

Do the community centred social housing theories of Alison and Peter Smithson remain relevant to the design of contemporary social housing (with particular reference to Robin Hood Gardens)?

Research Context

The Labour government has pledged to construct 1.5 million homes over the next five years, an average of 300,000 homes per year, a target that hasn't been met since 1970. However, official figures show that just 208,600 homes were completed in England in 2024/25, representing a 6% reduction from the previous year's total of 221,409 homes (Chu, 2025). Therefore, is there a call to revisit tried and tested housing models that successfully accommodated large populations in the past?

Today, Britain faces many of the same challenges encountered by architects following the Second World War, albeit with different complexities. These include housing shortages, outdated building stock, rising material costs, and increasing demand for space. In this context, Alison and Peter Smithson stand out for their innovative post-war design approaches and their people-centred philosophies aimed at fostering community within social housing schemes.

The Smithsons were influential not only through their architectural portfolio but also in shaping architectural design in post war Britain. They were instrumental in establishing the New Brutalism movement, promoted people-orientated urban design, and developed architectural, social and political theories.

The Smithsons could be characterised as realists, responding to the actual social conditions of post war Britain. They drew inspiration from the modern movement but abandoned some of the ideas in favour of faster construction, less refined finishes and arguably people centred design. The Smithsons rejected a universal solution in favour of contextual adaptable innovations centred around the needs of a community, but were these values realised and put into practice or just wishful thinking? Arguably, these ideas were eventually distilled into their 1972 project, Robin Hood Gardens. A community social housing scheme that prioritised neighbourly interactions but gained a reputation during the 1980s for a high concentration of antisocial behaviour. Yet, despite this, the scheme is still regarded by many as a masterpiece of community based social housing.



Fig 1: Robin Hood Gardens external (V&A, 2024)

The project embodied their concept of “streets in the sky” a valiant approach to urban communities addressing some of the key issues of high density living. Despite efforts to achieve listing by the 20th Century Society, the social housing development was demolished in 2017 with only an element of the building being preserved in the V&A museum. Therefore, despite the demand for housing and the cult like following that Robin Hood Gardens gained, why was it demolished? What were the reasons behind the decline of high-density social housing complexes and what can we learn from the Robin Hood Gardens model?

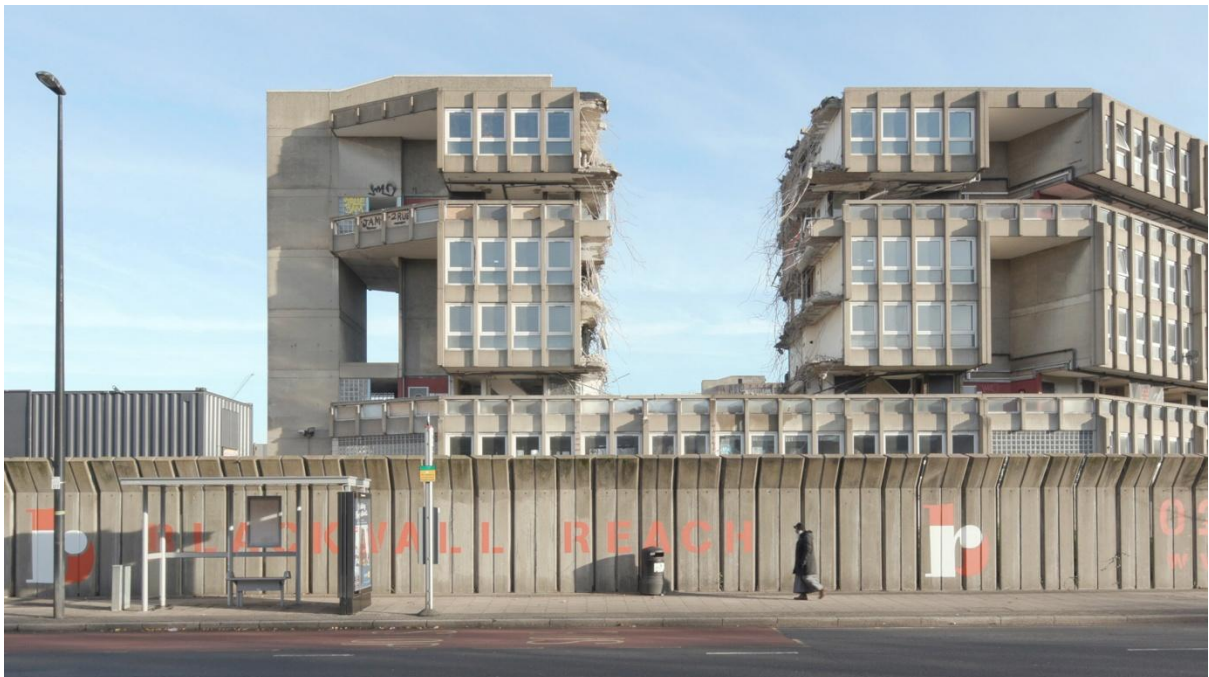


Fig 2: Robin Hood Gardens demolition (Mairs, 2018)

This thesis will examine the journey of conception to demolition as it attempts to unpick the fundamental elements that gained its reputation and evaluate its relevance to architecture and the British housing crisis.

Aim of the research

This thesis will focus on the Smithsons Robin Hood Gardens that represents two main themes, community architecture and social housing. Therefore, the aim of this thesis is to evaluate the Smithsons community architecture approach to social housing examining the Robin Hood Gardens and answer key questions. Did they design with people and communities in mind, and how is this reflected in their projects? Did their architecture function as intended? What projects inspired and influenced the Smithsons? Does the Robin Hood Gardens model remain relevant, and do their philosophies and theories continue to influence contemporary design?

Strategy for conducting the research – the strategies for the enquiry.

The research will begin by establishing the Smithsons' work, portfolio, philosophies, manifesto, and, to some degree, their personal lives. This will provide an understanding of the design moves they would later make in relation to Robin Hood Gardens. The study will then investigate Robin Hood Gardens in order to understand why it is considered a significant example of community-focused social housing and to establish its fundamental design elements.

A section of the façade of Robin Hood Gardens was preserved by the V&A prior to its demolition. I intend to visit this in the summer of 2026 in order to better understand the deck-access system and experience it in person, particularly in relation to materiality, spatial volume, and atmosphere.

While researching Alison and Peter Smithson's Robin Hood Gardens, a series of precedent buildings that informed and inspired the project will be examined as case studies. These case studies will be selected based on those explicitly referenced by the Smithsons or those which can be identified as architectural principles or elements that preceded their design.

The case studies, by examining how principles of community architecture encourage neighbourly connections and interactions within the context of large high-rise housing developments, provide a deeper understanding of the architectural elements of Robin Hood Gardens. By assessing the similarities between these projects and Robin Hood Gardens, the study will better establish the origins of its community-based elements and evaluate the success or failure within the Robin Hood Gardens' scheme. This will help determine whether Robin Hood Gardens represents the best example of community-based social housing and, ultimately, whether its demolition was justified.

Following an analysis of the case studies, the research will focus on how Robin Hood Gardens has influenced subsequent generations of architects, buildings and housing schemes.

Finally, the research will conclude by assessing the extent to which the Smithsons' community centred social housing theories, as expressed through Robin Hood Gardens, remain relevant within contemporary architecture and urban design.

Methodology

A substantial portion of this research will consist of desktop-based **historical research**, drawing on articles, books, and films. The primary focus will be on first-hand historical accounts of the building's conception, design, and construction, leading into an analysis of its use and the lived experiences of its inhabitants. Second-hand accounts will also be utilised; for example, the work conducted by the Twentieth Century Society in its efforts to list and save the Robin Hood scheme. Sources of this nature are likely to contain inherent bias and will therefore be used critically and appropriately.

Correlational research will be undertaken by comparing Robin Hood Gardens with earlier buildings that influenced its development. This will involve analysing key design elements and tracing their origins in order to better understand how these precedents informed the final scheme.

If appropriate, **qualitative research** methods will be employed, including interviews with contemporary architects working on projects inspired by Robin Hood Gardens, as well as specialists on the Smithsons. Site visits to relevant buildings and locations may also be conducted to gain a deeper, first-hand understanding of specific design choices and architectural elements.

Finally, the research will collect the findings into a coherent and **logical argument**, which will form the basis of the thesis conclusion.

Literature search.

There is certainly no shortage of literature about the Smithsons, they themselves have published many papers, manifestos and lectured extensively. Their work was influential not just across Britain, but they were among the first British architects that gained notoriety across the world, especially for their work on New Brutalism.

Robin Hood Gardens Re-Visions

The book '*Robin Hood Gardens Re-Visions*', written by Alan Powers (Powers, 2010) and published by the Twentieth Century Society in 2010, was produced as part of a campaign to secure listed status for Robin Hood Gardens social housing scheme, in an effort to prevent its demolition. Unfortunately, this campaign was unsuccessful, and the scheme was ultimately demolished in 2017. Despite failing to achieve listing, the publication was also intended to serve as a comprehensive record documenting the design, construction, and occupation of Robin Hood Gardens.

The text presents a narrative account of the project's conception, delivery, and post-occupancy evaluation. It outlines the social, political, and architectural conditions faced by both the Smithsons in post-war Britain, framing the constraints of the site that informed the final design. The book also explores the reasoning behind key design decisions made by the Smithsons. In addition, it discusses the challenges associated with achieving listed status, drawing comparisons with Park Hill, which received listing for reasons that the authors argue should also have applied to Robin Hood Gardens.

The publication includes sketches from the Smithsons' design process, illustrating the architectural moves that shaped the scheme. It also features photographs taken by the Smithsons themselves, including some previously unpublished images, as well as images produced by Twentieth Century Society photographers documenting the building during its period of occupation as part of the listing campaign. Furthermore, the book contains statements of support from prominent architects advocating for the scheme, including Zaha Hadid, Richard Rogers, and Peter St John.

The text has an extensive bibliography, drawing on historical research from books, journals, newspaper articles, films, and audio sources, alongside selections from the Smithsons' archived material. This includes a BBC2 broadcast with the Smithsons in the 1970s. The author also makes use of quantitative research drawing from the surveys conducted with residents of Robin Hood Gardens conducted by the Twentieth Century Society, and accounts from an architect who worked within the Smithsons' practice.

The author may have an inherent bias, as the Twentieth Century Society was actively advocating for the protection of Robin Hood Gardens. As a result, the publication understandably emphasises the scheme's positive architectural and social qualities. Despite this, the book largely adopts a factual approach and presents structured, logical arguments in support of its case for saving the development.

Overall, this book is a valuable source of historical and architectural insight into post-war Britain and the work of the Smithsons, while also illustrating the cult-like following that Robin Hood Gardens has attracted within architectural discourse.

'The Smithsons on Housing' Documentary

In 1970, the Smithsons produced a 28-minute documentary on the development of Robin Hood Gardens (*The Smithsons on Housing*, 1970). The film questions whether the 'tower block' had become an obsolete housing model, critiquing high-rise modernist housing complexes while simultaneously introducing Robin Hood Gardens as a community-focused alternative. The Smithsons advocate for housing schemes that foster community, social interaction, and individuality among residents.

The documentary outlines their design philosophy for Robin Hood Gardens, particularly their emphasis on designing with inhabitants in mind. This includes discussion of the wide deck-access "streets in the sky", strategies to mitigate noise pollution from surrounding roads, introducing large green spaces and architectural devices intended to encourage community interaction.

Alongside this theoretical narrative, the Smithsons express their frustrations with public responses to the building, highlighting issues such as vandalism and a general resistance to their ideas. There is a clear sense that they believed significant effort had been invested in providing both architectural quality and social value, which they felt was not being recognised or appreciated. While the documentary is a valuable source of first-hand information, it is also a form of advocacy or publicity, attempting to justify the design decisions and persuade the public to value the building they had produced.

The film was made by the Smithsons and directed by B. S. Johnson, providing direct, first-hand insight into their intentions and design process. The Smithsons explicitly explain their architectural decisions and consistently frame them as being made in the interests of the inhabitants. Despite this, the documentary can be considered biased, as it represents a retrospective defence of the project and may seek to induce a sense of guilt or obligation among residents and the wider public, potentially calling its objectivity into question.

Nevertheless, the film clearly documents the extent of antisocial behaviour experienced on the estate. This complicates the success of the scheme's community-focused elements, particularly those intended to promote social interaction and natural surveillance and raises questions about the extent to which these architectural strategies achieved their intended goals.

The GOOD the BAD & the UGLY cities in crisis

Written by Rod Hackney in 1990 the book is an autobiography and critical review of British post war urban architecture and design. Rod Hackney, a Manchester University graduate, is a British architect, born in Liverpool in 1942. Hackney draws on his experience as a community architect and RIBA president (Butler, 2025).

The book provides context to the British post war landscape, and Hackney reflects the repercussions of the high rise, high density modernist housing schemes. Aneurin Bevan's government changed policies and introduced 'operation housing' in an attempt to house masses but ultimately displaced existing communities and forced them into hostile tower blocks.

Hackney expresses his issues with the 20th century tower blocks and how they forced people into a way of living, something that he claims the Smithsons were also guilty of. Hackney believed in "letting people choose where they live, how they live, and the way they live" (Hackney, 1990)

The book is an excellent resource for understanding the position of architects post war. Hackney is a firsthand source as an architect that worked within the profession, witnessing the issues faced at the time and the increasing use of tower blocks. He attended university at a similar era to the Smithsons, thus his understanding and reflection give an honest picture of the situation at the time. While the Smithsons were only mentioned twice in the book and the book does not refer to Robin Hood Gardens, his arguments raised about the architecture of the tower block is still relevant to this research.

Projects referenced or suggested as inspiration for Robin Hood Gardens

During the initial process of researching the Smithsons and Robin Hood Gardens, some buildings and schemes have presented themselves as direct and potential inspirations that influenced the Smithsons' development of Robin Hood Gardens.

Golden Lane

Golden Lane was an unsuccessful competition entry by the Smithsons in 1952, which helped establish their name within the profession and was the precursor project to Robin Hood Gardens. Despite not winning the project it is still regarded as a great example of social housing with a community focus and the Smithsons first attempt at 'streets in the sky'.

The scheme promoted shared community facilities with places for casual social interaction. The 'streets in the sky' were intended to emulate the community aspects of traditional street life but lifted vertically. The shared civic spaces were intended to connect individual homes to the wider community (Charitonidou, 2023).

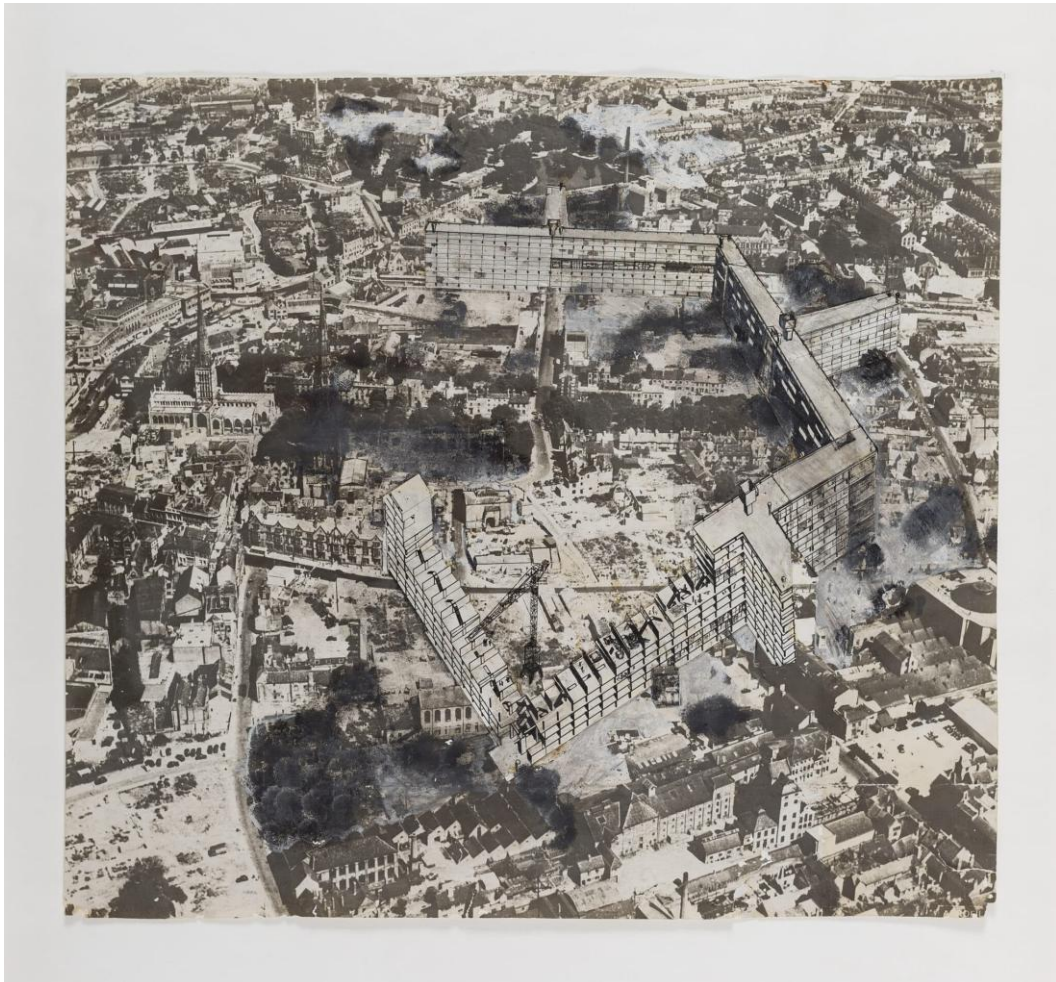


Fig 3: Ariel graphic of the Smithsons Golden Lane proposal (Charitonidou, 2023)

Court

Court Inn was directly mentioned as an inspiration by Peter Smithsons during the BBC 2 broadcast (The Smithsons on Housing , 1970), drawing on the inwards looking design with accessibility and green space within. The plan of the building has been unchanged for nearly 400 years, and the Smithsons used this as an example that with good design the road system will configure to the design.

Narkomfin

Constructed between 1928 and 1930 in Russia, the project was an experiment in community living. The building is an example of Collectivism, a Russian communist movement that created intentional communities. Designed for housing the employees of the People Commissariat of Finance, it was conceived as a “transitional type of house,” a model intended to shift Soviet society from private family apartments to communal living (ArchEyes, 2024).

The building included a set of shared amenities such as a community kitchen, childcare spaces, roof gardens and a communal dining hall along with a simpler kitchen and living room in each flat.

The Narkomfin share a number of design elements to the Smithsons’ Robin Hood Gardens; deck access, with wider walkways open to the elements to promote social interaction. The flats were 2 storey, sharing a similar impression to terrace housing.

The building was designed as a “social condenser”; an architectural intervention intended to reshape daily life. The building was vandalised as the occupants resisted the intended way of living in the building, which then fell into disrepair.

The building was recently refurbished for its historical and architectural relevancy; considered a landmark of Soviet modernism, a radical experiment in communal life, and a precursor to many modernist housing projects across the world.

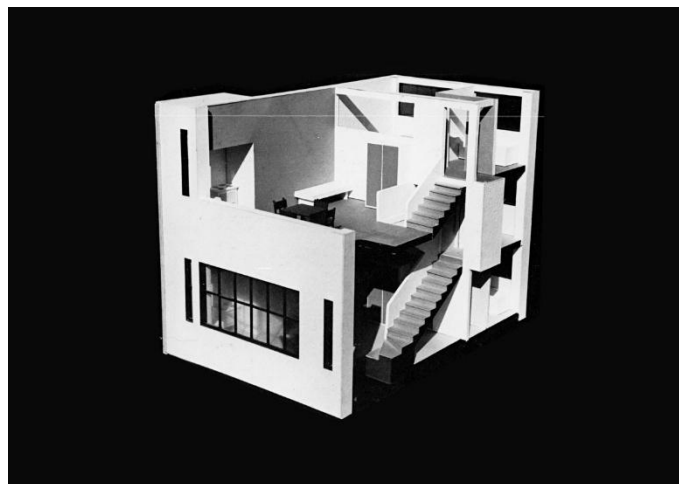


Fig 4: Sectional model of the Narkomfin (ArchEyes, 2024)



Fig 5: Refurbished image of the Narkomfin (ArchEyes, 2024)

Unite d'Habitation

Le Corbusier's Unite d'Habitation was completed in 1952, commissioned by the French government. The building was constructed in Marseille, consisting of 330 residential units, along with shops, roof terrace, and community facilities (ArchEyes, 2023). Corbusier believed that tower blocks were the solution to housing, through elevating the accommodation it would provide the occupants with clean air, views, and leave large spaces between the blocks for green space, lifting its occupants out of the noise of the city (Hackney, 1990).

Architects during this time were redesigning housing, but ultimately people wanted to live in their own way. Hackney states that Corbusier's ethos of forcing residents of the buildings he designed to live in a certain way, rather than embracing their way of living and designing the buildings to fit in with their lifestyle, made him inappropriate to design homes. Hackney uses the example that Corbusier believed people should not change in their bedrooms (Hackney, 1990).

Hackney also proposes that Le Corbusier was the founder of the 'streets in the sky' or deck access that is expressed in his Unite d'Habitation. Further that the Smithsons took the idea and produced them in concrete, which in turn inspired the Park Hill design.

Park Hill

Built between 1957 and 1961 as part of a major slum-clearance programme, the scheme was designed by architects Jack Lynn and Ivor Smith. This project was highly influential for the Smithsons. Having previously lost the competition for Golden Lane, the Smithsons viewed Park Hill as the first built example of their theorised concept of 'streets in the sky' (Powers, 2010).

Alexandra Road

Neave Brown rejected the high-rise, high-density modernist housing block model and instead designed a low-rise housing scheme with staggered façades, providing each home with natural light and its own front-door entrance. The scheme is organised around a pedestrian street running through the centre, with rows of terraced houses facing one another to encourage interaction and a sense of traditional neighbourhood (AD Editorial team, 2017).

The project completed in 1970, and is widely regarded as a masterpiece of social housing. The design actively fosters a sense of community and encourages residents to personalise their environment, for example through planting, which helps to soften the visual hardness of the concrete architecture. (Barnaby, 2020)



Fig 6: Original image of Alexandra Road (AD Editorial team, 2017)

Examples of Projects inspired by the Robin Hood Gardens Scheme

The following example adopted or reinterpreted design principles and elements associated with Robin Hood Gardens. While during the research they did not present with direct links, clear design elements suggest an inspiration or interpretation of the Robin Hood scheme.

Plashet Road

Completed in 2024 Plashet Road is a low-rise social housing scheme in East London. The scheme has a deck system that is not unlike the Smithsons Robin Hood Gardens, but lacks the deeper social elements. Plashet Road has a 1700mm deck with each door facing out to the deck and courtyard, meanwhile Robin Hood Gardens has a wider deck meant to promote communal space for interactions and play.

The Robin Hood Scheme intentionally faces the doors to each flat towards their neighbour to naturally promote neighbour interaction, while Plashet Road simply faces them out to the deck.

The Plashet Road development surrounds and contains a central courtyard, accessible via one entrance way, creating a dead end that discourages the use of the space and suggests a fortified enclosure. This is in contrast to the Robin Hood Gardens' open, permeable landscaping suggesting a freedom to use the space. (Levitt Bernstein, 2025)

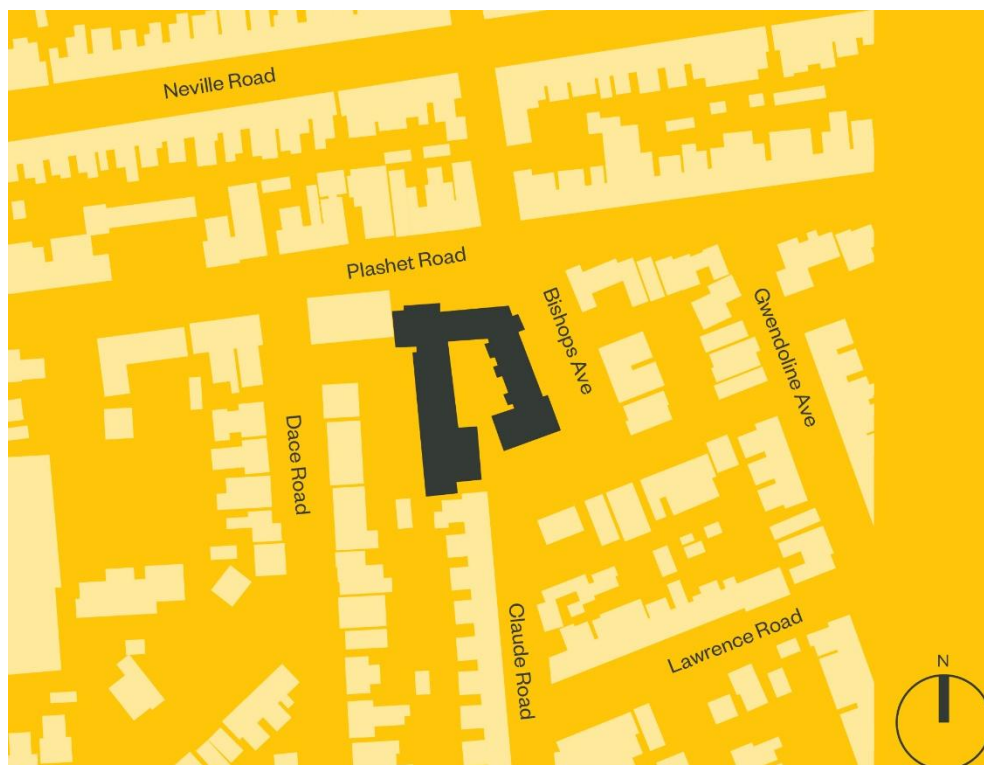


Fig 7: Block plan of Plashet Road (Levitt Bernstein, 2025)



Fig 8: internal courtyard of Plashet Road (Levitt Bernstein, 2025)

Bibliography

AD Editorial team, 2017. *Arch daily*. [Online]

Available at: <https://www.archdaily.com/880583/riba-awards-2017-royal-gold-medal-to-neave-brown>

[Accessed 2 March 2026].

ArchEyes, 2023. *Le Corbusier's Unité d'Habitation de Marseille: Redefining Urban Living*.

[Online]

Available at: <https://archeyes.com/unite-d-habitation-de-marseille-le-corbusiers-visionary-masterpiece/>

[Accessed 18 January 2026].

ArchEyes, 2024. *The Narkomfin Building by Moisei Ginzburg and Ignaty Milinis*. [Online]

Available at: <https://archeyes.com/the-narkomfin-building-by-moisei-ginzburg-and-ignaty-milinis/>

[Accessed 18 January 2026].

Barnaby, J., 2020. *Brutalist Beauty: The Alexandra Road Estate*. [Online]

Available at: <https://www.londonxlondon.com/alexandra-road-estate/>

[Accessed 2 March 2026].

Butler, J., 2025. *The Architectural Journal*. [Online]

Available at: <https://www.architectsjournal.co.uk/news/tributes-paid-to-maverick-former-riba-president-rod-hackney>

[Accessed 27 02 2026].

Charitonidou, M., 2023. *Drawing Matter*. [Online]
Available at: <https://drawingmatter.org/alison-and-peter-smithsons-collages-as-reinventing-established-reality/>
[Accessed 21 January 2026].

Chu, B., 2025. *Some councils ordered to increase home building by 400%, new BBC tracker shows*. [Online]
Available at: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/c8j9j0j4l7mo>
[Accessed 24 February 2026].

Hackney, R., 1990. *the GOOD he BAD and the UGLY cities in crisis*. First ed. London : Frrederick Muller.

Harris, K. J., 2022. *Kimberley Jane Harris*. [Online]
Available at: <https://kimberleyharris.co.uk/managed-decline>
[Accessed 4 January 2026].

hurst, w., 2025. *The AJ*. [Online]
Available at: <https://www.architectsjournal.co.uk/news/going-going-gone-last-chunk-of-robin-hood-gardens-is-ripped-down>
[Accessed 4 January 2026].

Levitt Bernstein, 2025. *Levitt Bernstein*. [Online]
Available at: <https://www.levittbernstein.co.uk/portfolio/plashet-road/>
[Accessed 24 January 2026].

Mairs, J., 2018. *Dezeen*. [Online]
Available at: <https://www.dezeen.com/2018/03/07/victoria-albert-va-museum-robin-hood-gardens-venice-architecture-biennale/>
[Accessed 3 January 2026].

Powers, A., 2010. *Robin Hood Gardens Re-Visions*. First ed. london: The Twentieth Century society.

The Smithsons on Housing. 1970. [Film] Directed by B. S. Johnson. Britain : BBC .

V&A, 2024. *V&A*. [Online]
Available at: <https://www.vam.ac.uk/articles/robin-hood-gardens>
[Accessed 2 January 2026].