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Alexandra Road Park by J & L Gibbons and Erect

21 October, 2015 | By [Laura Mark](#)

The restoration of Alexandra Road Park stays loyal to Neave Brown and Janet Jack's original ideas, says *Laura Mark*

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The play spaces of sixties housing estates have received a lot of attention this summer. The [RIBA's recent Brutalist Playground exhibition created by Turner Prize-shortlisted practice Assemble](#) and the subsequent talks programme that accompanied it re-enlivened the debate about the UK's unloved concrete playspaces.

But Alexandra Road estate's four acres of playgrounds and open spaces differ to those of the other sixties housing estates. Unlike, the spaces of the Balfron Tower, Churchill Gardens and the Brunel Estate referenced in the RIBA exhibition, Alexandra Road Park is distinctly more green. The lush planting which has grown up over the years now characterises the park which lies in the heart of Camden's built-up urban environment.

Architect Neave Brown designed the park's walls, steps, and ramps as part of his 1978 520-home estate before enlisting landscape architect Janet Jack to fill the areas he'd created with planting, playgrounds and open spaces. This landscape architect and architect team stands this design apart from other Brutalist estates where the playground spaces were usually designed by the architect with little regard for planting. The result was often stark concrete playgrounds which were eventually deemed unsafe and perpetuated the reputation these Brutalist estates have today.

You were more likely to see a burnt out car than children playing

Alexandra Road Park was heralded by Twentieth Century director Catherine Croft as 'one of the most important modernist landscapes in the country' but over the years the park has suffered from significant neglect. Neglect which Brown says made him 'furious'. A meeting point for local gangs – 20 years ago you were more likely to see a burnt out car in one of the playgrounds than children playing. Subsequently most of the playgrounds had been removed, management ceased and trees and plants became overgrown. But despite the loss of the playgrounds and a grass bowl, which was replaced by a circular lawn, Brown's original vision remained largely intact.

Spearheaded by the estate's residents group, a bid was put to the Heritage Lottery Fund to bring the park back to life. In 2003 the group won £1.5 million and work began on transforming the park.

Landscape architect and architect have again worked side by side on the project. Landscape architects J & L Gibbons have led the project assisted by playground specialists Erect, while Jack and Brown have both been involved in the revitalisation efforts. Jack had saved all the drawings for the original landscape and these have now subsequently been donated to the Garden Museum but prior to this were an invaluable help to J & L Gibbons.

The park's walls form part of the elements protected by the estate's grade II*-listed status and had to be carefully restored. These walls – which are so key to the park - were also part its downfall. Management was neglected allowing the trees and shrubs to grow up around the walls making visibility into the park difficult. Now with planting stripped back, sightlines have been restored and the feeling of the playspaces' contained rooms created by the walls can be felt once again.

For most of the playground's Erect took a key feature from the original designs and worked around it. In the smaller children's playground – the first you reach if approaching from the estate's community centre – Jack's original blockwork shell walls have been taken as inspiration and used alongside timber playstructures to create places for children to climb and hide. While in the playground reserved for older children, Jack's long-gone geodesic dome climbing frame has been replaced with a yellow structure inspired by the triangles of the original dome.

Playgrounds have to be more than just a slide and a swing

When Jack originally designed the playgrounds she was asked to pick from a catalogue, the result was simple playgrounds using swings, and slides. But Erect's Susanne Tutsch tells me: 'Playgrounds now have to be more complex and challenging to be of interest to children. It has to be more than just a slide and a swing.'

It strikes me that arranging playgrounds by age in this linear way would rarely be done nowadays. I think of the single-mums battling as young children and old rush off to the different playgrounds at opposing ends of the park and worry about security issues. But this is a modern day worry, and one which the architects seem unconcerned about.

Jack's original design also anticipated the movement of children through the linear park allowing for them running through bushes and jumping over walls. These desire lines, highlighted through 30 years of use, have been picked up in J & L Gibbons' landscaping design.

Alongside the original walls, the park's concrete benches have also been restored and replaced. Moulds for the bases were made using existing intact benches and the result is fitting.

'It is impossible to replicate every detail', landscape architect Neil Davidson says. But it is hard to see where they have strayed away from the park's original vision.

It's hard to see where they have strayed from the original vision

The scale has changed since the estate was completed in 1978. At that time the park's landscaping was dwarfed by the surrounding housing but in the past 30 years the trees have grown and now reach the height of the buildings which once towered over them, changing the feel of the park.

Erect and J+L Gibbons' work has brought the park back to life – making it a place where residents want to spend time. The changes have even won over Brown. 'I was apprehensive about visiting it at first', he tells me. 'But everything they have done, they have done well. I'm incredibly impressed by the care and attention they have taken. Where they have changed things they have done it with great sensitivity.'



Project data

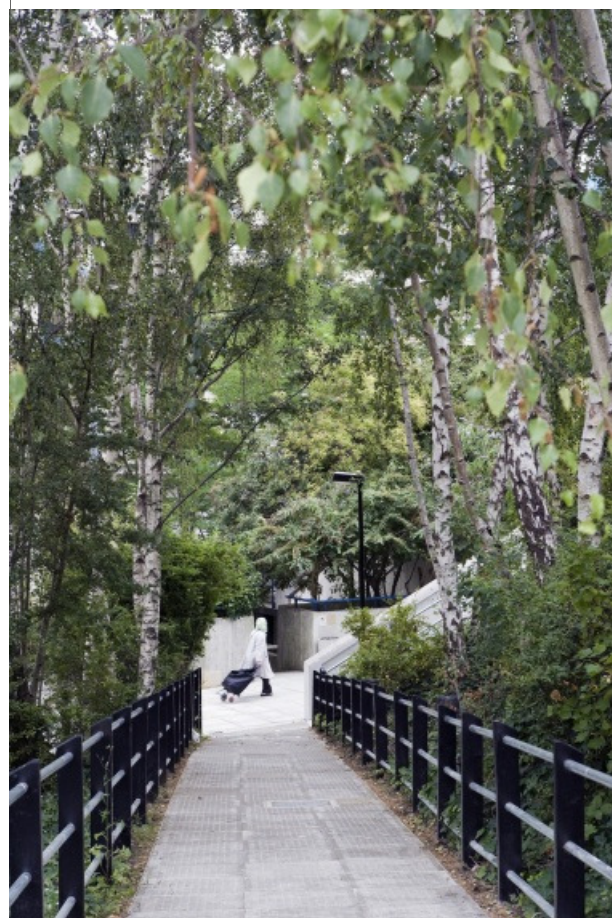
Location London
Type of project landscape
Landscape architect (lead consultant) J & L Gibbons
Architect (play area designer) Erect Architecture
Client London Borough of Camden, Heritage Lottery Fund, Friends of Alexandra Road Park
Structural engineer Jane Wernick Associates
M&E consultant Skelly & Couch
Quantity surveyor Artelia UK
Project manager Around the Block
Historic landscape consultant Sarah Couch Historic Landscapes
Activity planner MTW Consultants
CDM co-ordinator Artelia UK
Main contractor Ground Control
Start on site September 2014
Completion August 2015

Gross site area 12,500m²

Form of contract or procurement route JCT Intermediate Contract

Construction cost £1.25 million

Construction cost per m² £100/m²



Project brief

Alexandra Road Park is a neighbourhood public park in a built up urban area of inner London. It occupies an area of 4.2 acres 1.7 hectares area of Designated Open Space, the core park area is 1.25 hectares which connects to several adjacent plaza spaces which create entrance areas connecting the park to the surrounding neighbourhood. The park is linear in its layout and structured by a series of diagonal paths which cut across the open space, maximizing use of the space and creating a series of 'outdoor rooms' with different characters, for relaxation and play. This structure is enlivened by a dramatic three-dimensional landscape of ridges and valleys which create excellent views over the space from raised gardens and plazas, as well as more intimate sunken spaces.

This structure is enlivened by a dramatic three-dimensional landscape

Alexandra Road Park is a valuable example of a C20th landscape conceived and executed as an integral part of the groundbreaking Alexandra Road estate, commissioned by London Borough of Camden, completed in 1979 and now grade II*-listed. The park is of special significance because the original topography designed by Neave Brown, the estate architect, and a substantial amount of the original planting designed by Janet Jack is essentially still intact. The park has suffered from a lack of management and maintenance and today is in a state of dereliction and neglect, with the result that it is underused, even by the community who overlook it.

This project restores the park to its former glory

This project aimed to improve and rejuvenate the park, enabling the original design intent to be experienced and appreciated by a wide range of local residents and visitors. The proposals present an opportunity to restore and conserve the original design of the park and to reintroduce the playable landscapes that were an intrinsic part of the original design. There are a number of features that make Alexandra Road Park special and some of these features have been lost due to insufficient maintenance or removed and damaged. This project restores the park to its former glory, adding new features where appropriate to make it more enjoyable for current and future generations all set within the framework of a robust and achievable maintenance and management plan to ensure the park is more sustainable.

This has been achieved through a programme of works to improve the existing planting and repair existing park elements which are derelict including:

- restore and enhance the original park landscapes and planting
- restore the hard landscaping and improve accessibility
- reinterpret the original play landscapes with new playgrounds reflecting current best practice
- improve biodiversity across the site

- enable the original design intent to be experienced and appreciated by a wide range of local residents and visitors

Neil Davidson, J & L Gibbons



Architect's view

The refurbishment of Alexandra Road Park truly involved all generations. There was the unique exchange between the design team and the original landscape architect Janet Jack. It provided first hand insight into the original intent and context and tested those against contemporary issues. It ensured a continuity of vision, crucial for an HLF funded project.

At the other end of the age spectrum were the kids of the estate, challenging and improving our playground designs throughout the process.

In the middle our generation: the residents making it all happen whilst inspiring an affection for the estate, and the design team, skilfully led by JL Gibbons, enjoying the complexities of the project.

The brief for the playgrounds was unique, characterised by a dichotomy between reference to heritage and current best playground design practice.

Set within this rich, lush urban park the original playgrounds were contained within concrete 'rooms'. The play provision was low key, characterised by simplistic structures and urban materials. Playgrounds at the time were not much of a consideration - Janet Jack had been handed a catalogue to choose equipment from.

At the core of our interest as play designers has always been the aim to reconnect urban children with nature. Our first such playground coincided with the publication of Play England's Guidance, now considered best practice. Playgrounds do so by using natural materials and creating natural, bespoke, complex, evocative yet abstract settings. To invite us was a leap of faith by JL Gibbons and the client given our track record of natural playgrounds and the urban context at hand.

Our designs picked up on features within the original playgrounds, increased the complexity of the play offer, added play types and sensory experiences and increased risk and challenge to provide modern playgrounds inspired by the originals.

Susanne Tutsch, Erect Architecture



Landscape architect's view

The restoration of Alexandra Road Park was fascinating from the outset, involving the restoration of the most modern heritage asset that HLF have funded and cited as 'the most significant landscape of its type in the UK'. Many will be familiar with the iconic architecture of the estate designed by Neave Brown, but may not even know of the park designed by Janet Jack in 1979 which lies at the centre of the estate.

There are several critical aspects to a project such as this that makes it fulfilling and enjoyable to deliver, and that includes an informed and supportive stakeholder group, a funder with high expectations, a design team with exceptional expertise, and a contractor engaged in delivering a demanding project, we also had the rare benefit of the original author of the park fully engaged.

We had the pleasure in meeting Janet Jack several times to enable us to fully appreciate the original design intent, reflected in the Conservation Management Plan researched expertly by Sarah Couch which formed the fundamental basis of our approach to untangling the wildness, reframing views, restoring and revealing the engineered

topography and structure of the park defined by distinctive geometry of the walls and level changes, and enhancing the rich spatial pattern. We reviewed design proposals thematically with Janet around planting, biodiversity and play. These stimulating sessions considered the management of the existing resource to preserve the sense of 'wildness' while opening views and developing the understory; grafting of new elements including play features designed by Erect Architecture; evolving a long-term vision based on sound horticultural and conservation practice, to ensure that through design the park management is much more than operational, rather it is a creative process of securing the park's character and qualities for future generations.

Neil Davidson, J & L Gibbons



Client's view

When I moved to the Alexandra and Ainsworth estate in 2010 I enjoyed a view from my kitchen windows of what looked like a dense forest. When I explored further, I was amazed to discover dramatic concrete walls, sunken spaces, formal gardens and secret pathways and realised this was in fact a park that had become overgrown. But I could see that it was a special and unusual topographical design and had once been an amazing modernist landscape.

It didn't take long for me to connect with other residents who had been wondering for many years how to bring the park back to its former glory. A small group of us from the Tenants and Residents Association kick-started the restoration project by boldly deciding to prepare a funding application for the Heritage Lottery Fund's 'Parks for People' programme and secured agreement from Camden to this approach. These origins established a strong resident-led ethos within the project which was maintained even as it grew into a major capital project following award of HLF funding, and has been one of the distinctive and highly successful features of the whole process.

The process of developing the proposals was really creative

The consultants involved in the Alexandra Road Park restoration all shared our deep appreciation of the design and the specialness of the park – even in its overgrown state – which made the process of developing the proposals really creative and enjoyable as there was a strong shared desire to be true to the original

vision. This has resulted in a wonderfully coherent and exciting restored park, with replanted landscapes and bold new playgrounds set amongst the now fully mature original trees and restored concrete walls and ramps.

It has been a pleasure both to hear residents who knew the park when it was first completed in 1979 comment on how recognizable it is again, and to watch the local children claiming not only the playgrounds but the whole park as their 'playable landscape' as originally intended.

Eleanor Fawcett, Friends of Alexandra Road Park



Alexandra Road Park when it was completed in 1978

Original architect's view

When the buildings were built along the railway it meant a lot of excavation to get down to stable ground. We lowered the whole area so we could build. I thought it was fantastic. It was just what I wanted to do. All the topsoil was kept on site. The site was originally flat from one end to the other and lined with Victorian houses.

Camden bought the site and wondered whether to restore these houses or knock them down and build more. It was at a time when the borough had a tremendous housing backlog. They decided to clear the site and build new housing at a much higher density. They had a 16 acre site and every body in the area wanted to put something on it – so we got the housing, the school, the community centre, the home for handicapped children, a playcentre, a youth club. The brief brought all these things together.

It was created at a time of high idealism

One of the things they wanted was a park. There was no place for anyone to go in the area. The houses around there are some of the richest in London - but there is no park. It was at a time of high idealism. They were delighted with the idea of putting council housing at the top of this very rich area and embellishing it with a park. They wanted a four acre park without losing the housing density. We came up with the long continuous street.

The design is basically a late-eighteenth to early-nineteenth century model, which is a long continuous building. If you think of Pimlico, Belgravia – all those areas – there are parks with housing around. So that's what we did. It was a traditional plan with totally modern buildings and a modern way of thinking.

I know nothing about planting so I brought in Janet Jack. She was wonderful. I told Camden I would design the space but I can't design the planting. I told them we needed to employ a consultant.

The site had two levels so we started with the problem of levels. The idea was to use all the topsoil we had to create a three-dimensional site. This had never been done before – as far as I know. We sunk the playgrounds, the playcentre building at the end, and put an embankment all the way along the Boundary Road side. We made walkways across the site all on diagonals – we had an excuse to make a complex geometry. All the playground walls are on different diagonals. These were also designed to protect the housing and stop residents from being overwhelmed by the noise of the children. The playgrounds were made so you can never see all the way through – it was supposed to be a bit mysterious. It was all part of a strategy – instead of making one single open space, we made it with as many separate places which you could sit, walk, play or sunbathe. It was beautiful when it was finished and the concrete was white.

The park was in a terrible state

I was deeply furious to see Camden neglect the park. It was always beautiful in its own way – just neglected. It needed attention. It was a mess. The playgrounds had been stripped out. Camden had completely neglected it. It was in a terrible state.

At the park now very little has changed. It is more or less as I designed it. There have been a few changes, such as at the Abbey Road end – where the play centre building is – there are new walkways up into the park and there was a children's adventure playground by the football pitch but this is now a grassy bank. Everything they have done, they have done well. I have no adverse criticisms. I'm incredibly impressed by the care and attention they have taken. Where they have changed things they have done it with great sensitivity. The playgrounds are not only nicely done for children but they are also aesthetically satisfactory. They've restored the seating as it was when we designed it. They have brought it back with great care and very sensitively.

Neave Brown, Camden Council Architects Department (1968)

Janet Jack's original geodesic dome structure in Alexandra Road Park when it was completed in 1978

Detail

In Playground 3 we wanted to unsettle the urban play structure with a sensual natural experience to express the dichotomy within our brief. The scent of the loose play bark surface and sensory planting permeate this playground.

The main play feature lands in this setting. It is a large climbing structure made from painted tubular steel - in reference to the main material of the original climbing structures. Our design deconstructs the original geodesic dome and re-assembles large-scale equal triangles to provide a multitude of play experiences. Each frame holds a different type of experience and activity: Sliding, swinging, lounging, rope and net climbing, balancing, bouldering. A variety of routes are



created, inviting games and competitions. Grouped swings, horizontal nets above sensory planting encourage socialising and playing together.

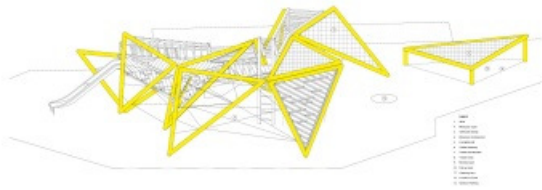
The need for children to learn to recognise, judge and negotiate risk through play is today widely acknowledged. Our structure hence pushes risk to the permitted maximum. The structure is tall and challenging and visible from afar. The playrooms are no longer hidden.

Just as the original off-the-shelf geodesic play dome, the detailing is robust, repetitive, industrial and simple.

When designing play structures falling conditions and entrapments are key considerations. Play safety inspectors thoroughly test structures with dimensional templates to ensure compliance with safety regulations.

The concept for the playground was developed through a series of physical models. During further design development we used 3D modelling to critically assess interfaces and junctions to design potential traps out early, ensure fall heights and distances complied.

Susanne Tutsch, Erect Architecture



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• [Katy Marks Fellner](#) | 21-Oct-2015 10:40 am

lovely

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