

## Case Name: Central Hill Estate, Lambeth

## Case Number: 1431543

### Background

We have been asked to assess the Central Hill Estate, including the adjacent Pear Tree House, Lambeth, for listing. The application has been prompted by proposals for the site's redevelopment.

### Asset(s) under Assessment

Facts about the asset(s) can be found in the Annex(es) to this report.

Annex	List Entry Number	Name	Heritage Category	HE Recommendation
1	1432557	Central Hill Estate, including Pear Tree House	Listing	Do not add to List

### Visits

Date	Visit Type
14 January 2016	Partial inspection

### Context

At present consultation with the Central Hill community is still on-going. The estate is not within a conservation area and has not previously been assessed for listing.

### Assessment

#### CONSULTATION

The listing applicant; Lambeth Borough Council (as owner and local planning authority); the Greater London Historic Environment Record (GLHER); the Twentieth Century Society (C20); the Central Hill Residents Association; and an interested third party, were provided with copies of our consultation report. We received responses from all those consulted, as well as from those who had not specifically been consulted but who are aware of our assessment and wished to express their views. The GLHER confirmed they had no comments to make, the contents of the other responses are summarised below.

LAMBETH BOROUGH COUNCIL (as local planning authority): considers that the estate is not of special interest at a national level, but that some elements are of local interest. The elements considered of local interest are:

- \* the 'Ways' for their architectural form and internal layout;
- \* the concrete refuse stores for their sculptural form;
- \* Pear Tree House for its direct association with Ted Hollamby [Lambeth's Chief Architect and Director of Development] and the inclusion of the basement bunker.

Criticisms of the estate as a whole include that it does not integrate well with its wider context; that exaggerated level changes increase the need for steps and ramps, contributing to an illegibility and impermeability, as well as making movement around the site more physically challenging; and that glazing has been replaced. The 'Prospect' blocks are considered repetitive and utilitarian, and criticisms of the 'Ways' include that the interlocking plan can cause nuisance from noise transfer between units; that the balconies are north-facing, affecting their amenity value; those at ground floor lack privacy; that the solid boundary on

one side of each of the paths which separates the blocks, and the blank end walls of the blocks, reduces natural surveillance; and the lack of copings on exposed wall heads has led to considerable staining.

Lambeth notes that Central Hill is the largest of the Hollamby era housing schemes to have a bespoke design, rather than to repeat designs and building types used elsewhere in the borough (which was a typical approach), and also notes the relevance of comparing Central Hill against other Lambeth schemes which might be considered to have been more successful.

Finally, Lambeth requests that if Historic England is minded to recommend listing, that consideration be given as to whether the interest of the estate might be captured in a representative part of the site, rather than in its entirety.

KM HERITAGE (acting on behalf of Lambeth Borough Council as owners): sets out the basis on which they consider that the estate does not meet the criteria for listing. Their response centres on three themes:

- \* the level of alteration: specific alterations noted include the replacement of aluminium windows with uPVC and the loss of some of the original glass balcony panels [replaced with clear rather than tinted glass]. The blocking off, cease of use, or change of use, of various other elements, such as some of the undercroft parking, garage chutes, and boiler house.
- \* the success, or otherwise, of the scheme as a piece of architectural design: noting aspects of the layout which create potential for crime or enhance the fear of crime, and raising issues regarding the accessibility and permeability of the scheme in the way in which houses and flats are accessed, how the buildings relate to one another, and how gradient of the site is managed. More technical issues were also raised, including the presence of asbestos, issues with cold bridging and damp, and noise transfer exacerbated by the interlocking planning of the maisonettes.
- \* comparison of the scheme against other housing estates of a similar date, concluding that Central Hill falls short of the examples which have already been listed.

HE response: relevant points raised by Lambeth and KM Heritage will be addressed within the body of the Discussion below.

C20 Society: supports the application for listing, stressing the early date of Central Hill in relation to other comparable schemes, noting specifically Branch Hill, Camden (1974), listed Grade II, and Maiden Lane (1976-81) (turned down for listing in 2009). The Society also considers that the estate reflects Hollamby's humanist approach to housing, and in particular his prior consultation with concerned local residents which was an untypical for the period, and reflects the communal nature of Lambeth's approach to estate development.

C20 Society also comments on the fact that the estate contains six different housing types within it, achieved despite the challenging topography. It emphasises its belief that the scheme is simultaneously complex and coherent.

APPROXIMATELY 20 RESIDENTS OF THE ESTATE: wrote in support of the application to list, setting out the particularly positive qualities which they consider to be inherent in the design. These include the generous proportions of the flats and maisonettes, both internally and in the external terraces and balconies; the quality of the views and natural light that their orientation and design allows for; the balance between private and shared space and the sense of community which this engenders. A number of the responses were from those who had lived on the estate since its construction.

KATE MACINTOSH (former member of Lambeth Architects' Department under Ted Hollamby): supports the application for listing, in particular stressing the importance of the architect Rosemary Stjernstedt, both as the group leader for the Central Hill project team, and as a successful, highly regarded, architect, at a time when very few women were in the profession. As the lead architect for Alton East, Roehampton (listed Grade II), for London County Council, she was the first woman to be appointed to a managerial level in the public sector. At Lambeth, Macintosh recalls that group leaders enjoyed a high degree of autonomy under Hollamby. She believes that Stjernstedt's approach to the role of group leader was such that she would have been actively involved in the design of the scheme, rather than just taking a managerial role, and therefore Stjernstedt should be credited as lead designer of the scheme (the listing application gave greater emphasis to Hollamby's involvement).

SEAN MACINTOSH (architect with Arup Associates and son of Kate Macintosh): supports of the application for listing, commenting that the scheme is “a great example of the re-examining of the street as a pedestrianized series of routes”, as well as a sensitive exploration of the sloping site and the views it offers. Sean Macintosh believes that of equal importance to the architect’s contribution to the scheme, is that of the Arup engineering team led by Ted Happold. He cites Central Hill as an example of Ove Arup’s concept of ‘Total Architecture’, explained by Arup as implying that “all relevant design decisions have been considered together and have been integrated into a whole by a well organised team empowered to fix priorities.”

LYNNE WALKER (Senior Research Fellow at the University of London): supports the application to list the estate on architectural grounds, but also as an exemplar of the significant role played by women architects in post-war design in the public sector. Lynne Walker sets out Rosemary Stjernstedt’s credentials as an important female architect in the post-war public sector and makes the case that she should be credited as the lead designer. She also draws attention to the tendency for the contribution of women architects to be under recognised as many worked for local authorities where credit has often been attributed to male department heads.

HE response: relevant points raised by C20, residents, Kate Macintosh, Sean Macintosh, and Lynne Walker are addressed in the body of the Discussion below.

## DISCUSSION

The Central Hill Estate is assessed for listing against the Principles of Selection for Listing (DCMS, March 2010) – the overarching criteria being special architectural or historic interest. Further guidance is set out in our listing selection guide: Domestic 4: The Modern House and Housing (April 2011). This guide acknowledges that while benchmarks have been identified, the assessment of post-war housing is particularly difficult as our understanding of the type continues to develop. Architectural interest, intactness of design, subsequent influence, and being a particularly good example of a development in housing will all be key considerations, as will whether or not a scheme fulfilled its original brief. Low rise developments in particular are difficult to assess as their simple virtues can be overlooked. To be listable they should survive reasonably intact, show special spatial imagination in their layout, and elevational treatments, though often simple, should be immaculately detailed.

The Central Hill estate is a social housing development, built 1967-75 by Lambeth Borough Council. The lead architect was Rosemary Stjernstedt. The adjacent Pear Tree House is a single flatted block, built slightly earlier, in 1965, to the designs of Ted Hollamby. Within the genre of low-rise, high density, social housing, Camden Borough Council is widely recognised as producing some of the most important examples nationally. Several of Camden’s estates have been listed, as have a small number of housing schemes produced by other authorities. After Camden, Lambeth produced the most consistent and extensive body of public housing, but an understanding of its output is still developing. Our 2012 report: Housing in Lambeth, 1965-80 and its National Context, has fed into this, but it is not an exhaustive study and does not contain detailed analysis of individual sites. When assessing housing for listing each example must be judged for its intrinsic interest and considered within the context of the wider genre; qualitative comparisons with other schemes can only be made against those which have also been assessed for listing.

It is certainly the case that Central Hill has claims to interest as an example of post-war social housing. It is one of the few estates nationally where the influence of continental ideas about recreating the ‘hill town’ in modern housing is explored on a large scale, and on a genuine hill. The idea was one developed by Le Corbusier with his Roq et Rob project of 1947, and realised by Atelier 5 in their highly influential Siedlung Halen scheme outside Berne in 1961. By placing new development on a hillside, its visual impact could be reduced while it would benefit from the views that its elevation afforded. The stepped forms of these types of development also often created a more irregular, romantic, aesthetic, than the typical modernist block which rises assertively from a flat landscape. The Bishopsfield estate, Harlow, designed 1961, built 1963-67, (turned down for listing) pioneered the hill housing concept in Britain. The idea was later explored by Camden Borough Council in schemes such as Alexandra Road, designed 1968, built 1975-78 (listed Grade II\*) and Maiden Lane, 1976-83 (turned down for listing), where the absence of a hill meant that a sense of gradient was designed into the buildings. This was not the case with phase I (the principal phase) of Central Hill, where the presence of a real hill presented great opportunity, but also real technical challenges to be overcome – the gradient had to be designed around, rather than designed in. The result is a scheme where the drama of the topography is exploited; the mass of the residential blocks is broken down into stepped forms which follow the contours of the site, injecting an irregular, fractured, aesthetic into their repeated forms.

The skill with which the challenges of Central Hill were met is in evidence in the complex planning of the terraced 'Ways'. The use of ingenious planning solutions – split levels, scissor plans, deep foot-prints with glazed partitions, etc., were a particular phenomenon of the more sophisticated low and medium-rise post-war mass housing. Again, it was Continental models, in particular the work of Le Corbusier, which inspired much of this creativity, compounded by the need for high densities, and the desire amongst local authority architects to create a better quality of housing for communities. In limiting the height of the Central Hill 'Way' blocks to three storeys, the need for tight planning was paramount. The solution, in the form of laterally interlocking L-shaped plans, is particularly ingenious, and allows each unit the benefit of much natural daylight, in many cases spectacular views, and two terraced outdoor spaces as well as the small private courtyards through which each house is entered.

Though not a deciding factor in any assessment for listing, the authorship of the scheme is also worthy of note. Rosemary Stjernstedt was a rare example of a female architect working at a senior level within the public sector; she was held in high regard by her contemporaries, and Central Hill is a major work by her. Stjernstedt led the design team on part of the LCC's much celebrated Alton Estate, and yet whether down to her gender, or her choice to remain in the public sector throughout her career, her name is not widely recognised even within her profession. Nevertheless, Stjernstedt's work is represented on the List, with the Grade II listing of the ten Alton East point blocks; the List entry for each recognising her as the Architect in Charge.

Central Hill is a successful and accomplished example of mass housing. Beyond the clever space planning within the blocks, the network of paths creates the sense of a small pedestrianized town, with a piazza by the shops, and informal pockets of soft landscaping throughout. The bunker-like bin stores provide interesting, sculptural, features, and the use of red brick setts gives the routes through the estate a warm, timeless quality which contrasts with the harder character of the white/grey flint lime bricks of the buildings. However, for all its positive qualities, phase I of Central Hill relies on the drama of its topography for much of its effect, rather than the virtuosity of its architecture. The 'Prospect' and 'Way' blocks are repetitious, with visual richness coming principally from their placement on a sloped, undulating, site, and the areas of landscaping which soften their geometric forms. In comparison with listed estates, such as those by Camden, there is not the formal complexity, or quality of detail within the architecture, which marks those out as exemplars. Coupled with this, the layout of phase I is not particularly innovative. The blocks are arranged in a linear fashion and their blank end walls underline the sense of repetition. The front doors of the houses in the 'Ways' are screened by walled yards, so to the north the narrow path which separates each block is not surveilled. To the south however, the path is overlooked by the lower balconies of the next block; the close proximity of the passer-by making these valuable private outdoor spaces less private. The benefits of this overlooking would be best felt at night, a time when the balconies are less likely to be in use. Further to this, as the end wall of each block is blind, there is reduced scope for passive surveillance of adjacent paths, where it might be well valued. The arrangement of some of the community facilities is awkward and unresolved. For example, the shops on the north boundary of the site were designed to face inwards, onto the piazza, but they are architecturally undistinguished, have never been functionally successful, and their relationship with Hawke Road (to which they turn their back) is not well conceived. The arrangement of the constituent parts is rational and broadly well-conceived, but there is not the creative integration of design and planning which might lift its overall achievement as an example of mass housing.

Phase II of Central Hill has a quite different character – much more introspective and domestic. It reflects the direction in which Lambeth housing headed in the 1970s – towards more traditional materials and building forms, but as a small adjunct to the much bigger phase I, it is not a key example of this typology for Lambeth. The slightly earlier Pear Tree House has a level of interest as a building believed to have been designed by Hollamby himself, and incorporating a former civil defence control centre. It is however not a work of particular architectural merit.

Designed in 1966, Central Hill represents a comparatively early exploration of the hill housing concept in the English context, on a site where the topography presented the genuine technical and planning challenges of building on a gradient, and on a large scale. It is not believed to have been influential however, rather it reflects ideas and approaches which were being explored and developed by architects of the period. Money, time, and design expertise has been invested in complex engineering and internal space planning, but not to the same extent in the external architecture and spatial relationships between the blocks. This is not a criticism of the scheme, which typifies Lambeth's humane approach to housing and is a credit to its lead architect, Rosemary Stjernstedt. It appears to have been, and remains, a popular and successful development, and an important example within Lambeth's notable output. The assessment for listing however is highly discriminating, and architectural interest is a key determinant for developments of this type and date. The estate lacks the combination of finely construed architectural units, integrated into a creative and sophisticated plan. Despite its merits, Central Hill, and the adjacent Pear Tree House, does not have the

architectural and planning quality to equal examples already on the List, and does not merit listing at a national level.

## CONCLUSION

After examining all the records and other relevant information and having carefully considered the architectural and historic interest of this case, the criteria for listing are not fulfilled. The Central Hill Estate (including Pear Tree House) is therefore not recommended for listing.

## REASONS FOR DESIGNATION DECISION

Central Hill (including Pear Tree House), a social housing development, built 1967-75 by Lambeth Borough Council, designed by a team led by Rosemary Stjernstedt, is not recommended for listing for the following principal reasons:

- \* Architectural interest: Central Hill relies on the drama of its topography for much of its effect, rather than the virtuosity of its architecture, blocks are repetitious and lack the formal complexity and quality of detail which marks listed examples out as exemplary;
- \* Planning interest: the overall layout of the estate is not unsuccessful, but it lacks sophistication and aesthetic variety;
- \* Historic interest: the estate reflects, rather than pioneers, ideas relating to the provision of mass housing which were evolving at this time.

## Countersigning comments:

Agreed. We have carefully considered the architectural and planning qualities and historic interest of the scheme, in the context of Lambeth's provision of social housing, and against wider comparators, especially contemporary development in London. Whilst Central Hill has many merits, it falls short of the very high bar for listing post-war housing estates. P Trevor 7.7.2016

# Annex 1

## Factual Details

**Name:** Central Hill Estate, including Pear Tree House

**Location:** Roman Rise, Hawke Road, Lunham Road and Highland Road, Lambeth, London, SE19 1EZ

County	District	District Type	Parish
Greater London Authority	Lambeth	London Borough	Non Civil Parish

## History

The Central Hill Estate was conceived as a large-scale social housing scheme by Lambeth Borough Council, as part of the redevelopment of the Central Hill and Gipsy Hill neighbourhood; it moved from outline proposal to completed development in the decade between 1965 and 1975. Although it was envisaged that it should be executed in a single-stage, delays in securing the necessary compulsory purchases resulted in there being two over-lapping phases. The majority of the site was developed in 1967-74 across 15 acres, providing 374 dwellings; the second phase was developed between 1972 and c1975 across three acres, providing 73 dwellings.

The design for Central Hill came out of Lambeth's Architect's Department, led by Ted Hollamby between 1963 and 1981. The department was organised into four groups, each with a lead architect who worked under Hollamby. Central Hill was the work of the group led by the experienced Rosemary Stjernstedt (1912-98), who Hollamby had brought over from London County Council (LCC) where they had been colleagues; other members of the team were Brian Roberts, Frank de Marco and Adrian Sansom. Stjernstedt trained at the Art School attached to Birmingham School of Art, subsequently taking an evening class at the School of Planning attached to the Architectural Association. She spent the war years in Sweden, working in the planning departments of Stockholm and Gothenburg, and in the first five years of her return to England in 1945, she worked for the Ministry of Town and Country Planning, the Ministry of Housing and Local Government, and the Stevenage Development Corporation. In 1950 she joined the LCC, where she became the body's first senior woman architect in management and design. She was one of five group leaders, and led on the Alton East Estate in Roehampton (listed Grade II). Hollamby brought her to Lambeth, where she led on the small Alexandra Drive scheme, and its sizeable, and slightly later, neighbour, Central Hill. She finished her career in the Housing Development Directorate at the Department of the Environment.

The Central Hill development site was previously occupied by a number of large Victorian villas, and its dramatic topography offered both opportunities and constraints. Situated on the crown of a ridge which extends from Sydenham (in the east) to Norwood (in the west), the site gave panoramic views of London to the north. The wooded skyline however was protected by a joint policy approved by the Greater London Council and the neighbouring Boroughs of Bromley, Croydon, Lambeth, Lewisham and Southwark, strictly limiting the acceptable height of the development to below the existing tree line. The steeply sloping nature of the site meant that significant engineering works were necessary. Ove Arup and Partners were the project structural engineers, and an Arups team, led by Ted Happold, was responsible for finding the solution to developing this difficult site. The development required a continuous reinforced retaining wall for much of its southern boundary, supporting Central Hill road, which the development nestles beneath. The clay subsoil, slope of the site, and high water table, required subsoil drainage to ensure against slip. Efforts were also made to retain mature trees on the site where possible, although much of the planting was added as part of the development.

The scheme which Stjernstedt and her team developed was an example of low-rise, high-density housing, which optimised the dramatic views to the north, and kept vehicles to the perimeter. The scheme also provided a group of shops, a community hall, a nurses hostel (the latter a requirement to replace a pre-existing nurses hostel already on the site) and a doctors' group practice in the easternmost part of the site, developed as the second over-lapping phase. It is not clear whether the second phase was the work of the same design team; its aesthetic is quite different from the first, and as it did not receive coverage in the architectural press (as the main development did) its authorship remains unclear.

Opposite the northern edge of the estate is a building called Pear Tree House. This slightly pre-dates the estate, being completed in 1966. It is believed to have been designed by Hollamby himself, and comprises eight flats and a civil defence control centre in the basement. Civil defence control centres were built in

response to the perceived threat of war with the Soviet Union in the post-Second World War period. As the political situation and the structure of London government changed during the 1960s, 70s and 80s, the control centre at Pear Tree House changed from a regional control centre to a borough control centre and back again, remaining as an emergency centre until the early 1990s. It was subsequently used as a store.

## Details

Social housing development, built 1967-75 by Lambeth Borough Council. The lead architect was Rosemary Stjernstedt.

**MATERIALS:** within phase I of the estate, the buildings are constructed of white flint lime bricks with exposed shutter-marked concrete floor and roof slabs. Balcony balustrades are bronze-tinted glass held in slender steel frames (some of the glazing has been replaced with clear glass). Pathways are red brick. The buildings in phase II combine white flint brick with hung artificial slate upper storeys and timber boarded entrance recesses. Windows and doors were timber, but in the great majority they are now replaced with uPVC.

**PLAN:** the site forms a shallow U shape, curving southwards from the north-east, and swooping back up to the north-west; it slopes steeply downwards to the north, with the slope of the north-east section curving round towards the west, creating a bowl-like form.

The first phase housing is laid out in rectangular apartment blocks, known as 'Prospects' (e.g. 'City Prospect', 'Valley Prospect' etc), and terraces known as 'Ways', or in one case, a 'Walk' (e.g. Bankside Way, Wychwood Way, and Plane Tree Walk). There are five Prospects, which are located along the southern edge of the site; these are four storeys high, with a flat roof and undercroft parking at ground floor. Within, they provide two-bedroom, split-level, flats which span the full depth of the building, and have balconies to the front and back. The terraced Ways step down to the north and west, all orientated so as to face down the hill. They are divided into flat-roofed terraces of about ten units, and these have complex interlocking, L-shaped, split-level, plans. Each block has three storeys, and each house is entered from the north or west on the middle floor, through a small walled courtyard. Each house has on this middle level a kitchen, dining and living room, and each either then has an upstairs, where the bedrooms are arranged above its ground floor rooms, and those of its neighbour, or a downstairs, where the bedrooms are arranged below its ground floor rooms, and those of its neighbour. Each house has two balconies: a smaller one off the sitting room, and a larger one off two neighbouring bedrooms, either below or above. In all, there are six different unit types across the estate.

There are a number of green open spaces interspersed throughout the site and, as well as the paths separating the Ways, which connect the site along its contours, are paths, steps and ramps which connect the site across the gradient, from north to south. The community facilities – the shops (with studio flats above), play area, and the community centre (with latter was not included in this assessment) are situated to the north of the site, at the bottom of the topographical 'bowl'. The shops are the only element which face southwards, into the site, looking out over a paved square, or piazza, with built-in benches and raised planters. On the opposite side of Lunham Road, which borders the site to the north, is Pear Tree House. The building shares the same palette of materials as the rest of the site and has four storeys of flats above a two-storey basement, built as a civil defence centre, which opens out onto a large garden. The former nurses' hostel, now used for short-term accommodation, is to the far west of the site and is a four storey block with a roughly cruciform plan; again, sharing the same palette of materials as the rest of the site.

The second phase of Central Hill is on a more level part of the site and the housing is arranged as small terraces, or blocks of flats, facing out onto surrounding roads, or onto small, irregularly-shaped, greens.

**EXTERIOR:** the overwhelming aesthetic of the estate is formed of the dramatic stepped terraces of the Ways which proceed down the site. The austere geometry of their blank end walls, and the square brick screens which divide rows of balconies, is contrasted with the downwards undulation of the topography, and informally planted green spaces, which are connected by a network of red brick paths. The straight, lane-like routes which separate the Ways are bounded on one side by the stepped balconies of one block, and on the other by the yard walls and entrance gates of the next block down. Throughout the site are a number of sculptural refuse stores. Formed of cast concrete, these have a bunker-like base, in some cases built into the slope of the site, topped with chimney-like chutes, and built-in planters.

The second phase housing is more domestic in character; much of it is arranged as two-storey terraced houses with small walled yards to the rear. The roofs are mono-pitched, creating a saw-toothed sky line. The houses are mainly inward-looking, facing small communal greens, whereas a block of flats to the south of the site faces onto the road, Central Hill. This has two storeys and a basement, and a lively geometric frontage of

protrusions and recesses, and a stepped, pitched, roof line. At the west end of the block is the former doctors' surgery, now flats.

INTERIOR: only one interior was inspected - this was one of the houses in a 'way'. It had an original glazed screen between the dining and living rooms – a feature common to many of the houses. The interiors were not originally specified with extensive built-in fittings and it is expected that most original features will have been lost, as is typical in large estates such as this.

## **Selected Sources**

### **Books and journals**

Amery, C, 'Housing, Central Hill, Lambeth' in Architectural Review, Vol. Vol. 159 no. 948, (February 1976), pp. 97-106

'Central Hill, Lambeth' in The Architect and Building News, (30 November 1966), pp. 944-945

### **Other**

E Hollamby, Central Hill Development Report, 1966

G Franklin and E Harwood, Housing in Lambeth 1965-80 and its National Context, Research Report Series no. 2-2014. Available at:

file:///C:/Users/pmetz/Downloads/HousinginLambeth1965-80anditsNationalContext.pdf

