

## Listing application Central Hill

Application type: New

Identification: Central Hill

*Subject:*

Location: Lunham Road, Lambeth SE19. The development is bounded by Central Hill, Roman Rise, Hawke Road, Lunham Road and Highland Road.

*Primary County/Unitary Authority:* London Borough of Lambeth

*Postal address:*

Threat: Lambeth Council has identified the Central Hill Estate as an area for potential regeneration. The final decision was scheduled to be made in June 2015, but has now been delayed until December 2015. (Lambeth Cabinet Report dated 27 July 2015: Investment in estates – Knight’s Walk, South Lambeth, Westbury, Central Hill and Fenwick estates.)

*Planning application:* No

Ownership & Occupancy: Ownership: LB Lambeth; Occupancy: various

Reasons:

*Historic interest:*

Central Hill was built as a public housing estate in 1970-74 by Lambeth Borough Council. The estate was designed and constructed by Lambeth Architects Department under Edward (Ted) Hollamby, Director of Development and former Borough Architect. The team leader was Rosemary Stjernstedt; assistants were Brian Roberts, Frank de Marco, Adrian Sansom.

The Central Hill development was conceived as the second stage of the Central Hill/Gipsy Hill neighbourhood area, the first stage being the development of the Alexandra Drive site, completed in 1967 (Central Hill Development Report, p. 2-3; A&B News, 30/11/66, p. 944). It also followed on from, and is built around, the Pear Tree House block of flats in Lunham Road, designed by Hollamby himself at nights when he first arrived at LB Lambeth (included in this application for group value).

Central Hill is the culmination of a long evolutionary process of post war housing in London. From the mid-1950s, local authorities were encouraged to meet the high densities of housing required by building high—point blocks or slabs. But Hollamby had reservations about housing families in point blocks, and in a number of Lambeth developments (including Central Hill) sought to meet the required densities with low rise developments. He became ‘the acknowledged leader in high density housing with low buildings’ (Jill Craigie, ‘People Versus Planners’, The Times, 14 September 1968). By the time of Central Hill’s development, the lessons of placing point and slab blocks in isolation were being learned: Central Hill provides a mix of low dwelling types and a varied skyline.

Central Hill is a strong example of the important legacy of progressive public housing created by Lambeth under Ted Hollamby. It demonstrates some of the fundamental principles and design features espoused by Hollamby in Lambeth's social housing in the period: the use of a variety of unit types to suit different age-groups and family sizes, the complex layering of mixed size units, the spatial interest of the planning, the exploitation of natural topography, the arrangement of blocks to create a genuine community, the provision of private patios and balconies to give residents privacy, the simple robust detailing of the architecture, and the integration of community and welfare buildings. Within the genre of low rise, high density housing of the post-war period, Camden Borough Council is widely recognised as producing some of the most important examples nationally. However, the Central Hill design predates comparable Camden schemes such as Highgate New Town (1972-8), Branch Hill (1974-6) and Maiden Lane (1976-81).

In the parallel debate between the Le Corbusier-inspired and the softer Swedish-inspired philosophical camps, Hollamby and his team fell clearly into the humanistic Swedish camp, creating low rise high density housing at a human scale. This humanism is a characteristic of both the key architects involved with Central Hill: Ted Hollamby and Rosemary Stjernstedt.

Edward Hollamby (1921-1999)

As the Borough Architect and then Director of Development at LB Lambeth, the most populous borough in the GLC (E. Hollamby, 'Lambeth', RIBA J. 7/65, p. 350), Edward (Ted) Hollamby was a significant figure in the development of post-war social housing.

As a young man, Hollamby was strongly influenced by the Arts and Crafts movement and in particular by William Morris; he and his family later lived in the Red House, Philip Webb's house for Morris. Later influences included the Bauhaus, Modern movement pioneers and members of the MARS group (in particular Arthur Korn). These early influences inclined Hollamby from an early stage towards a view of architecture that was 'anti-monumental, anti-stylistic and fit for ordinary people' (E. Hollamby, *The social art*, p. 38). Always socially committed, after the war Hollamby took a position in the architect's department of the Miners Welfare Commission, helping to design pithead baths, canteens and health centres. He moved to the LCC (1949-62), serving in the Schools Division and then as one of the two senior architects in the Housing Department, with general responsibility for housing south of the Thames.

Hollamby moved to LB Lambeth in 1963, initially as Borough Architect and later as Director of Development. Over the following two decades, under Hollamby's direction Lambeth acquired a national reputation for its public housing schemes. Hollamby believed strongly that architecture is 'a social art', both in the way it is produced and in the purposes it is required to meet. He organised the Lambeth Architect's Department into teams, each with its own personality and leader, and sought to bring together the maximum number of people within the department to join in the creative process (E. Hollamby, *The social art*, p. 43).

Hollamby saw housing architecture as community architecture, 'embracing the ancillary uses and forms—shops and pubs, old people's homes, schools, health and community centres, clubs, libraries, and parks—that serve the urban needs of town dwellers' (E. Hollamby, *The social art*, p. 39). The objective was not just to build housing, but to build communities (P. Rawstorne and E. Hollamby, 'Lambeth', RIBA J., p. 351.) He believed that the matrix should constantly vary in form and texture,

and recognised the preference of most people for 'fairly small scale, visually comprehensible environments' (E. Hollamby, *The social art*, p. 39). But while he believed that housing architecture should be reasonably modest and restrained, 'it should never be repetitious to the point of monotony' (Ibid, p. 41). He successfully applied all of these humanist ideas at Central Hill.

Hollamby strongly believed that the involvement of people is an integral part of architecture and town planning, and Central Hill provides a good example of how he went about that. Initially there was significant local opposition to the compulsory purchase of the Central Hill site. Hollamby and his team organised a meeting in a local pub, 'neutral ground with no air of officialdom about it', showed the local people the new types of housing proposed, and discussed with them their concerns about the development. The result was that the opposition evaporated. (P. Rawstorne and E. Hollamby, 'Lambeth', *RIBA J.*, p. 351.) Although this sort of consultation is now commonplace, it was an innovation at the time.

Hollamby finished his career as Chief Architect and Planner to London Docklands Development Corporation (1981-85), at that time the largest urban development scheme in Europe, and thus was a significant force in the redevelopment of east London.

Rosemary Stjernstedt (1911 or 12-1998)

Rosemary Stjernstedt, the team leader for Central Hill, trained at the School of Architecture attached to Birmingham School of Art (where she was the only woman in her class). After graduating in 1934, she worked for Robin Atkinson and took an evening course at the School of Planning attached to the AA. She spent the war years in Sweden, where she worked in the Stockholm and Gothenberg planning departments, acquiring an intimate knowledge of the humanist housing built in Sweden during this period. In 1945 she joined the Cambridge Regional Office of the Ministry of Town and Country Planning, later moving to the Ministry of Housing and Local Government and then the Stevenage Development Corporation. In 1950 she moved to the London County Council, becoming the first senior woman architect in management and design at the LCC. As one of five team leaders, she led on the Alton East estate in Roehampton, applying her knowledge of Swedish housing.

Stjernstedt moved to Lambeth in the early 1960s, where she again headed a team. She was responsible for the Alexandra Drive development, before becoming Team Leader on the second stage of the Central Hill redevelopment. She finished her career as a public architect in the Housing Development Directorate at the Department of the Environment.

*Architectural interest:*

An exemplar of high density low rise development, Central Hill is one of the most important examples of social housing in London. As one critic noted at the time, Central Hill 'is the built version of the current vogue for low-rise high density that absorbs the motor car and provides safe, good housing at reasonable densities' (C. Amery, p. 105). 'Its virtues are quiet ones.' (C. Amery, p. 106) But Central Hill also had ambition: at Central Hill Lambeth 'made strident efforts to humanize the design of high density housing' (*RIBA Book of 20<sup>th</sup> Century British Housing*, p. 104).

*Context:* Central Hill sits on the crown of a ridge which extends from Sydenham to Norwood. From the ridge, the site slopes steeply down to the north-east; it sweeps around to the north, creating a bowl-like formation, and from Highland Road the site slopes steeply towards the west (Central Hill

Development Report, p. 2; A&B News, 30/11/66, p. 944). Formerly the location of large detached and semi-detached Victorian houses, the site provides magnificent panoramic views over London. The development nestles into the hill, taking full advantage of the sloping site and views, and forming a fine tree clad skyline. Existing trees were incorporated into the layout and, in accordance with a joint statement of planning policy approved by the GLC and London boroughs of Bromley, Croydon, Lambeth, Lewisham and Southwark, no buildings in the scheme projected above the existing tree line (A&B News, 30/11/66, p. 944). The architects' intention was 'to retain the sylvan wooded atmosphere that exists at present' (Central Hill Development Report, p. 9).

Significant engineering was needed to prepare the steep site for the development. Ove Arup & Partners were the project structural engineers, and they seconded the young Ted Happold to advise on the Central Hill development. Central Hill Road is set into the hillside, and its support involved construction of a continuous reinforced concrete retaining wall of varying height for much of the site. Hawke Road was diverted by means of a bridge over depressed ground, with the area under the bridge used as a car park. Due to low permeability of the clay subsoil, the nature of the development, the slope of the site and the relatively high water table, the structural engineers decided it was necessary to introduce subsoil drainage in order to obtain an adequate factor of safety against slip. The water table was lowered by means of graded aggregate filled buttress drains which were collected at the bottom of slope and fed into main drainage system via silt interceptors. (A&BN, 13/2/69, p. 70.)

*Scheme:* The development comprises 374 dwellings, including 212 three- to six-person houses and 162 one- and two-person flats, built to Parker Morris standards and achieving a density of 89.5 persons per acre. The larger houses are in the form of overlapping and interlocking two-storey dwellings in three and four storey blocks. These are planned (with a noticeable formalism) in terraces running parallel to the slope, with units stepping down one below the other, giving a strong overall cohesion to the development. All living rooms face down the slope, which affords almost everyone the benefit of good views and at least one patio or balcony. Two-person dwellings are in three-storey staircase access flats at the top of the slope and over car parking bays and a covered pedestrian way. Living rooms in these are on alternate sides of the blocks. One-person flats are on two floors over shops.

The complete schedule of accommodation is as follows:

- 10 six-person houses
- 106 five-person houses
- 86 four-person houses
- 10 three-person houses
- 150 two-person flats
- 12 one-person flats
- 4 shops
- 14 garages
- 117 covered car spaces
- 129 parking spaces

Pedestrianisation and the separation of pedestrians and vehicles was an important element of the scheme (Central Hill Development Report, p. 3; A&B News, 30/11/66, p. 944). The housing is set in a network of brick-paved footpaths and stairways, with car parking and garaging tucked away on the

perimeter of the scheme on the high side of the site (RIBA Book of 20th Century British Housing, p. 104). The scheme also included a doctors' group practice, a group of shops, a site for a club centre and a community hall, and a nurses hostel (completed 1970). These shops and amenity buildings are sited in a bowl-like hollow at the intersection of the north and east facing slopes and of the main pedestrian ways.

The estate was designed with a district heating system: hot water produced by a central oil-fired boiler house was circulated to each house and block of flats through a system of underground heating mains. The system has now been decommissioned and replaced with domestic heating and hot water systems in individual dwellings. However, the original concrete boiler house and chimneys remain, forming a sculptural Brutalist accent point in the northeast corner of the site. The estate is served by 14 refuse collection chambers.

*Plan:* The planning and spatial arrangements are intelligent and creative, designed 'to obtain the maximum possible benefit from the conflicting elements of view to the north and sunlight,' (Central Hill Development Report, p. 3; A&B News, 30/11/66, p. 944). The four- and five-person houses, which are the main house types, are mainly north facing. They are approached from the pedestrian way and entered through a patio on to which the dining-kitchen room faces. The dining-kitchen area is flexible, allowing alternative arrangements for kitchen planning. The living room is on the entry floor, which due to the site slope is at first floor level in relation to bedrooms of the lower dwelling. The bedrooms are located alternately below and above the living room floors, thus giving an interlocking L-shaped two storey dwelling. The placement of living rooms at the intermediate level in relation to the three tiers of interlocked dwellings, combined with the steep slope of the site, ensures distant views from each living room. (Central Hill Development Report, pp. 5-6.) This stepped interlocking plan makes Central Hill stands out as an exemplar of high density low rise development.

Each dwelling benefits from very generous private amenity spaces. Because of the steep slope and high density, the dwellings do not have conventional gardens, but each faces on to at least one large sunny patio or balcony. All living rooms in the four- and five-person dwellings have a six-foot wide balcony. The bedrooms of the lower level dwellings face onto an enclosed terrace, while those of the upper level dwellings open on to a twelve-foot wide, very deep terrace, created by the deep set-back of the housing.

A third phase of the development comprises a low-rise (predominately two storey), low scale terrace of three-bedroom houses designed by the same Lambeth team. These are characterised by a distinctive saw-tooth roof profile, clad in tile. The interior layout is similar to that of the dwellings in the earlier phase of development. The houses also benefit from generous private amenity space, this time including generous rear gardens. This group of houses, representing Hollamby's interpretation of the traditional terrace, adds another layer of interest, variety and dwelling type to the estate.

*Construction and materials:* The architecture of the terraces is 'straightforward, plain, well finished and relies on the drama of the site for its architectural effects. It is remarkably clean and style-less, which is not to say that it is dull.' (C. Amery, p. 106.) The houses and flats are of brick cross-wall construction with concrete floors and timber roofs. External walls are of brick cavity construction. Exposed concrete is textured with shutter board marks. (Central Hill Development Report, p. 8.)

External walls are of white flint lime brick. The juxtaposition of the board-marked concrete floors and the white brick infill creates a coherent colour palette which is seen to good effect from the stairways between the building blocks.

Windows were originally aluminium vertical sliding sashes and louvered windows, within painted softwood timber sub-frames. External doors were painted softwood. Although many doors and windows have now been replaced with uPVC, the robust form and structure of the development means that the overall integrity is retained. Balustrades to balconies are tinted safety glass within painted metal frames. 'The bronzed glass balcony fronts and the mixture of rough concrete with almost white lime bricks is cool and has a certain elegance. Central Hill feels like a well-designed Swiss sanatorium.' (C. Amery, p. 106.) Pedestrian ramps and walkways are paved with 3 inch brick paviors, while balconies and entrance patios are precast concrete slabs.

Internal walls are plasterboard. Floors are thermoplastic tiles and felt backed vinyl sheet. Ceilings are finished with plaster sprayed on to concrete slabs.

*Philosophy:* As discussed above, the basic approach of the Lambeth Architects Department was humanistic: these are homes for living in, not bland boxes that could be office blocks. The success of this approach is demonstrated by the way in which some residents have adapted and 'humanised' their homes. The 'Puritan simplicity' of the architecture provides a 'cool frame' for residents to personalise their spaces (C. Amery, p. 106). Ted Hollamby himself noted how pleased he was that the shell of each living space was being customised and made personal by each resident in their choices of décor and planting on balconies and in courtyards [(cite?)]. He was enthusiastic about the appropriation of space--although within limits so that the harmony of the whole is not disrupted.

*Intactness:* The character and architectural integrity of the estate remain much as they were when the estate was first completed. The overall plan form remains intact, together with the brick pathways and smoky glass balustrades, and the estate continues to form a coherent whole. There have been no visible extensions, and the landscaped areas remain in use. Although some windows and doors have been replaced, this does not affect the overall integrity of the development.

*Comparables:* Central Hill easily matches and surpasses the quality of the Branch Hill estate (design of 1970 by Benson and Forsyth, listed Grade II), considered one of the best low-rise, high-density estates designed by Camden Architects' Department in the 1960s and 1970s. The overall form of the two estates is similar, with blocks of houses in rows stepping down a steep hill. However, Central Hill is on a much larger scale and its planning is the more complex: there are six housing types, compared to only two at Branch Hill. Moreover, the four- and five-person units at Central Hill overlap and interlock in a complex three-tier arrangement; by contrast, at Branch Hill the roof of the lower house forms a terrace for the one above, but there is no interlocking of interior spaces. Branch Hill is recognised for the way in which it interacts with the landscape, but Central Hill also does this, on a much larger scale and much more challenging topography. The blocks of housing at Central Hill are carefully arranged to maximize views for each dwelling, with many being dual aspect, while the Branch Hill houses are single aspect and regimented. The use of materials is sophisticated in both, with a white concrete frame forming an exposed structural-skeleton, in both cases detailed with board-marking. As shown by this comparison, the Central Hill estate clearly meets the high bar for listing.

Photographs:

Documents:

London Borough of Lambeth Central Hill development. Report prepared by Edward Hollamby for the Development Committee and to the requirement of H.G. Simpson, Housing Manager. LB Lambeth Pub. 1967 pp. 1-11.

'Project for housing scheme, Central Hill, Lambeth', *Architect & Building News*, 30 November 1966, pp. 944-5.

E. Hollamby, 'The social art', *RIBA J*, March 1974, pp. 37-44.

C. Amery, 'Suburban slopes: Central Hill housing, Lambeth', *Architectural Review*, vol. 159, no. 948, Feb. 1976, pp. 97-106.

'Edward Hollamby (Obituary)', *The Independent*, 22 January 2000, p. 7.

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C. Amery, 'Suburban slopes: Central Hill housing, Lambeth', *Architectural Review*, vol. 159, no. 948, Feb. 1976, pp. 97-106.

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E. Hollamby, 'The social art', *RIBA J*, March 1974, pp. 37-44.

P. Rawstorpe and E. Hollamby, 'Lambeth', *RIBA J.*, July 1965, pp. 350-357.

London Borough of Lambeth Central Hill development. Report prepared by Edward Hollamby for the Development Committee and to the requirement of H.G. Simpson, Housing Manager. LB Lambeth Pub. 1967 pp. 1-11.

'Ted Hollamby (Obituary)', *Building Design*, no. 1424, 21 Jan. 2000, p. 6.

'Edward Hollamby (Obituary)', *The Independent*, 22 January 2000, p. 7.

'Rosemary Stjernstedt, London public architect, dies at 86', *Architects' Journal*, vol. 208, no. 18, 12 Nov. 1998, p. 22.

'More ways of killing a cat', *A&BN*, 13 Feb 1969, pp. 67-70.

Comments: The Central Hill estate is one of the most important examples of social housing in London. It compares favourably with listed examples in Camden, which is widely regarded for its low-rise, high-density housing. The Twentieth Century Society's casework Committee recently considered Central Hill and feels strongly that it meets the necessary standard for listing.