

# THE BRANDON ESTATE: PAST PRESENT FUTURE

## ORIGINS IN HISTORY

The estate is named after Thomas Brandon, a gardener, who 'obtained permission by Act of Parliament to let land within Walworth manor on building leases for 99 years in 1774.

## EDWARD HOLLAMBY: THE ARCHITECT OF THE PRESENT ESTATE



Edward and Mrs Hollamby at The Red House

The English architect, Edward Hollamby OBE was the principal designer of the existing Brandon Estate in 1961. Hollamby was "very much an architect of the 20th century, a public servant who believed not just in high quality architecture but in the existence and nurturing of the public realm, of public architecture and civic design".

Hollamby liked to hold exhibitions, consultations and meetings on major or controversial housing schemes. 'We want the public to be involved, to complain, to argue, to come rushing down to the Town Hall every time they have a legitimate grouse'.

Edward Hollamby was a member of the Communist Party of Great Britain and his socialist beliefs led him to public sector housing where he worked for London County Council, under Leslie Martin (principal architect of the Royal Festival Hall). As well as the Brandon Estate, he designed a number of Modernist housing estates in London, including Cressingham Gardens in Tulse Hill, Central Hill in Gipsy Hill, Avebury Estate in Bethnal Green, and the Pepys Estate in Deptford.

William Morris, the great Arts and Craft theorists and practitioner, was a great influence in his practice and personal life. He bought, as a family home, William Morris's own iconic Red House (designed by Phillip Webb) which was, at the time, threatened with demolition.

From the 80s, when Thatcherism destroyed "the existence and nurturing of the public realm" the Edward Hollamby became increasingly unhappy as a result of conflict with local Labour politicians and he ended his career by contributing towards the design of Thamesmead and London Dockland Development

You can hear an interview with Edward Hollamby in the Architects Lives' collection held by the British Library:

<https://sounds.bl.uk/Oral-history/Architects-Lives/021M-C0467X0022XX-0700V0>

## THE BRANDON ESTATE DESIGN PROCESS

The visual presence of the Brandon Estate, in Southwark, with its path-breaking high-rise, and pioneering mixed development is distinguished as is 'one of the most novel' of the London County Council's housing schemes.



Pointing to the future, an early image of the Estate from Lorrimore Square

The Estate was intended as a statement – part of the LCC’s attempt to regenerate ‘the decaying and lifeless south bank of the Thames’. It was developed, in a grander post-45 vision, with the Festival of Britain and its legacy.



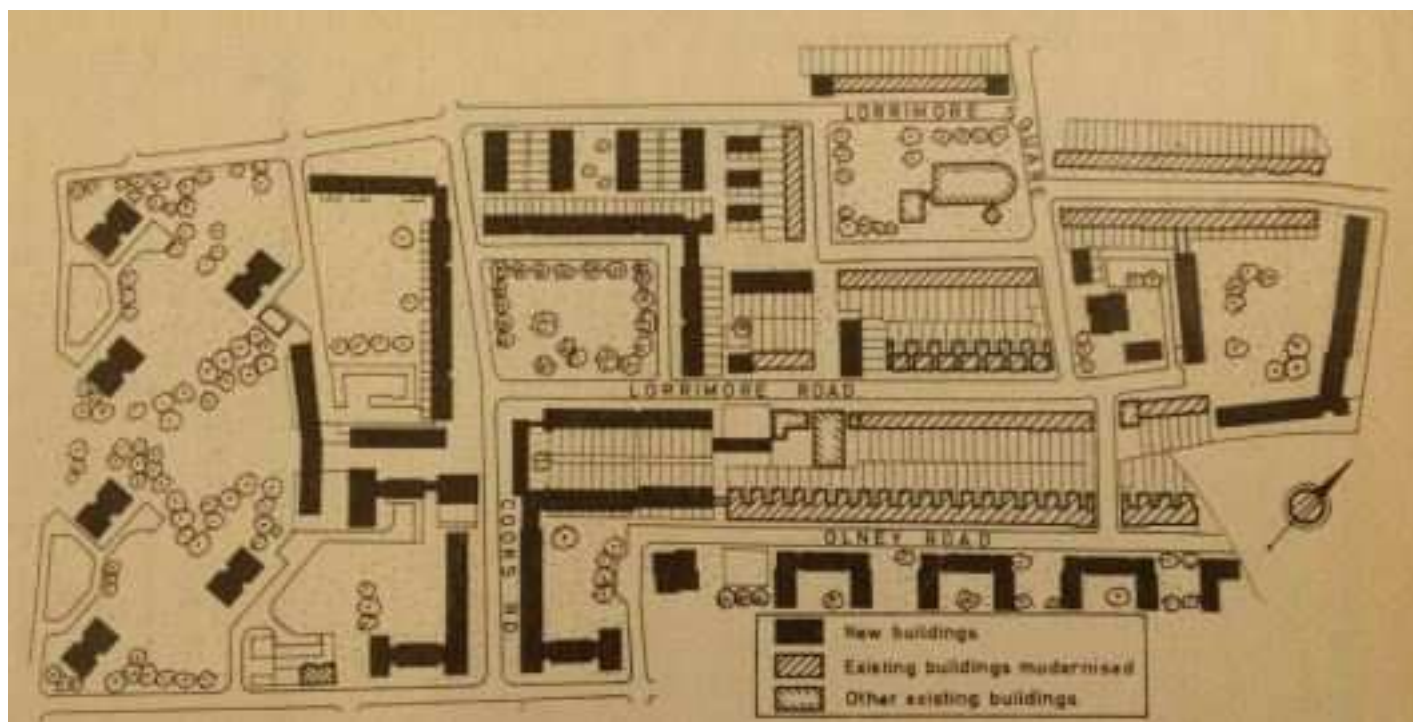
Lorrimore Square

Lorrimore Square, retains the existing but substantially adapted Victorian street pattern at the western end of the Estate. One side of the square is formed of substantial three-storey Victorian terraces and two sides of equivalent modern homes. The other is occupied by the new St Paul’s Church, a modernist Grade II-listed building of reinforced concrete designed by Woodroffe Buchanan & Coulter in 1959-1960 to replace one destroyed by wartime bombing.

The rehabilitation drive is rightly associated with the later 1960s’ disenchantment with estate design but it had been prefigured in a neglected clause of Nye Bevan’s 1949

Housing Act which provided 75 per cent Exchequer grants to councils for the purchase of homes for improvement or conversion. More famously, that Act declared a classless vision of council housing by removing the stipulation it be considered solely working-class accommodation.

Forsyth Gardens, on the Estate's main artery Cook's Road, was a new square lined with brick-faced four-storey maisonettes designed by Gregory Jones, intended to maintain, in the historian Pevsner's words, this 'revival of Georgian town planning traditions'.



The original LCC plan for the Estate

Rehabilitation and the retention of an existing streetscape was the cause of some anguish at the time when the principle of separating cars and pedestrians was very much the governing wisdom.

The Council lamented that it had been 'impossible to provide an ideally comprehensive system of independent footpaths', and the early residents, two-thirds of whom wanted less traffic, objected but to no avail.

Further east, the Estate assumes its more striking and daringly modernist form. Across Cook's Road lies the ten-storey Napier Tower, a gateway to the Estate's pedestrian-ised shopping precinct, and beyond that its signature six 18-storey point blocks carefully set in a new extension to Kennington Park. In 1957, these were the highest blocks the LCC had built.



Signature six 18-storey point blocks

These towers are not some alien and overpowering presence in the terrain but fit, as the architects intended, comfortably into their landscape. Their mix of bush hammered (providing texture) and precast finishes, with patterns of strong horizontals and tripartite vertical pattern, along with a range of solid and glazed balconies, gave, it was said, ‘a more humane scale and greater architectural sophistication than earlier points’.

The high-rise development at the Estate’s eastern end was necessary to achieve the required density of 137 persons per acre – in total, the completed Estate would house a population of 3,800; that was 600 more than had lived in the area prior to redevelopment.

The key principle of the Estate, was ‘mixed development’. This was the coming idea of the mid-1950s, promoting the ideal of a range of housing forms intended to break both the monotony of traditional forms of working-class housing – public and private – and provide housing appropriate to a range of people and households in different life stages. It also licensed the idea of building high at a time when it was not envisaged that tower blocks would house young families.



Bungalows for older people on Lorrimore Road



Family houses on Greig Terrace

The Brandon Estate is the acme of the mixed development idea in a number of ways. It's seen, most obviously, in its conscious attempt to embody something of the visual intricacy and complexity which characterise, and attract us, in the organic and slow-grown parts of our older cities. It succeeds in this, to a greater extent than most recently planned environments built in one piece.

It's there too in the variety of external materials used – 'the list would read like a building exhibition catalogue of cladding materials'.

This attention to a humane environment was seen also in other details of the Estate. It included, for example, a number of small and secluded courtyard spaces – to the apparent consternation of the Housing Manager who foresaw 'immorality in all sheltered corners'.



This early photograph of the Precinct also shows Hollaway's 'Hairy Mammoth' and Canterbury Arms pub sign

It was seen as well in the artworks and decorative elements which adorned the Estate, notably the work of Anthony Hollaway and Lynn Easthope, employed by the LCC's Housing Committee 'as consultants for decorative treatment on housing estates'. Hollaway's 'hairy mammoth' (marking the discovery of a fossilised mammoth tooth during site excavation) on the exterior wall of the club room survives as does his decorative frieze at the top of Napier Tower but the illuminated sign created for the Estate pub, the Canterbury Arms, and the broken tile mosaic in the precinct commemorating the Chartist meeting in 1848 on Kennington Common and other elements have been lost.



Cornish House with Henry Moore's Two Piece Reclining Figure No. 3 to the foreground

All this art came at a cost of £3215 which included Hollaway's £1760 annual fee. He was rather resentful of the £8000 spent on the Estate's masterpiece, Henry Moore's Two Piece Reclining Figure No. 3 (donated at cost price by the artist), located in front of the Cornish House.

All this is important as an indication of the care, attention and money (around £3.6m) that Hollamby and the LCC invested in the Brandon Estate, intended as a showpiece and not just another anonymous council estate.



Children at play on the Estate, 1976

The estate was designed as a community. Apart from the shopping precinct and club room already mentioned, there was a doctor's surgery, a library, a housing area office and nine play spaces for toddlers and four playgrounds for older children.

The six point blocks contained 64 two-bedroom flats with all the modern conveniences to be expected in public housing – a bathroom and separate toilet, an electric drying cupboard, a linen cupboard and broom cupboard plus warm air central heating (from a central boiler room) and constant hot water. Each flat also benefited from a full-length private balcony at its front and a second, smaller, balcony in front of the kitchen windows.



Living room of tower block flat



This image of the kitchen-diner also shows the Weatherfoil hot air heating system

At the top of each of the point blocks were four bed-sitter penthouses with private patios. The Housing Manager, moral antennae twitching, insisted that these be let to either all men or all women in any one block. One observer described these as ‘the only genuine metropolitan penthouses’ she knew ‘to be had for £4 a week with heating thrown in’.



Living room of penthouse flat



The first residents receive their keys from the mayor of Southwark in front of Cornish House



Reclining Figure No. 3 by Henry Moore

## THE BRANDON ESTATE AS FILM SET

The sitcom “15 Storeys High” used the estate as a backdrop for the exterior locations. It has also been featured in the TV shows Spooks, Silent Witness and The Bill.

“Doctor Who” the sci-fi series used the estate to stand in for the fictional Powell Estate, home of the Doctor’s companion for several series:

Video of the estate from the early 1960s exists due to the Brandon Estate Cine Club, which 'made Super 8 films of events on the estate organised by the social club – using a camera bought by 17-year old Brian Waterman with his first pay-packet from his job on the Underground'. YouTube - [Brandon Estate Cine Club \(1961\)](#)

Some scenes in the film “For Queen and Country” were shot at Hanworth House on the estate.

It is also famous for housing a group of UK drill rappers called Moscow17.

## BRANDON CAN BE PROTECTED BY THE LAW

Two estates designed by the architect Edward Hollamby, have recently been protected in legal cases. Lambeth Council was forced in 2016 by the High Court to stop its plans for the demolition of the estate. Tenants have demanded in 2018 there be a consultation in line with the London Mayor’s new policy for regeneration. The estate was hailed as ‘unique’ by the Twentieth Century Society, and the campaign to save the estate was backed by heritage organisations including Save Britain’s Heritage and the Brixton Society.

In another case, an LVT tribunal decided in 2005 that the council's window replacement plans threatened the exemplary Brandon Estate. The tribunal found that the estate would lose its 'unique character' as the result of the planned insensitive renovations and the council was found to have been negligent in its procedures and its decision to demolish the windows. Sadly, however, the Council continued with the demolition of the original wooden window assemblies, and uPVC assemblies of an inferior design replaced them. It may be possible to replace these inferior uPVC windows when, quite soon, the uPVC versions come to the end of their life. Possibly then the estate may gain again the recommendation for listing that was in place before the window demolition.

## REFERENCES TO FOLLOW UP

- (1) Elain Harwood, *Space, Hope and Brutalism, English Architecture, 1945-1975* (2015)
- (2) This and the preceding quotation are drawn from London County Council, *Brandon Estate Southwark* (ND)
- (3) Bridget Cherry, Nikolaus Pevsner, *London 2: South* (1983)
- (4) 'Housing at the Brandon Estate, Southwark', *Architects' Journal Information Library*, November 1 1961
- (5) 'LCC Brandon Estate, Southwark', *Architecture and Building News*, 3 January 1957
- (6) 'First of the "high altitude" tenants gets his key', *South London Observer*, 21 January 1960
- (7) 'Housing at the Brandon Estate, Southwark', *Architects' Journal Information Library*
- (8) Dawn Pereira, '[Henry Moore and the Welfare State](#)' and 'Current condition of LCC Patronage artworks'
- (9) 'Brandon Estate Clubs Get Off to Photo-Start', *South London Press*, 23 December 1960. You can see some of the efforts of the Cine Club and much of the early life of the Estate on [YouTube](#).