostalgically portrayed as the only successful truly left-wing politician in British history, Red Ken was a disaster for Camden's architectural revolution. His interference in Alexandra Road would sully Cook's legacy and end Brown's career in the UK. Two years later, with the ascent of Thatcher, the last vestiges of the astonishing Camden project would be shut down forever as Thatcher launched the right-to-buy scheme<sup>11</sup> and, more significantly, ended the role of the council architect, thereby terminating one of the

most compelling and powerful client-architect relationships. While Thatcher may have finally closed the door, Ken Livingstone and his generation of Labour libertarians had been the ones to give her the opportunity and the ammunition.

Thatcher would go on to notoriously change global finance, and Ken Livingstone would become London's mayor once more as well as the man who famously changed its skyline forever. His partnership with Richard Rogers on their tall-building strategy – synonymous with the now-infamous catch phrase “The only way is up” – is yet another example of the transformative power of the motivated client.

London is now a capitalist's dream, its socialist project dismantled long ago. Boroughs have abdicated all responsibility, divesting their duties (and power) to private developers and social-landlords. Today, London's housing is delivered through clever accounting, affordable housing quotas and Section 106 demands – the client is now the iniquitous developer. Haggling over contributions and profit margins is largely what's to blame for London's distinctly unaffordable housing and the conservative blandness of its architecture. The new generation of clients – private and gluttonous, and financed by hedge funds and pension plans – are voraciously consuming the former generosity of the council-client. London's anaemic contemporary architecture is not due to the death of architectural talent (a mysterious and spontaneous evaporation of skill and ideas, although this is also possibly true); rather, it was precipitated by the death of the decent client.