

CULTURE

Quality and quantity

Camden's 1960s social housing schemes are a timely lesson in successful experimentation, says **David Kohn**

EXHIBITION

COOK'S CAMDEN: LONDON'S GREAT EXPERIMENT IN URBAN HOUSING

*New London Architecture, 26 Store Street, London WC1
newlondonarchitecture.org*
Until November 27

★★★★☆

In our post-comprehensive spending review moment, it can be instructive to look to the past, for misery loves company. In the London Borough of St Pancras in 1959 an incoming Conservative council chose to reduce its deficit through increasing social housing rents on pain of forced eviction. One consequence was the rent riots of 1960 but a more positive outcome was Camden Council's social housing programme, the subject of this timely exhibition, based on research by Mark Swenarton of Oxford Brookes University.

Cook's Camden is a long overdue survey of the assured achievements of Sydney Cook (1910-79) the borough architect from 1965-73, and his merry band of AA graduates. In only eight years they managed to realise 47 social housing projects of a quality, scale and ambition that has arguably not been surpassed, despite subsequent spending booms. These include Alexandra Road, the Brunswick Centre, Highgate New Town and Branch Hill designed by a roll call of talent including Neave Brown, Patrick Hodgkinson, Peter Tabori, Gordon Benson and Alan Forsyth. Individual buildings are famous locally and often loved by their residents, of which I must admit to being one. However, up until now there has been a conspicuous lack of documentation about the wider building project.

Social housing presents fiendishly difficult design problems. It therefore seems fair to point out that Cook took the helm at the onset of a perfect storm. Camden was formed in 1965 through the amalgamation of the boroughs of Hampstead, Holborn and St Pancras, by turns intellectual, wealthy and radical. With the highest rateable income in the UK after the City and Westminster, the upstart borough had the means to deliver on its stated political ambition to create the highest quality housing possible for low-income families. To match, there was a pool of ideologically driven young architecture graduates eager to contribute to the post-war reconstruction effort. Cook purportedly hand-picked a team able to get things done, and demonstrated great skill in spotting talent.

The exhibition consists primarily of plans, texts and Martin Charles's black and white photographs of key buildings. This core material is accompanied by a further description of possibly the best-known scheme, Alexandra Road, in model, construction drawings and a film made by residents. The page layout arrangement of the material is reminiscent of the architectural press coverage

Highgate New Town stage 1.



of the day, giving the show a familiar, if a little stiff, character.

While the exhibition design foregrounds the built architecture, arguably the greater success is that, more than 30 years on, many of the estates are thriving. This comes to the fore in both the film and the symposium that took place on October 30, attended by many of the architects involved.

The film, *One Below the Queen: Rowley Way Speaks for Itself*, is the exhibition's highlight. It splices candid residents' interviews with footage of the estate. One is left with a vital impression of hanging gardens and light-filled interiors, the nightmare car access but cheek-by-jowl neighbourliness, the grey concrete and poor sound transmission, yet a sense of stability and comfort.

Of the issues raised by the symposium, it was the discussion around designing a city, and not creating ghettos, that seemed most timely. In 1965, the planning briefs inherited by Cook's architects asked for system-built tower blocks — fast, cheap, dense and unhindered by context. Cook fought for a traditional street-based four-storey urbanism and funds were made available to resource their design to a high quality. That these elegant concrete terraces have stood the test of time is in no small part due to the detailed drawings on show in the

Cook took the helm as borough architect at the onset of a perfect storm

exhibition, each requiring hours of skilled manipulation. However, by 1973, economic pressures saw resourcing of this process cut back, sending the scale and ambition of housing provision in the borough into decline.

The subtitle of the exhibition is "London's Great Experiment in Urban Housing". From the vantage point of my concrete balcony,



Alexandra Road (above) and Branch Hill (below).



PHOTOS: MARTIN CHARLES

I feel I can safely say the experiment was a success.

What the exhibition makes evident is the conditions required to allow such experimentation: a political and economic commitment to provide social housing on a significant scale; leadership that understands the city as much as housing; a talented team able to describe at all scales the conditions

for pleasurable inhabitation. It is in stark contrast to our current situation with the mayor of London warning against the "Kosovo-style social cleansing" of lower-income families from the city.

SEE THE ROWLEY WAY FILM

online at www.rowleyway.org.uk
A video of the symposium will be available at www.pidgeondigital.com

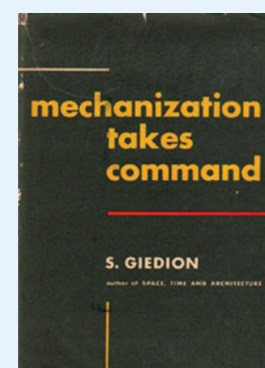
BUILDING A LIBRARY: 34

MECHANIZATION TAKES COMMAND: A CONTRIBUTION TO ANONYMOUS HISTORY By Siegfried Giedion, 1948

This is a wonderful instance of what can happen when someone ventures outside his habitual field. Giedion was an architectural historian and early propagandist for European modernism. We can imagine the link between the two subjects, architecture and machines, developing like this: his architectural heroes

Gropius and Le Corbusier felt a romantic attraction to the factory and mass production. Giedion suspected that these clean forms and rational procedures were outward signs of more pervasive cultural forces, which he called mechanization. To understand how such processes had gained overpowering momentum, he needed to examine their history.

The result is one of the most original works of its period. He tells a story set largely in America, where tools and processes brought from Europe are reshaped by a restless drive to make them work better. Curved axe handles are one outcome, but the most interesting devices completely transform the material. Door locks are a key instance; a self-educated locksmith named Yale



makes them more complicated, but lighter, cheaper and virtually foolproof. Giedion jumps from this episode to the assembly line, which appears first in a slaughterhouse in Cincinnati. By this time, his enthusiasm for inventiveness running roughshod over traditional forms has somewhat cooled.

The story of the mechanization of bread production is intermittently hilarious, but the outcome is disastrous: a sweet substance between bread and cake, into which a little of the food value removed is injected afterward. Giedion thinks mechanization has to admit defeat when faced with live hogs, steers and the like.

A less disturbing subject, domestic furnishings and appliances, provides many surprising detours on the way to familiar contraptions; true to his modernist roots, Giedion loathes upholstery. He ends darkly in the modern bathroom, where a communal hall (the Roman ancestor) has become a prison cell (the shower booth).

Robert Harbison