

## **BROWNFIELD ESTATE – GRADE 2\*-LISTING NOMINATION – REASONS TEXT James Dunnett, July 2014, Final-2**

### **The case for listing the Brownfield Estate grade 2\* in the context of Goldfinger's work**

The Brownfield Estate - or specifically the parts of it known to their architect Ernő Goldfinger RA as Rowlett Street Housing Phases I, II, and III – is partially listed Grade 2, and it is here proposed that it be listed at Grade 2\* in its entirety. It was built between 1965 and 1975 as social housing for the London County Council (succeeded by the Greater London Council after 1965), and is the most unaltered example remaining of Goldfinger's housing design. Indeed, now that his earlier housing at Abbots Langley has been largely demolished (2009), it represents one of only two public housing complexes of his that survive, the other being the Cheltenham (or Edenham) Estate in North Kensington around and including 31-storey Trellick Tower, which is now wholly Grade 2\*-listed including specifically all the ancillary buildings around the Tower. But the earlier demolition of much of the parking structure with its roof top garden and of the Old People's Home, both central to the Edenham Estate, as well as the radical alteration of many of the terrace houses, has damaged its overall integrity as an urban or architectural complex. By contrast there has been no such demolition at the Brownfield Estate; furthermore, the 'forecourt' of 26-storey Balfour Tower, framed by the 2-storey Old People's Housing on one side (both Phase I) and by 11-storey Carradale House (Phase II) on the other, together with the Community building and shop block free-standing within it, retains its full integrity and constitutes one of the great urban spaces in London.

Indeed it is the most unaltered complex of Goldfinger buildings of all kinds. Of his two major non-housing projects, his recently part-listed work at the Elephant and Castle is much altered and part-demolished, and his Haggerston School has also been transformed by painting, various extensions, and the general replacement of original fenestration. As explained earlier, Balfour Tower currently faces comprehensive renovation by a private developer and it seems highly desirable that it should be listed at a grade at least as high as the Edenham Estate, i.e. at Grade 2\*, rather than simply at Grade 2 as at present, to ensure the involvement of English Heritage and the careful attention to accuracy in all detail. The ancillary buildings and the spaces and hard landscaping need also to be included specifically in any listing (whereas they are not currently) since they play a critical role in the 'architectural drama' and the sculptural modelling of the surface of the ground; both contribute fundamentally to the architectural potency of the Estate. Arguably the social purpose of this housing, reflecting Goldfinger's life-long closeness to Socialist groups, and the social elements in the design, should also be reflected in the listing, as it is in the list description of Lubetkin and Tecton's Finsbury Health Centre. Finally, the whole of the third Phase of Goldfinger's work on the Brownfield Estate, presently unlisted, needs to be brought into the listing, as will be argued below.

### **Goldfinger's work and background prior to the Brownfield Estate**

As is well known, Goldfinger was born in Budapest in 1902 and died in London in 1987, having spent the years 1920-1934 in Paris where he studied architecture at the Ecole des Beaux Arts, in part as a pupil of the concrete pioneer Auguste Perret. Goldfinger was closely involved with the Modern art and architectural world in Paris at that time, working, for example, as Secretary of the French group of CIAM (Congrès Internationaux d'Architecture Moderne); he thus worked with Le Corbusier on the important 1933 Athens Conference, where the definitive Athens Charter attempting to encode Modern Architecture and Urbanism

was evolved. Le Corbusier's close associates Amedée Ozenfant, Pierre Jeanneret and Charlotte Perriand remained Goldfinger's own friends (and sometime his colleagues) all his life.

Goldfinger started his own practice while still a student around 1924, designing furniture and interiors. His first housing design in 1929 for Algiers was intended for the indigenous Algerian population and showed some influence from Gropius' Zeilenbau estates in Germany. His first interest in higher-rise housing forms can be seen in sketches from 1931, leading to his project for a self-contained 24-storey residential slab block, wedge-shaped on plan and complete with nursery school on the roof and communal services; this was exhibited at the Athens CIAM conference in 1933.

At the end of 1934, having married an English art student, Ursula Blackwell, in Paris, he moved to London and designed some private housing projects for his new brother-in-law and others, but nothing was built except the row of three terrace houses in Willow Road in Hampstead in 1938. The central one was for his own occupation and is now owned by the National Trust and open to the public. During the war he studied crosswall housing with the engineer Ove Arup but was not able to put this into effect until his housing scheme in Abbots Langley for Watford Rural District Council in 1956-8. Here he attempted first to get approval for a single thirteen-storey slab, but was unsuccessful and was obliged to build two four-storey maisonette blocks (demolished 2009) and a row of terrace houses instead. The original project, however, had embodied for the first time the planning solution he was to use as the basis of the main buildings at the Brownfield and Cheltenham Estates.

### **The planning conception of Goldfinger's major housing blocks**

This solution Goldfinger adopted in his major housing blocks comprised a linear arrangement with a lift and stair tower at one end and an escape stair at the other, and lateral semi-enclosed access galleries on every third floor between them, serving a four-person flat on the floors above and below and a two-person flat adjacent. This allowed dual aspect and cross ventilation for all flats (including the two-person flats, by windows looking across the access galleries and mechanical ventilation of kitchens). Others, such as Peter and Alison Smithson, and Ivor Smith and Jack Lynn at Park Hill, Sheffield, had studied similar solutions at the time, inspired by Le Corbusier's Unité d'Habitation at Marseilles, which has an internal corridor on every third floor. But Goldfinger's solution was unique in that the access galleries serve three housing units for each bay rather than two, and in that the simple slab forms avoid the insoluble planning problems found at the non-orthogonal junctions of the linked blocks of the Smithsons' and the Sheffield projects. His solution also automatically generated the then-demanded mix of two family flats for every one two-person flat, without requiring arbitrary convolutions of the plan. Finally it also allowed the regular articulation of the facades by wide and narrow balconies reflecting the size of the flats within (not yet fully developed at Balfron). A two-person and a four-person flat could be combined into a six-person maisonette in the relatively few instances where these were required; a row of these maisonettes was used in both Balfron and Trellick to create a distinct and expressive feature on elevation derived from a further variation of the balcony pattern.

The presence of an access gallery only on every third floor allowed the circulation tower to be divided into two storeys for every three residential storeys, lending the entrance hall and the lift lobbies an added dignity of height and leaving room for an intermediate floor that provided social facilities for the block – play rooms, hobby rooms, or laundrettes (most of

which eventually closed when social conditions deteriorated), as well as additional water or oil tanks where required. The vertically-pivoted slit windows that light these spaces were designed to make it impossible for anyone to fall out; in addition they constitute a highly expressive feature on elevation, especially when they cross the channeled horizontal day-work joints in the concrete. The concrete is finely detailed with fair margins edging the bush hammered surfaces and boldly radiused external corners. Communal areas are enhanced by decorative and durable materials of high quality - marble-lined entrance hall, coloured tiles to access walkways, sapele hardwood doors with moulded handles - demonstrating the value given to spaces used by and 'belonging to' everybody.

### **Rowlett Street Housing Phase I, Brownfield Estate**

Balfon Tower, the principal element of Phase I, was built 1965-7. It effectively doubled the size of the abortive Abbotts Langley block of ten years earlier, being 26 storeys high, and has six rather than four units on each floor (146 in total). Moreover, the spatial potential of the design is more fully articulated by the wide separation introduced between the lift tower and the main block. This allows delivery or refuse vehicles to make a complete circuit of it from entry to exit as well as ensuring isolation of the residential part of the block from lift and other mechanical noises. But it also creates the highly distinctive bi-partite composition with the circulation tower - topped by the lift motor room, boiler house, and tank rooms - rising considerably higher than the accommodation tower. In overall size and proportion, but not in plan, Balfon is similar to the block first sketched in 1931. Internally, the relatively wide frontage of each flat (22', increased to 22'11" in Carradale House – both a multiple of Goldfinger's standard planning module of 11") brings with it a generous sense of light and space. The ingeniously interlocked stairs rise or descend to the access galleries from within the central zone of each flat, and their carefully considered layouts have proven very popular with residents. Externally, the broad frontage leads to a shallow depth and generated the exceptionally slender profile of the tower which is one of its most exciting aspects.

Other blocks forming part of Phase I were:

- (1) 52-74 St Leonards Road, a two-storey block intended for old people; this achieves astonishing monumentality for its size by the emphatic expression of its bull-nosed brick crosswalls.
- (2) the single-storey parking garage forming a podium for the Tower, with its coffered ceiling and with the highly-sculptural play structure set into it.
- (3) the small shop block, characteristically square on plan.
- (4) the Nursery above the garage, again with coffered ceiling, and with a Community Room above accessed by a sculptural external concrete stair. Though this is physically within the Phase I area, it was designed as part of Phase II and built as part of Phase III.

### **Rowlett Street Housing Phase II**

Carradale House, Phase II of Goldfinger's work, built from 1967, plays an interesting variation in design on the themes of Balfon. It runs east-west past the northern end of Balfon Tower; in order that no flats in it were deprived of sunlight by the tower standing immediately to its south, it is broken into two halves, with the main lift and circulation tower here placed between the two unequal halves, rather than at one end of the block. Its horizontal proportions contrast with the vertical proportions of Balfon Tower. The warm-toned south façade, lined with cedar boarding between crosswalls and its floor slabs faced with precast

concrete units with exposed Thames Valley aggregate, has full width balconies, unlike the west façade of Balfron and also unlike the west façade of 14-storey Glenkerry House (Block F of Phase III, built 1972-75).

### **Rowlett Street Housing Phase III**

At Glenkerry House, the principal building of Phase III, under pressure of the new Housing Cost Yardstick, a more economical solution had to be found that reduced balcony size. It incorporates features of Balfron and Carradale but introduces a new horizontal banding, reminiscent of the 1930s and which suppresses expression of the crosswalls. There is also a further variation on the circulation tower, which is here bent round at right angles at the northern end of the main block and not detached from it – a solution dictated by economy and the narrowness of the site. The boiler house here projects boldly from its summit with wrap-around glazing, as it does at Trellick Tower, but only tentatively at Balfron, where the projection resulted from a late decision to enlarge the boilers so as also to serve Carradale House.

Glenkerry has a slightly more domestic character, which introduces the remaining three low-rise blocks along Burcham Street (numbers 48-94, 26-46 and 12-24). These pick up the language of the brick bull-nosed crosswall lower blocks at the Edenham Estate and the Phase I Old People's Housing south of Balfron. These three low, gallery-access blocks enclose two very pleasant south-facing landscaped squares; one of these also contains a single-storey nursery and old people's 'facility', with an enclosed garden of its own with a witty large round 'window' in the surrounding wall. These blocks, with their mixture of bush-hammered concrete, bull-nosed calcium-silicate brickwork, and timber boarded surfaces are charming exercises in their own right, yet quiet so as not to challenge the three big blocks. They are in practically original condition.

### **Architectural character of Goldfinger's Brownfield Estate as a whole**

The three principal blocks – Balfron, Carradale, and Glenkerry – thus each have a different treatment to their principal façade, though their access-gallery facades are broadly similar, and are dominated by the projecting railway carriage-like access galleries on every third floor supported on pronounced and rhythmic brackets at every crosswall. The high-level bedroom strip windows on Balfron are abandoned on Carradale and Glenkerry in favour of paired lights of normal proportion, and the solid panels between them are uniquely timber boarded on Glenkerry, probably in response to its higher visibility. The array of slit windows on the north façade of Glenkerry is particularly impressive, punctuated by gargoyles. Glenkerry retains its original windows and the expressed concrete boiler flues (which have been replaced with steel on Balfron). Uniquely it never had the projecting 'cornice' feature at the skyline which is still present on Carradale but regrettably was removed c.1985 from Balfron.

The composition of Goldfinger's three principal blocks as a group – though only evolved *ad hoc* because he did not know when designing each phase that the adjacent site was later to be entrusted to him – is highly expressive and pleasantly varied, given the different heights and character of each. Together they form an S pattern – and they need to be read as an integral whole. The spatial sensibility characteristic of his work, the spatial permeability, characterizes the whole.

### **Goldfinger's social attitudes and the social history of Balfron Tower**

The early social history of Balfron Tower is noteworthy. Families living in the houses taken for the Blackwall Tunnel Approach roads and in unsuitable accommodation (often a consequence of the Blitz) were re-housed street by street. Of the 160 families housed, only two came from outside of Tower Hamlets, and former neighbours were rehoused in flats sharing a common access gallery, so as to maintain community spirit. Goldfinger received international publicity for staying with his wife in one of the flats in Balfron when it was first occupied. He did so for eight weeks, from February to April 1968, so as to document many aspects of life there, and assess them for himself; these included the adequacy of the lifts and the heating, whether the wind noise was excessive, and how well the windows worked. He was by this time 65 years old. His wife Ursula diligently compiled records of her own experience and of conversations with residents, about which an article was later published in the Twentieth Century Society Journal. Based on his experiences and residents' feedback, Goldfinger wrote a report for the GLC. He also established a strong relationship with residents, who made him an honorary member of the Tenants' Association. His request for permission to stay in Balfron was made privately, as can be seen from the surviving correspondence; it was the GLC that chose to give it publicity, under their Housing Committee Chairman Horace Cutler – who was a Conservative but nevertheless, it would appear, a keen supporter of Goldfinger.

It should be remembered that Goldfinger was both architect of the headquarters of the Communist Party of Great Britain, in King Street, Covent Garden (1946), and a good friend of its Secretary-General Harry Pollitt (as is evident from correspondence in the RIBA Archive), and also architect of a substantial building for the party's newspaper the Daily Worker, in Farringdon Road (also 1946). Both have since been demolished, but as commissions they testify to his sympathy with socialist thinking. Although he was apparently never a member of any Communist party himself, in France he had been an active member of the communist-linked Association of Revolutionary Writers and Artists. The social agenda of Balfron Tower is explicit, the format is that of a community, rather than simply of a stack of housing units, with a defined centre (implied by the expressed row of 6-person maisonettes at mid-height), and with extensive social facilities – laundry rooms, hobby rooms, community rooms, nursery - in the circulation tower and in the 'parterre' in front of the Tower. The open space is communal and the service towers and their connecting bridges represent and generate new ways of communal interaction, providing facilities and spaces for different age groups and opening to nine access corridors which maximise the number of front doors and opportunities for social engagement. It would therefore be regrettable if the Tower were to be converted into just more housing units on the private open market – as is in prospect: its architectural 'message' would be compromised.

### **The Brownfield Estate in the context of the Modern Movement**

As a composition as a whole, Goldfinger's Brownfield Estate reflects the Modern Movement ideal embodied in Le Corbusier's slogan 'Soleil, Espace, Verdure' (Sun, Space, Greenery) – the belief that by building taller but without necessarily much increasing the density these conditions could be obtained for the mass of the population. Architecturally this policy would create dramatic spaces, wide views, ample sunlight, privacy, and wide areas of green space at ground level, which could in turn be exploited as a sculptural surface. In all probability, with the Edenham Estate, this is the most forceful and convincing demonstration and example of this design philosophy in the UK. It is for this reason that all the spaces, incidental details of

hard landscaping, and minor buildings between the main buildings are of equal importance to the main buildings themselves, and should therefore be explicitly included in the listing description. A further characteristic of Goldfinger's work is that his office was always small and that he designed everything himself – books of standard office details were built up over time, which assistants were expected to follow (or woe betide them). The elegance of details such as window frames, specially made to his designs, is critical to the overall effect.

Goldfinger always maintained that he designed his social housing 'for himself' – as he would for himself to live in. But by the time Balfron Tower was complete the climate of architectural opinion in Britain had moved sharply away from high-rise social housing of any form and it did not receive wide publicity except that resulting from Goldfinger's stay there. Balfron reflected ideas that had been developed 35- 40 years earlier, designed by an architect who both understood their origins because he had been present at their birth, and had had time to become their master.