

# perspective



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## Alexandra Road: what does it mean for public housing?

The listing of Camden's Alexandra Road estate was a response to concern about current repairs, but there are wider implications

BY ANDREW MEAD

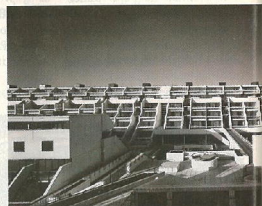
The decision to list Camden's Alexandra Road housing and adjoining community centre Grade II\* has come midway through a controversial programme of repairs on the estate.

Peter Brooke, the National Heritage Secretary, announced on 18 August that Alexandra Road would join Sir Norman Foster's Willis Faber building and the Smithsons' Economist building as one of the select exemptions to the usual 30-year rule for listing. Brooke hailed the estate as 'one of the most distinguished groups of buildings in England since the Second World War', and added that it was being listed immediately, because of concern about the quality of the current repairs.

Alexandra Road was designed in the late 1960s by the London Borough of Camden Architects' Department, with Neave Brown

as job architect, but was not completed until 1978. The brief required housing at the highest allowable density. There are 520 dwellings for over 1600 people in parallel six- and four-storey blocks, which are boldly modelled in reinforced concrete. They flank two gently curving pedestrian streets with the northernmost block forming an 'acoustic wall' against the railway line at its rear. The stepped-back section gives every dwelling a balcony. Neave Brown wanted to 'render irrelevant the sad distinction between public and private housing'.

The controversial repairs are to the concrete and public-lighting system on the estate. They are being carried out by the London Borough of Camden under the Estate Action programme, in the first of three phases of work which will cost over £8



Top: the present appearance of the Alexandra Road estate, looking west along Rowley Way. The block on the right shields noise from the railway line behind.

Above: photograph by Martin Charles of the estate soon after completion, first published in a comprehensive study in 'The Architectural Review', August 1979

million. Patch repairs to the concrete are necessary because there has been structural movement in some places, so expansion joints have opened and water has penetrated. Rainwater pipes carried within the structure have become blocked by small stones, leading to further water saturation of the concrete.

The original lighting system ran along conduits housed within the concrete. This

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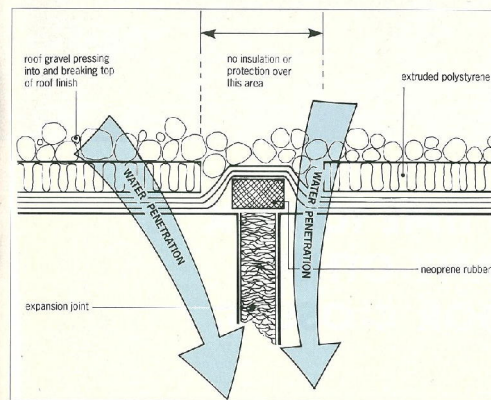


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Left: the controversial surface-mounted lighting system that replaces conduit originally concealed within the concrete. Centre: one of the patched areas of concrete. Camden says this is still to receive a top dressing coat. Below left: detail of water penetration at a roof expansion joint, as drawn by Forbes Bramble Associates in the study of the estate before the present repairs were undertaken. Above: the estate in 1976. A detailed account of construction methods appeared in AJ 8.9.76



cast-in system has corroded and it is no longer possible to draw wires through, so surface-mounted fittings are being installed on staircases and walkways. Future phases of work will include the installation of new security doors and windows to all the properties, further concrete repairs, and new landscaping.

Both English Heritage and DOCOMOMO are concerned that no attempt is being made

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nings, says: 'I remember how absolutely stunning it looked when I first moved in. I felt privileged to be here. But there has been a history of incredible neglect over the years.' She thinks that the patched concrete is 'outrageous' and that the lighting system is 'total overkill, really obtrusive and unpleasant'. She acknowledges, however, that other tenants feel differently and welcome the new lighting as an improvement to security.

Andy Brown, head of building design services in Camden, which is carrying out the work, says: 'We have tried to get a balance between respecting the original design of the estate and finding proper solutions, with guarantees for the next fifteen years, to the problems tenants are having.'

The concrete repairs will, he says, have a 'finished dressing coat' so the patches will be less conspicuous. As for the lighting, he says: 'We are not intransigent about other opinions.' He adds: 'I wouldn't dream of making decisions without consulting the tenants and the conservation lobby.'

The listing decision makes the involvement of English Heritage obligatory, so their officers will advise on all future phases of work on the estate.

The immediate effect of the listing is that Camden has to obtain Listed Building Consent in order to continue with the present works. But the wider implications of the decision remain to be seen. Is post-war public housing about to come in from the cold? Will Trelick Tower, Golden Lane and the Alton Estate join Alexandra Road on the Department of National Heritage list? □

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