

Reforming the Welfare State: Camden 1965-73

Mark Swenarton

'The period from 1965 to 1973,' wrote David Harvey, 'was one in which the inability of Fordism and Keynesianism to contain the inherent contradictions of capitalism became more and more apparent.'¹ As the state struggled to deliver to the population the fruits of the Keynesian settlement in the form of collective goods and benefits - housing, schools, education, etc. - inflation spiralled and the world was shaken in 1971 by the collapse of the Bretton Woods international financial system. At the same time, social critiques pointed to the deficiencies in the Keynesian model and called for a radical re-appraisal. In Eric Hobsbawm's terms, the West was undergoing a structural change from the 'golden age' of postwar welfare capitalism, marked by plenty and consensus, to the 'crisis decades' of the 1970s, marked by polarization and conflict.²

The period 1965-73 was also that of the incumbency of SAG Cook as chief architect of the inner-London borough of Camden. Cook was in charge of one of the largest social housing programmes in the country, and as such was in the maelstrom of these developments and conflicts. In terms of housing provision, Camden's housing programme aimed to demolish the worst of the existing stock with as many new homes as it could produce; and as such, it conformed to the Keynesian model of maximizing the provision of collective goods for the population. But in terms of design, Cook's team rejected the characteristic form associated with postwar welfare housing - the high-rise slab or tower - in favour of an attempt to re-connect

with recognizable features of traditional urbanism, above all streets with front doors. While the architectural trajectory was therefore away from the *tabula rasa* and back towards the street, and in this sense formed part of the critique of the Fordist/Keynesian settlement, the programme itself could not escape the growing sense of crisis surrounding the welfare state project as a whole; and by the time the most important Cook projects were completed, towards the end of the 1970s, they were caught up in the attacks on the welfare state consensus coming from both sides, the New Right (Margaret Thatcher) and the Hard Left (Ken Livingstone).

In essence, the Cook projects sought a new model for urban family housing. In contrast to the Corbusian model of towers or slab blocks standing in acres of empty space, which characterized much municipal housing at the time, the Camden schemes typically consisted of low-rise linear blocks of family dwellings, each with its own open-to-the-sky external space. These schemes - including Fleet Road, Alexandra Road, Highgate New Town, Branch Hill, Maiden Lane - were designed by the talented architects appointed by Cook, most notably Neave Brown, Peter Tábori, Gordon Benson and Alan Forsyth, who joined the council's staff, as well as by private architects including Colquhoun & Miller, Edward Cullinan and Farrell Grimshaw.

Camden was the most prominent of the 32 new boroughs created by the reorganization of London's government in 1965. Formed from the amalgama-

tion of three metropolitan boroughs - Hampstead, St Pancras and Holborn - it was also one of the richest boroughs, with a rateable value nearly 30% higher than even wealthy boroughs such as Kensington and Chelsea.³ Whatever Camden wanted to do, it seemed that there were the resources to do it. And what Camden wanted to do was build housing. At the heart of the programme of the new Labour-controlled council was housing: as former Labour councillor Enid Wistrich put it, 'the main aim was more housing - beginning and end'.⁴

The person appointed to take charge of this ambitious programme was the former Holborn borough architect, Sydney Cook. Cook was not an outstanding designer but he was an excellent judge of quality, of both design and designers. He was determined that Camden was going to be a different kind of local authority office, with the emphasis on youth and the production of ideas.⁵

In this he had a number of advantages. Camden was home to two of the leading architecture schools in London - the Architectural Association and the Bartlett (University College London) - and only a stone's throw from a third, Regent Street Polytechnic (now University of Westminster). It was also the location of many architectural practices and a favoured place of residence for architects. A lot of London's most talented architects thus already lived or worked in the borough.

While the 1960s are often regarded as the era of high rise, in fact by 1965 there was already a strong movement against high flats. From 1964 onwards, the *Architectural Review* was promoting a move away from high flats towards high-density low rise, and the 1965 housing white paper produced by the new Labour government envisaged removing altogether the additional subsidy for high flats.⁶

Criticism of the Corbusian model of high blocks or towers set in open sites was already widespread

in avant-garde architectural circles well before then. The critique of functionalist planning formulated by Team Ten had attracted the attention of historians,⁷ but the Smithsons were by no means the only people in Britain dissatisfied with the urban model inherited from the modernist masters. At the Architectural Association School in London a group of students in the early 1950s, including Neave Brown, Kenneth Frampton, Adrian Gale, David Gray, Patrick Hodgkinson and John Miller, were forming their own versions of this critique, in which Aalto was seen as a corrective to the reductive urbanism associated with Le Corbusier.⁸ The goal was to re-establish continuity between the new and old, the project and the city.

When Camden was formed in 1965, Brown had under construction a group of five family houses designed for himself and friends, including engineer Anthony Hunt and architects Michael and Patty Hopkins and Edward Jones. The Winscombe Street houses provided a radical reinterpretation of the traditional London terraced house, placing the children's rooms on the ground floor, the kitchen/breakfast room plus roof terrace on the first floor, and parent's bedroom and reception on the top floor. As well as the private roof terrace, there was a communal garden at the rear. In embryo, Winscombe Street offered the basis of a new model for urban housing inspired by London's housing traditions: high-density, low-rise, street-based family accommodation.⁹

Brown joined Cook's team early in 1966 and soon after was given the project at Fleet Road to design. Three parallel blocks with a stepped section provided a mix of maisonettes (two and three bedrooms) and one-bedroom flats (70 units in all), with a private garden or courtyard to every unit (in many cases on the roof of the unit below), and every unit accessed directly from the outside via pedestrian alleyways. As Brown put it at the time (1966): 'The houses are in terraces as near traditional as possible. Every



Fig. 1



Fig. 2

Fig. 1: Gordon Benson and Alan Forsyth, Branch Hill, 1971-78, stepped-section semi-detached houses accessed from pedestrian route (photograph: Martin Charles).

Fig. 2: Peter Tábori and Kenneth Adie, Highgate New Town, phase one, 1968-80, view from pedestrian street with staircase access to flats (photograph: Martin Charles).

dwelling is identifiable with its front door on an open route, continuous with the main pedestrian system. Every dwelling has a paved garden, not overhung by a balcony above, and fenced for privacy.¹⁰

Following Fleet Road, Brown moved onto a much larger and more complex project, Alexandra Road. With 520 dwellings at a density exceeding 200 ppa, as well as a community centre, childrens' home, home for the physically handicapped (designed by Evans & Shalev), workshops, shops and park, this was more a piece of city than a mere housing estate. Brown took his inspiration from the continuous urbanism represented by the great set pieces of the Georgian era - Bath, Bristol, Leamington Spa. At Alexandra Road, a 350 metre-long curving pedestrian street running roughly west-east gives access to four- and six-storey terrace blocks on either side, with a linear communal garden and another parallel block to the south. Family units are organized on the same principles as Fleet Road (bedrooms on the lower floor, living rooms above), with open-to-the-sky private external space to the family units.¹¹

Brown was not the only talented designer at work on the Camden programme. The young Hungarian architect, Peter Tábori, a former student of Richard Rogers at Regent Street Polytechnic, designed Highgate New Town, which comprised a series of parallel terraces at right angles to the street, accessed by pedestrian streets, with the stepped section giving each flat an open-to-the-sky balcony.¹² Two of Eldred Evans' students at the AA, Gordon Benson and Alan Forsyth, joined Camden to work with Brown on Alexandra Road and then went on to design schemes of their own, notably Branch Hill in Hampstead, comprising a series of courtyard houses stepping down the hillside, reminiscent of Le Corbusier's Roq et Rob scheme of the late 1940s as well as Atelier 5's Siedlung Halen in Berne.¹³ This typology was then further developed in their much larger Maiden Lane estate, where family houses were combined with slab blocks for single

people and couples in a tour de force of tectonic design.¹⁴

Following Cook's retirement due to ill health in 1973, Camden's architects lost much of their impetus. Both public opinion and government were turning away from redevelopment to rehabilitation¹⁵ and from modernism towards a more traditional palette of materials. As the worst examples of the Victorian inheritance were eliminated, proposals to demolish yet more came under increasing criticism. Moreover, as the Cook projects came through to completion towards the end of the 1970s, it turned out that many were costing far more than originally estimated, providing an easy target not just for the right-wing press but also for the new generation of hard-left politicians, who saw in them an opportunity to denigrate the Labour 'old guard'. The leader of this new tendency in London was Ken Livingstone, who in 1978 added to his role at the Greater London Council by becoming Camden's chair of housing, a move that was soon followed by the appointment by Camden of an independent enquiry into the cost and timetable overruns of the as-yet unfinished Alexandra Road.¹⁶

Although major schemes were started after Cook's departure, notably Benson and Forsyth's Maiden Lane phase one, much of the energy drained away and many of the most talented designers moved on. With Margaret Thatcher's accession to power in 1979, the construction of social housing by local authorities was brought to a halt and the heroic projects of Cook's Camden were left looking like monuments to a vanished era.

How are we to view the Cook projects today? At the level of contemporary architectural discourse, they continue to fascinate current practitioners and students, with Alexandra Road and Branch Hill in particular being regular destinations on modern architecture tours of London. Given the constraints within which they were operating, the achievement



Fig. 3



Fig. 4

Fig. 3: Neave Brown, Winscombe Street, 1963-66, garden front showing sequence of external spaces (roof terrace-individual garden-communal garden) (photograph: Martin Charles).

Fig. 4: Neave Brown, Fleet Road, 1966-75, pedestrian alleyway giving access to flats, with bridge link to upper-level maisonettes above (photograph: Martin Charles).

of Cook and his team was extraordinary: within the bureaucratic requirements and procedures of social housing provision, and under the ever-watchful eye of the Housing Cost Yardstick, to have come up with the invention and attention to detail of schemes like Fleet Road or Highgate New Town is an exceptional achievement. But, whatever the ambitions of the architects may have been, they were not free agents; they formed part of the machinery of the local state and part of a politically devised welfare system and could not escape the contradictions that this imposed. However laudable the social objectives of the Camden architects, to many people in London, Camden appeared to be simply a huge development machine devouring huge swathes of the capital like any property developer. As such, the Camden projects were seen as part of the machinery of the oppressor as much as the helpmate of the oppressed.

Yet to see the Camden projects simply in this light would be to miss their value. Cook, Brown and the others were addressing the key issue on which they believed social housing had failed: how to design housing in the inner city that families would want to live in. Hence the avoidance of high rise; the emphasis on legibility (front doors) and connections with the city (the street); and the drive to give every home its own outdoor space - a veritable garden in the city. Much of this was experimental, and inevitably not all of it was successful; but at its best it showed how, at least in part, this goal could be achieved. It is moreover a goal that still awaits solution. As we await the next upturn in housing production, the ideas of the Camden architects form a necessary benchmark in the search to improve our urban housing.

Acknowledgements

Mark Swenarton's paper at EAHN 2010 represented a preliminary overview from his ongoing research on Camden housing, which has also led to the exhibition, 'Cook's Camden', with photography by Martin Charles, shown at the Building Centre in London (2010), the Architecture Centre in Bristol (2012) and elsewhere. A related exhibition focusing on Neave Brown and Alexandra Road was shown at Holborn library and in the tenants hall at Alexandra Road (www.alexandraandainsworth.org/history.html). Parts of the paper that Mark Swenarton gave at the 2010 EAHN conference were subsequently developed into a much longer article, 'Geared to producing ideas, with the emphasis on youth: the creation of the Camden borough architect's department under Sydney Cook', published in the *Journal of Architecture*, 16, 3 (June 2011) pp. 387-414. An article on Neave Brown and the design of the Fleet Road project, also in the *Journal of Architecture*, is forthcoming in 2012-13. (www.tandfonline.com/rjar)

Notes

1. David Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1989), pp. 142-3. Thanks to the RIBA Research Trust Awards and Oxford Brookes University for financial support for this project at an early stage, and to Kaye Bagshaw and Angela Hatherell for invaluable research assistance.
2. Eric Hobsbawm, *Age of Extremes. The Short Twentieth Century 1914-1989* (London: Abacus, 1994; 2000), p. 286.
3. Ministry of Housing and Local Government and Welsh Office, *Rates and Rateable Values in England and Wales 1965-66* (London: HMSO, 2 vols, 1965), vol. 1, p. 9, and vol. 2, p. 9.
4. Enid Wistrich, telephone interview, 8 January 2009; Enid Wistrich, *Local Government Reorganisation: The First Years of Camden* (London: London Borough of Camden, 1972), p. 202.
5. Mark Swenarton, 'Geared to producing ideas, with the emphasis on youth: the creation of the Camden borough architect's department under Sydney Cook', in *Journal of Architecture*, 16, 3 (June 2010), pp. 387-414.



Fig. 5



Fig. 6

Fig. 5: Neave Brown, Alexandra Road, 1967-79, stacked maisonettes with stair access from main pedestrian street (photograph: Martin Charles).

Fig. 6: Gordon Benson and Alan Forsyth, Maiden Lane phase one, 1972-80, family houses and slab blocks seen from the west (photograph: Martin Charles).

- Also Stephen Games, 'Cook's Camden', *RIBA Journal*, 86, 11 (November 1979), pp. 483-90, and Christoph Grafe, 'Les Terraces de Camden', *Oase*, 61 (Spring 2003), pp. 73-95.
6. 'Preview', *The Architectural Review*, 137, 815 (January 1965), p. 38; Patrick Dunleavy, in *The Politics of Mass Housing in Britain 1945-1975* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1981), p. 162.
 7. John R. Gold, *The Practice of Modernism* (London: Routledge, 2007), pp. 232-45; *Team 10 1953-81. In Search of a Utopia of the Present*, ed. by Max Risselada and Dirk van den Heuvel (Rotterdam: NAI, 2005).
 8. Neave Brown, interview, 6 August 2008.
 9. Christopher Woodward, 'Life in N19: Five houses in Winscombe Street, London, by Neave Brown', *Architectural Design*, 33 (July 1968), pp. 330-4. Also Miranda H. Newton, *Architects' London Houses* (London: Butterworth, 1992), pp. 58-65.
 10. Edward Jones, 'Neave Brown's Fleet Road: The Evolution of a Social Concept of Housing', *Architectural Design* 48 (1978) p. 523. See also Neave Brown, 'The form of housing', *Architectural Design*, 37 (September 1967), pp. 432-3.
 11. Robert Maxwell, 'Alexandra Road', *Architectural Review*, 166, 990 (August 1979), pp. 78-92; Andrew Freear, 'Alexandra Road: the last great social housing project', in *AA Files*, 30 (1995), pp. 35-46.
 12. Su Rogers, 'Preview: Highgate New Town', *Architectural Review*, 154, 919 (September 1973), pp. 158-162.
 13. 'Housing at Branch Hill, Hampstead, London', *Architects' Journal*, 169, 25 (20 June 1979), pp. 1261-76.
 14. 'Housing, Maiden Lane, Camden, London', *Architectural Review*, 173, 1074 (April 1983), pp. 22-29.
 15. London Borough of Camden, Housing Committee, 29 June 1976, p. 340.
 16. London Borough of Camden, Housing and Development Sub-Committee, 12 June 1978; Andrew Hosken, *Ken: The Ups and Downs of Ken Livingstone* (London: Arcadia, 2008), pp. 58-61.

Biography

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