

Living in Utopia: Suburb flats

Born out of her experiences at Toynbee Hall in the slums of Whitechapel, the concept of an inclusive mixed community lay at the heart of Henrietta Barnett's vision for Hampstead Garden Suburb. Her idealistic solution to the problems of social deprivation and inequality was integration. By bringing all classes together in to a seamless whole, she hoped 'to provide a bridge between poverty and privilege and to overcome the ignorance which separated the Two Nations'. There was to be a place for all – the young and old, the ignorant and the learned, the handicapped and the whole, even 'the wicked and the naughty' – all living in peaceful harmony alongside each other.

These noble aspirations were enshrined in buildings which still characterise the area today. A range of housing types were intended to provide the basic building blocks of a healthy, sustainable and socially mixed community; one which offered opportunities for intellectual and spiritual betterment through shared worship, education, outdoor activities, gardening, art and theatre. This was the spirit of William Morris and the Arts and Crafts movement writ large.

From the outset flats formed an integral part of this architectural and social vision. A number were designed as great architectural set pieces – Arcade House and Temple Fortune House (by AJ Penty

1909 & 1911) which form a towering architectural gateway in to the Suburb from Finchley Road; nearby Temple Fortune Court (1911 also by Penty), the superb Heathcroft (1923 by JBF Cowper) with its 'labour-saving flats' which once boasted a private dining room for residents, or Meadowway Court (1913 by the prolific G.L. Sutcliffe), reminiscent of a Tudor Oxbridge college.

But a true socially-mixed community required specialised housing for specific social groups. The sublime Waterlow Court in Heath Close (1909 by Baillie-Scott) was built for single working ladies. Southwood Court in Bigwood Road (1923 by John Soutar) was designed for officers' bereaved families, whilst the discreet Barnett Homestead off Erskine Hill (1916 by John Soutar) provided twelve, tiny one-room flatlets for World War I widows, the gift of the engineering magnate Sir Alfred Yarrow. The first and most ambitious of all – The Orchard – (1909 by Parker and Unwin) was demolished alas in 1970; a great loss of an exceptionally important grade II listed building. Elsewhere Queen's Court (1927) and Emmott Close (1928 by H. Duncan-Hendry) were constructed by the United Womens' Housing Association for thrifty working women.

Much of my life on the Garden Suburb has been spent enjoying the character and charm of such buildings. My first seven years were spent in

Neale Close (1928 by CG Butler), each flat with its own garden approached through an exciting maze of hedges. Beyond lay the open fields of Park Farm where horses and cattle grazed, later sadly built over. Playing with other children in a quiet cul de sac inculcated a strong sense of community and a deep-seated sense of place. After spending my teenage years at the family home in Oakwood Road, and three years at Cambridge, I married. For six years home was in another handsome Butler block in Hill Top set behind a broad communal garden with a similar maze of gardens at the rear overlooking the former St Marylebone Cemetery. I well remember the surreal sight of a full-blown Victorian funeral cortege complete with plumed horses gliding past the garden in the fading light one winter afternoon.

Subsequently for many years home was in Homesfield off Erskine Hill. Erskine House, originally Ursula and Henrietta Cottages, was designed by Parker and Unwin in 1911 as dormitories for Poor Law children with elegant oak balconies running along the front. Later it was adapted by John Soutar as four flats. Behind lay our garden and allotment and the Arcadian delights of Little Wood and the Open Air theatre.

After a short sojourn in Swiss Cottage in the extraordinary haunted Gothic atelier of the Victorian artist, John Collier, I



Butler flats on Hill Top, memories of old fashioned funerals behind the gardens



Homesfield, originally dormitories for Poor Law children



Clarendon Court, guarding the ramparts

returned to the Suburb and to Clarendon Court, (1926 by Soutar) an accomplished neo-Georgian block of flats guarding the outer ramparts of the Suburb in Finchley Road, close to the Trust's offices. Nearby lies The Pantiles (1934) forty flats in an exotic Italianate hacienda style with green glazed tiled roofs, a totally different, but nonetheless well-executed, creation by the architect of Heathcroft, JBF Cowper.

Today much of Dame Henrietta's social idealism has been lost – driven out by those who know the price of everything and the value of nothing. This is unfortunate. Where once the children of local families might have stayed in the area by moving in to the smaller flats and cottages as a step on to the local housing ladder, rising property prices have forced many to move away undermining the social cohesion which formed such an important part of the original concept. However the buildings remain to bear witness to a remarkable exercise in 20th century placemaking, one which we struggle to emulate today.

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Pantiles, hacienda style



Heathcroft, above and Waterlow Court, below



Below, Neale Close, a sense of community



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