Foundling Court and O'Donnell Court
Brunswick Centre
Brunswick Square
London WC1N

Proposed Video Door Entry System installation

HERITAGE STATEMENT

History

The Brunswick Centre comprises two linked blocks of 560 flats, incorporating rows of shops at raised ground level over basement car -parking on two levels, with attached workshops, ramps and steps. It was designed 1967-72 by Patrick Hodgkinson for Marchmont Properties and LB Camden, completed by L Brian Ingram and T P Bennett and Partners. The first scheme was prepared 1960-3 with Sir Leslie Martin, subsequent scheme developed 1963-5 by Hodgkinson, and modified 1966-8, assisted by F D A Levitt, A Richardson, D Campbell and P Myers.

Complex megastructure of two 'A-framed' blocks, O'Donnell Court and Foundling Court, linked by a raised podium containing shops and a cinema and set over a basement car park on two levels. The outer or perimeter range of five storeys, the inner or main range of eight storeys. Most of the flats on the upper floors have one or two bedrooms, with some studios at the ends, all with glazed living room extending on to balcony, which form a stepped profile down the side of the building. One larger flat and further small flats on the lower floors of the perimeter blocks. The raised ground floor is occupied by a shopping mall, whose projecting form forms two terraces above, linked by a bridge in the early 1990s when steps from the mall were blocked. The professional chambers, intended for functions such as doctor's surgeries, are now leased as offices and workshops. The cinema facing Brunswick Square descends two levels into basement. The basement on two levels has car parking.

The elevations are determined by the plan, with metal windows, and metal balustrading to concrete balconies. Mullions to concealed basement ventilation. Regularly spaced lift-shafts, staircases and ventilator towers reminiscent of Antonio Sant'Elia's scheme of 1914 for Milan Railway Station; there are comparisons too in the formal entrance to the shopping mall opposite Brunswick Square, where the framework of the structure is left open save for the cinema, largely glazed and with glazed doors. The flats are now entered via modern security doors and the internal 'A'-frame structure is exposed and makes an extremely powerful composition along the landings serving the flats.

Reinforced concrete, some now painted as was always intended, glazed roofs to part of each flat, otherwise roofs are flat. Flat roofs over shops form terraces serving the flats, on which are placed small 'professional studios'. The detailing of the building is simple. Concrete surfaces are left fair-faced, without modelling or surface texture. In terms of architectural impact the architects have concerned themselves with the overall effect of scale and innovative massing. Windows are steel W20 sections, once ubiquitous, but out of favour by the late 1960s. The building is made entirely of reinforced concrete, making the installation of new services impractical, other than face-fixed to external services. Security doors and door-entry systems were installed, presumably in the 1970s or early 80s, as a result of the flawed architectural strategy – huge semi-internal spaces, dark and unsupervised.

The Brunswick Centre is the pioneering example of a megastructure in England: of a scheme which combines several functions of equal importance within a single framework. It is also the pioneering example of low-rise, high-density housing, a field in which Britain was extremely influential on this scale. The scheme grew out of a theoretical projects by Hodgkinson with Sir Leslie Martin, and his own student work of 1953 though the Brunswick Centre more closely resembled Harvey Court, designed for Gonville and Caius College, Cambridge, in 1957, a design largely developed by Hodgkinson working with Martin and Colin St John Wilson. Brunswick developed the concept of the stepped section on a large scale and for a range of facilities, whose formality was pioneering. The housing part of the scheme was taken over in 1965 by LB Camden, and Hodgkinson liaised with the Chief Architect, S A G Cook. The Brunswick Centre influenced architects working for LB Camden, and can be seen in schemes by Neave Brown, Benson and Forsyth, and others built across the borough in the 1970s - and which in their turn were celebrated and imitated on a smaller scale elsewhere.

Presumably the Brunswick Centre was listed because it is the pioneering example of a stepped megastucture – a short-lived architectural strategy – and the scale of the buildings. Its closest relatives in London include Alexandra Road (Rowley Way) by Neave Brown, of 1972-8 and listed grade II*, which repeats the use of concrete and the stepped building profile, but achieves greater formality by concentrating solely on the provision of housing, set in a crescent. Alexandra Road is more successful on many levels – circulation is all external and supervised, the detailing of the buildings is sophisticated and elegant, providing visual interest from every viewpoint. Another relative is Thamesmead, designed by GLC Architects in the late 1960s, and partially demolished to eliminate places that harbour anti-social behaviour, and to avoid listing.

The Brunswick Centre was listed Grade II in September 2000. The List Entry Number is 1246230.

Proposed works

Approximately half the flats within the Brunswick Centre are sheltered housing, occupied by elderly or otherwise vulnerable residents. Camden Housing proposes to install a new controlled entry system serving only these flats, comprising video cameras at main entries together with new internal handsets. The existing voice controlled door entry system will have to be maintained for those properties which will not be upgraded, and in any event to all flats until the new system is commissioned. The construction and configuration of the blocks – reinforced concrete with non-continuous risers – necessitate face-fixing of new wiring. Internal wiring is not an option because of the design of the building, flats do not align with each other from floor to floor, and to avoid excessive disturbance to elderly residents. The new wiring will be contained within galvanized trunking which will largely be fixed to the soffits of projecting concrete access balconies. The trunking runs will be clean and simple with the minimum of bends or other visual clutter to detract from the predominantly horizontal lines of the building.

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