

# HOUSING, BLACKHEATH

## COUNCIL ESTATE, VANBRUGH PARK, LONDON

architects **CHAMBERLIN, POWELL AND BON**

photographs by *H de Burgh Galwey and John Maltby*

### criticism

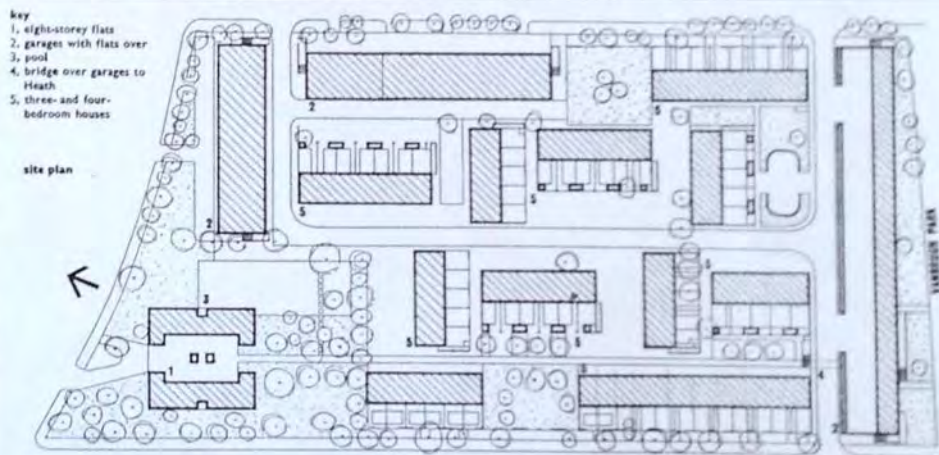
This sizeable estate is just round the corner from Sir John Vanbrugh's own castle, and it is perhaps appropriate that it should be designed by the architects who since the war have most nearly approached Vanbrugh in aesthetic provocation. The actual dwellings are only a part of the estate's apparatus for living. Geoffrey Powell, the partner in charge, made the crucial decision to build in concrete blockwork for the low-rise terraces which form two-thirds of the estate; and, with the money thus saved, a remarkably lavish treatment of the ground surface has been made possible, within the normal rock-bottom local authority budget. The single tower block is placed far back where it catches the attractive cross-river views without overburdening the Heath skyline. The intended relationship of the blind-walled terrace of the Heath-side garages to the Greenwich Park wall on the west has been sadly damaged by the neo-Georgian flats recently built between (see *AR* Outrage, December, 1963).

Within the boundaries of the two news-garage groups and the tower, the new grid of terrace houses has been brilliantly interwoven with the surviving grid of trees from the Victorian villas. The variety of spaces, open and closed, paved and grassed, are 'fixed' on a central avenue which is formally, but not too formally, closed by the white-tiled, hammer-headed lift tower of the tall block. Children actually play here—there is none of the 'ghost town' atmosphere of some LCC estates. Particularly successful are the brick and concrete pergolas framing each garden from the public way; with a vivacity not entirely intended by the architect, tenants are gradually filling them with multi-coloured trellises in individual patterns. Along the western edge of the site these pergolas have been used, like Wilkins's screen at King's College, Cambridge, to give an open-and-closed relationship to the surrounding townscape. The massive pick-hammered concrete frame of the tower, perversely out of scale with the rest of the estate, is reflected in a pleasantly irregular pool (which is rapidly becoming an open sewer, through lack of upkeep by the council). The architect's ingenuity, or perversity, has led to some needless eclecticism—oell-de-boeuf windows

in the terraces allegedly pinched from a Loire chateau, Imperial Roman lunettes which jar the base of the tower—but also to such admirable details as the concrete canopies on the flank walls designed to conceal whatever bracket lights the local authority cared to install.

Apart from an excess of glazing in the tower block and in the news flats, the private spaces are as admirably planned as the public spaces; they compare very

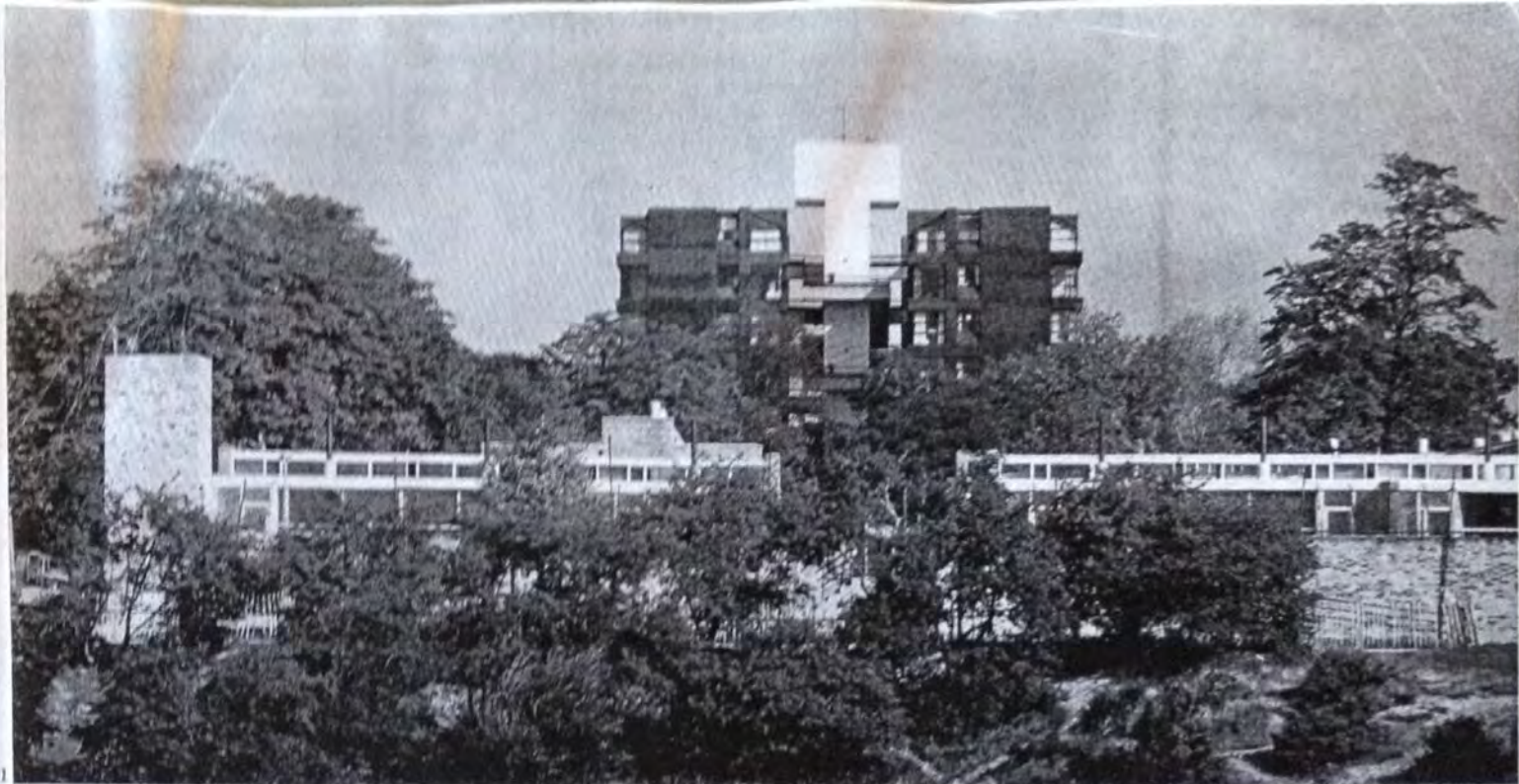
terraces the exposed concrete blockwork, never before used in London for council housing, mystified the District Surveyor, who suggested rendering, tile-hanging or various gnome-in-the-garden treatments. Eventually the architects agreed to a thick, elastic paintlike finish, a neutral brown in colour. This too has not worked out, having faded to a dull slate grey. It is a pity that the attractive pale grey of the naked blockwork could not have been kept.



favourably with Eric Lyons's Span houses at twice the price on the other side of the Heath—and let no one be so snobbish as to regret that the £4-a-week tenants are receiving the same privileges. The internal layout is compact enough to make the stove a central focus, with its concrete flue free-standing in the stairwell; this has the directness of expression associated with Scandinavians such as Erskine.

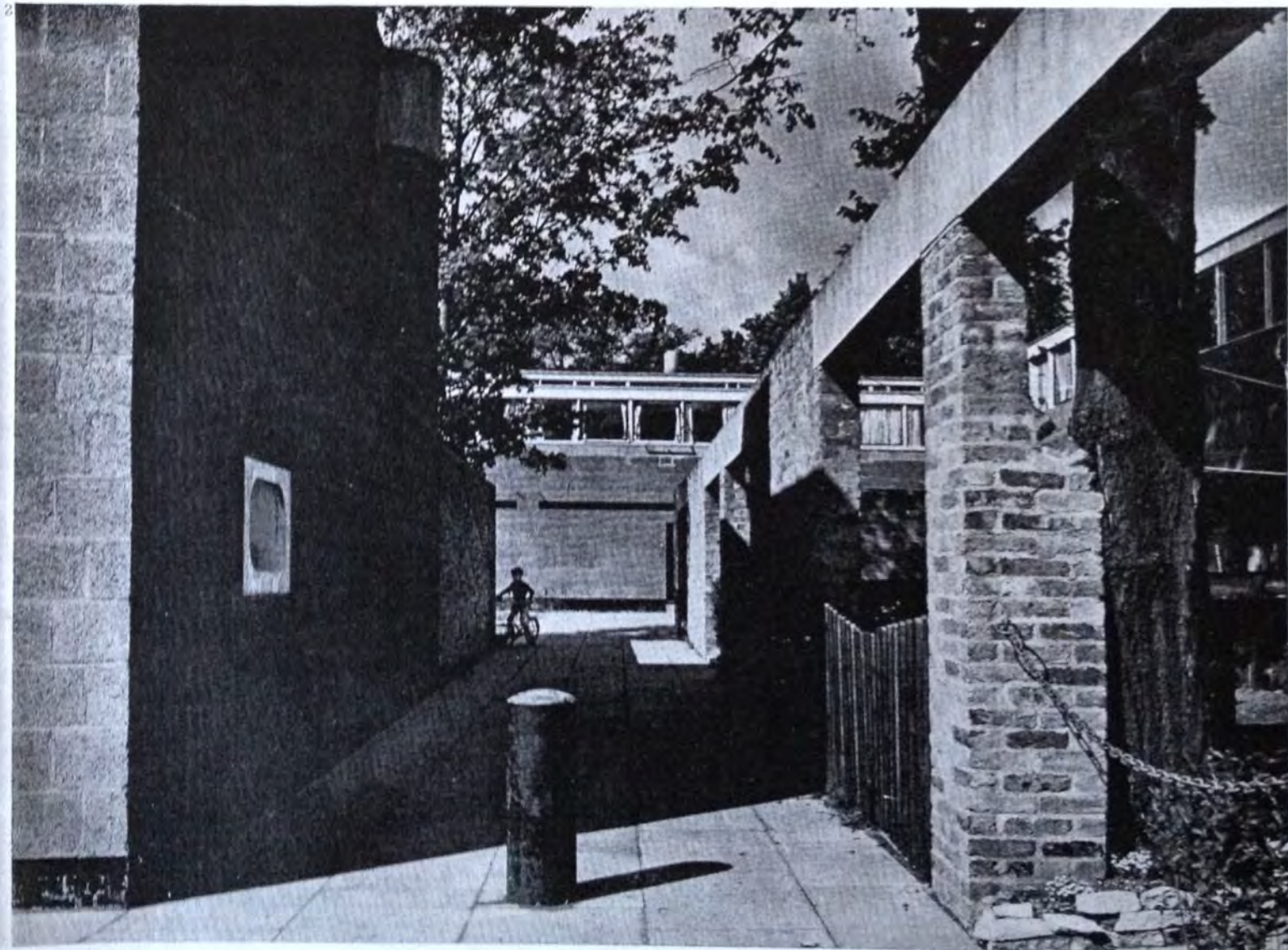
In spite of the obvious care and forethought, something has gone badly wrong, not in the design but in the execution—and it is hard to separate one from the other. The strongly dramatised tower block demanded a high quality of concrete in its two linked slabs, to match the brilliantly white tiling of the lift stack. The pick hammering of the flanks revealed the normal Thames Valley ballast aggregate and, feeling this was not enough to overcome rust stains and spots of pyrites, the architects specified an overall dark brown stain. Unfortunately the staining was insufficiently tested and it dried forming a seal so that any overlapping of coats produced dark irregular bands. On the

Worse than any of this, however, is the appalling quality of the contractor's work throughout. Whatever provocation there may have been from a lively architect, there can be no excuse for the grimly blotched concrete of the balconies in the tall block (shades of Peabody), for the mortar-spattered brickwork of the garden walls (the re-used stocks are made to look like scrappy rejects rather than mellowed antiques), and above all, for the lamentable failure to lay the concrete blocks in evenly aligned courses, which goes far to nullify the crisp geometry of the terraces. These things matter in the long run far more than the fact that the job was finished over a year behind schedule. In the delay, the scaffolding on the Blackheath side has rusted so much that it has dripped indelible stains all along the retaining brick wall which the general public sees across the open grassland of the Heath. Perhaps a borough council, with its much smaller programme of work, is unable to exert such discipline on its contractors as the old LCC admirably achieved on the same small budgets. N.T.



1, general view across the Heath with the mews flats in the foreground. 2, typical view of alleyway between houses.

showing treatment of paved areas and garden enclosures between terraces built of concrete blockwork.



3, near view of eight-storey flats, showing two slabs linked by lift tower clad in white tiling. 4, distant view of the same, looking along the 'processional way' from the Heath to the tower.



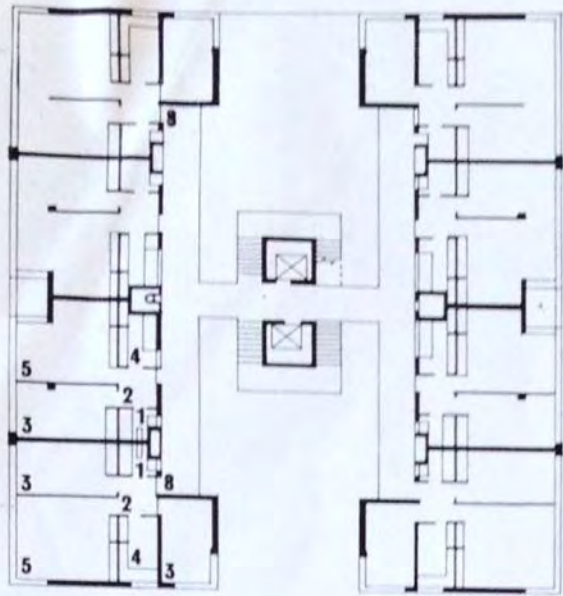
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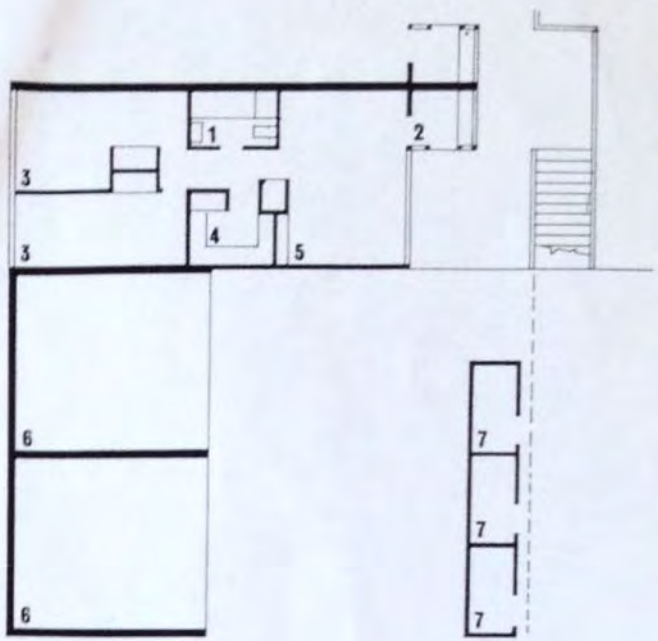


The Vanbrugh Park housing scheme, designed for Greenwich Borough Council, lies on the south side of Blackheath, east of Greenwich Park. The level site, of just under seven acres, was previously occupied by war-damaged Victorian houses and their gardens and possesses a number of mature trees mostly lying along the old garden boundaries. The scheme consists of a mixture of houses and flats, built to a density of 90 persons to the acre. Most of the flats are in one block of eight storeys (plus a low-level storage floor), which has been placed at the north end of the site to make the most of good views over the Thames valley and so as not to be too prominent in the views towards the site from the Heath. Other flats occupy a single floor over the terraces of garages, which are on the perimeter of the site for reasons of access. Those facing the Heath have garages on the inner side only, so as to present an unbroken wall towards the Heath. This wall is of old bricks and continues the old wall of Greenwich Park. The houses are laid out in short terraces, enclosing

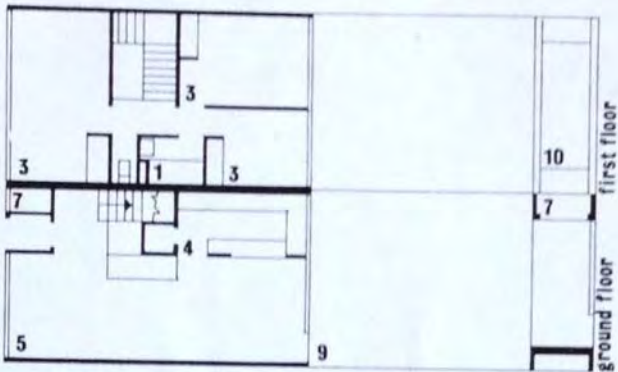


20 10 0 10  
eight-storey block, typical floor plan

- key  
1, bathroom  
2, hall  
3, bedroom  
4, kitchen  
5, living/dining room  
6, garage  
7, store  
8, balcony  
9, garden  
10, pergola



20 10 0 5  
three room news flats over garages



20 10 0 5  
four room house, ground and first floor plan



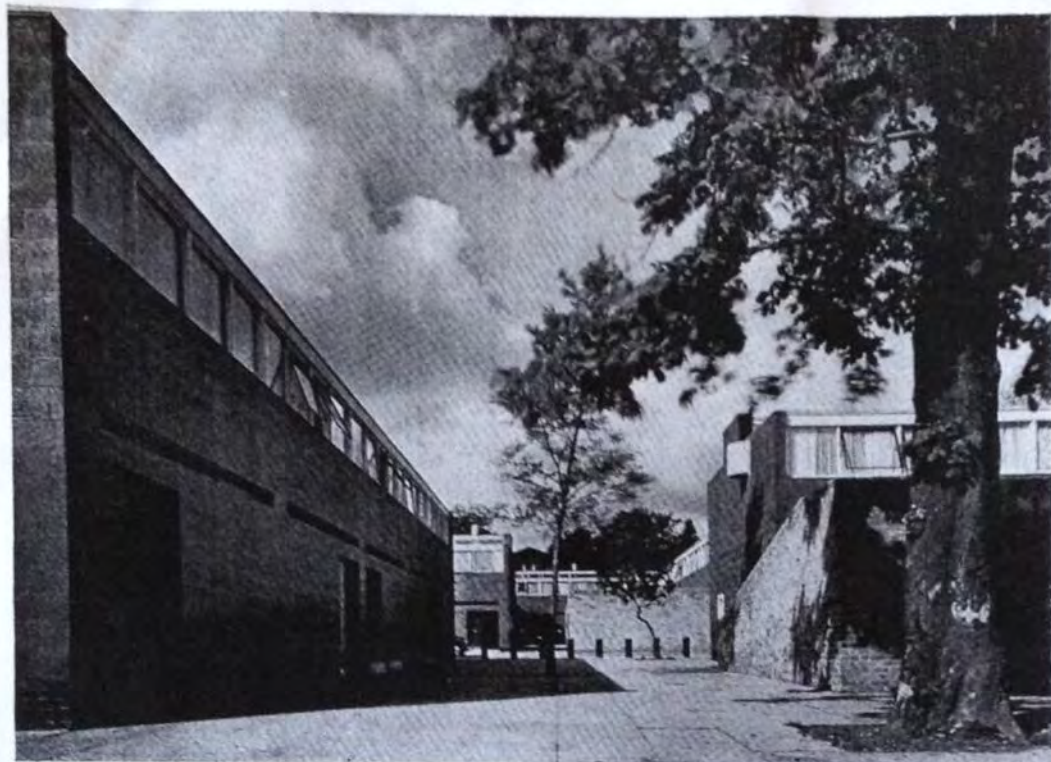
courts connected by alleys, and each has a small garden, partly brick walled. The site, being surrounded by wide roads, is screened from them either by its own buildings or by sections of brick walling, the latter being set back to preserve the lines of old trees. The access roads within the scheme do not allow through traffic. They serve a separate system of pathways one of which passes through the high block and reaches the heath by means of a bridge over a sunken section of the road.

There are three types of plan, with two variations. The high block has a two-room type and a variant formed by adding a second bedroom at the end of the block. The flats over garages are a three-room type. The houses have four rooms with a variant where a fourth bedroom (or study-bedroom) is added at a lower level where there were dips in the site on the lines of old basements. This room has direct access from the garden and its own lavatory. The house plans centre round the stove, which is encased with blockwork to form a large mass for the retention and diffusion of warmth.

The houses and the garage flats are of cavity wall construction, both leaves being of concrete blocks containing their own additional cavities, which gives good insulation and water exclusion. On the outside they have a thick elastic paint-like finish. Floors and roofs are timber. The high block is of reinforced concrete with a Thames valley ballast aggregate pick hammered and afterwards stained. Windows are galvanized steel in softwood frames.

Assistants in charge, Brian Frost and Michael Thomas. Structural engineers, Taylor, Whalley and Spyrá. Electrical consultants, Greenwich Borough Council. Quantity surveyors, Davis, Belfield and Everest.

5, south-east view of flats, overlooking the pool and stepping stones.



6, typical courtyard, with inclusion of existing grid of garden trees within new grid of terraces. 7, special four-bedroom type, using existing excavated basement area to provide extra bedroom and lavatory. 8, north-eastern corner of site, showing drying area next to two blocks of mews flats over garages. 9, detailed view of garden enclosures, showing private enterprise ornament within the architects' arches.

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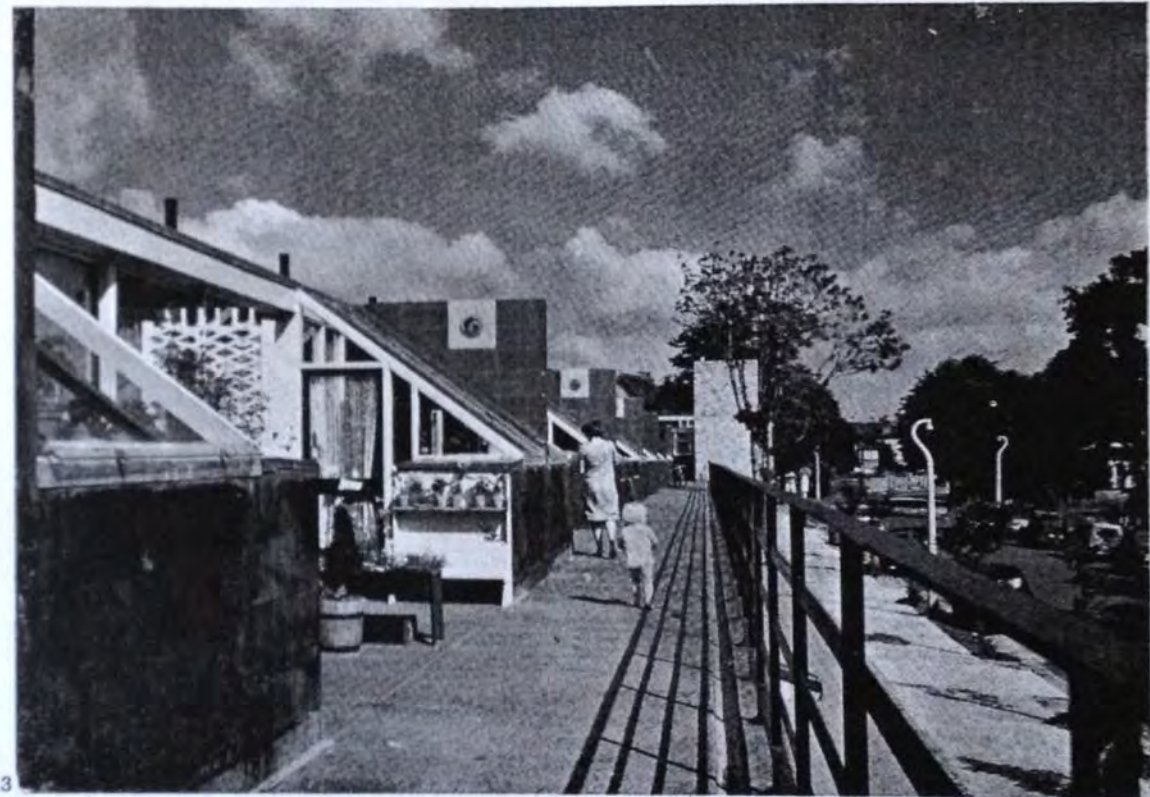
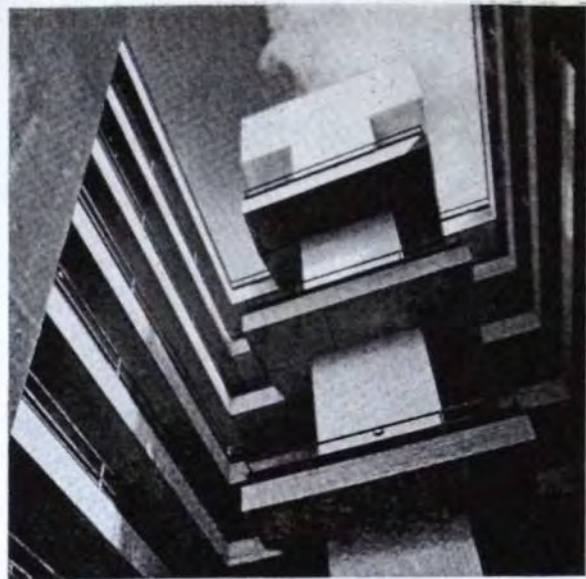
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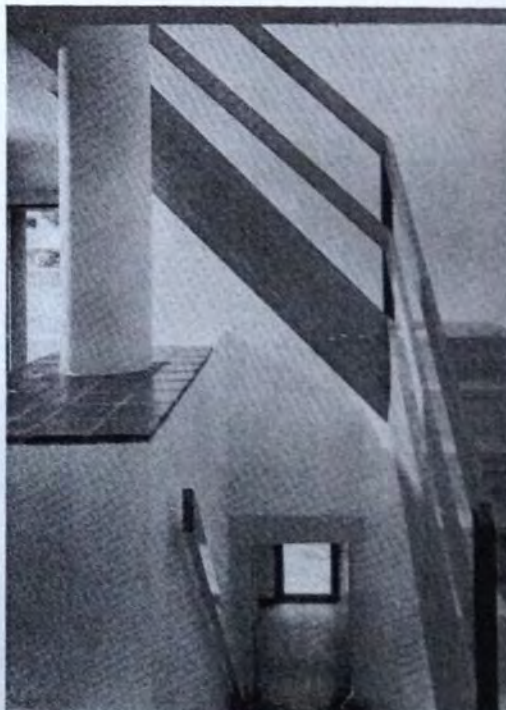
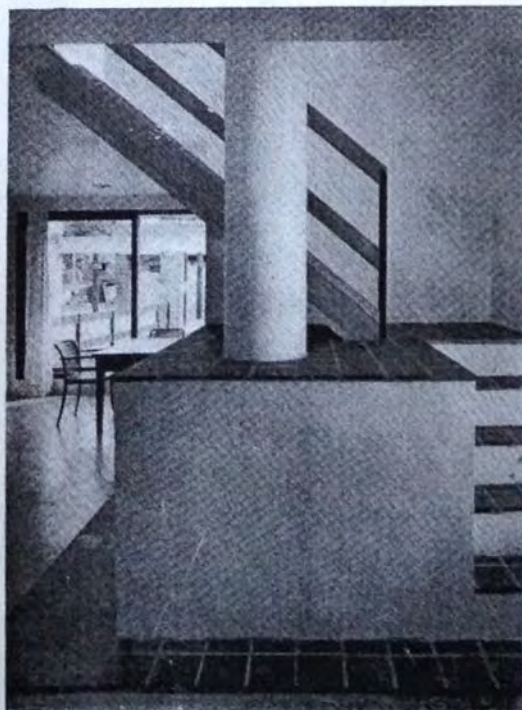


10, top floor of flats, seen through lift and staircase tower. 11, view from south-east corner of site, showing pergola towards street and tower block in the distance. 12, lift tower of flats seen from ground. 13, access terrace of mews flats, showing tenants' treatment of glazed porch. 14, northern block of mews flats seen from pool at base of tower block.



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15, detail of concrete shade to light fitting. 16, interior of living room in three-bedroom house, showing central stove and chimney in staircase well. 17, same view of four-bedroom type, showing stair up from basement immediately behind stove.



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