

## Chapter 13

**Berthold Lubtekin: 'Nothing is too good for ordinary people'**

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### Introduction

Berthold Lubekín's legacy continues to impress and inspire public health initiatives in Islington, London, where his architecture for housing, health centres and wider leisure facilities continues to have a positive effect in particular on Islington's resident's outlook and wellbeing.

Born in Georgia in 1901 Berthold Lubetkin pioneered modernist design in Britain in the 1930s. His work in Islington also included the Spa Green and Priory Green Estates and Bevin Court. In the 1930s he set up the architectural practice called Tecton (an abbreviation of the Greek Architecton), designing many pioneering housing estates before his plans to replace Finsbury's slums with more modern housing designs were deferred in 1939 by the onset of World War 2.

Perhaps his overwhelming belief was to be a key part of the design of some of the best social housing that modern architecture and construction technology could provide and to bring the very best environments to whom he considered the worthiest, the ordinary person. No doubt some of these influences nurtured whilst bearing witness to the socialist revolutions during his study in Moscow and Leningrad in 1917. Other influences to his work include traditional textile designs and

processes from his Georgian ancestry. His work was also inspired by Russian constructivism, facades played a key role in the elements of his work such as chequerboard frontages, musical designs and bold use of colour. His designs were exciting and literally enlightening (Coe, 1982; Round, 2016; Wikipedia, undated)

Most of this chapter is based on living and working in the modern London Borough of Islington, visiting and passing buildings he designed and being privileged to receive “universal access to healthcare” services from the striking Finsbury Health Centre in Pine Street and a growing, snowballing interest in what else Lubetkin has designed. This chapter therefore represents an academic, but also a developing organic, personal journey of discovery including on estates such as Priory Green, Spa Green and Hallfield as well the Finsbury Health Centre.

## **Legacy**

Today the revival of interest and link and with housing and health could not be any more explicit. So too is the role other Public Health practitioners can make to contributing to positive health outcomes and reducing health inequalities caused by poor housing. Environmental Health practitioners (EHPs) have a renewed focus in the broader determinants increases the supply of good decent social housing decreases. Never before has the pioneering work of Lubetkin been so relevant and provided such impetus in today’s public health agenda.

Lubetkin didn’t need to prove the link between housing and health as he was acutely aware of his task to task of providing houses for heroes. Lubetkin arrived in Britain at a time of great social deprivation and gathered together a group of architectural

students. He made it his mission to fight for better housing conditions for these heroes. He strongly believed that Tecton were best placed to attack the housing and health problem they had been set to solve, as unfit housing and disease were widespread at the time (Reading, 1982).

Perhaps Lubetkin's greatest contribution to public health is the design of some of the finest built social housing in London. The provision of well designed, safe, warm, hazard free and affordable housing is still as relevant to public health today as it was when Lubetkin arrived in Britain. Lubetkin set a standard not just for form but for function too, other council estates he designed in London include Highpoint apartments in Highgate and Hallfield estate in Paddington with their sweeping balconies and naturally lit vistas (Wikipedia, undated).

Lubetkin was part of the Modernist movement in London and the modernists were to be influential in designing living environments. Many were committed socialists who sought to deliver an entirely new way of living using the latest technologies with socially progressive amenities, leaving no gaps in need. They were particularly committed to enhance the lives of residents and to move away from traditional approaches. Of particular significance is Le Corbusier, who provided immense impetus in architecture and furniture, but in London in particular there were others commissioned by progressive councils and the such as the Peckham Experiment Pioneers, the Bermondsey Health Centre (under the auspices of Alfred and Ada Slater) and the Peckham Experiment (led by Doctors George Scott Williamson and Innes Pearce) built beautiful centres to deliver local health services.

For housing, Wells Coates designed the Isokon (Lawn Lane) flats and Embassy Court, whilst Maxwell Fry and Elizabeth Denby designed – with tenant participation,

then a radical idea – Kensal House in Ladbroke. These architects were in turn to later influence high rise developments, most particularly large concrete council estates such as Park Hill at Sheffield, flats by Denys Lasdun, as well as the later brutalist architecture of Chamberlain, Powell and Bon's Barbican and Goldfinger's brutalist Trellick and Balfron Towers (see also Stewart, 2016).

Whilst part of this movement and its ideals, Lubetkin's design aesthetic includes soft patterned, blocky, tessellated style and use of building elements particularly glossy tiles as seen at Spa Green Estate, Finsbury Health Centre and Priory Green estate. This is style often mimicked by other municipal architects especially in Islington and a lot of Public Houses also built in the 1930s.

However well designed social housing wasn't the only contribution to modern public health that Lubetkin made and one of his most significant contributions was the Finsbury Health Centre. We shall now look at some of his significant architectural achievements in the modern London Borough of Islington, which continues to pioneer contemporary approaches to public health.

In 1982 Lubetkin was awarded the RIBA Royal Gold Medal and died in not long after in 1990 and his work on the Hallfield and Spa Green Estate still being remembered and showcased today as models of good practice (Wikipedia, undated; Round, 2016).

## ***Finsbury Health Centre***

Finsbury Health Centre contains, as Lubetkin stated: “an entrance hall flooded with light, through a wall of glass bricks, clean surfaces and bright colours to produce a cheerful effect” (Wikipedia, undated).

Many have benefitted from the range of health care treatments available at the Centre, and the therapeutic nature of the design aesthetic itself allowing both light but also privacy. Described by some as space ship that has landed from the future, this description is as physically apt as its design and aim. To achieve noble public health goals through lofty social ambitions of universal free access to health care and to be complimented by the provision of the finest housing architects could design. Finsbury Health centre was futuristic iconic “space ship” of social progress that landed from the future and whose philosophy was here to stay (Lewycha, 2016).

Commissioned by the Labour council of the borough of Finsbury and completed in 1938 it had revolutionary public aspirations. One of Lubetkin’s greatest legacies is perhaps that he was part of this significant moment in British social history that sowed the seed of development of today’s NHS (there are also parallel health centres designed around this time; for a brief description see the introduction and entries on Bermondsey and Peckham, inner urban areas sharing similar poverty and deprivation at the time).

Finsbury at the time was a densely packed slum, rife with disease, pests and deprivation. Labour politicians were determined to make Finsbury a model of social progress not just with housing but education, hygiene and health too. Ironically Islington still has the highest deprivation indices of one the London boroughs. The 1938 Centre incorporated a TB clinic, a foot clinic, a dental surgery, and a solarium.

Lubetkin once described how history repeats itself first as tragedy and second as a farce, this charge can still be levelled at the rise and fall of social housing and the continuous need for excellent health care provision. Today stop smoking services and the Clerkenwell Medical Practice and the Michael Palin Centre for Stammering Children Services operate from the centre.

### ***Spa Green Estate***

The Spa Green Estate “lifts, central heating, balconies, daylight from multiple direction and a spectacular roof terrace” (Wikipedia, undated). The Minister of Health Aneurin Bevan laid the foundation stone to Finsbury's Spa Green Estate in 1946 and this included the planting of a plane tree by Princess Margaret. In 1998 the building received a Grade II\* listing. Residents have reported that something about the 1930s art deco style combining squares and curves attracted them to wanting to see his work up close.

Each flat gives clear unobstructed views, and his aerodynamic 'wind roof' provided a communal area for drying clothes and another new type of social space. The flats originally included fitted kitchens, slide-away breakfast counters and ironing boards, electrical and gas appliances, and a stainless steel central waste-disposal system. You can understand Lubetkin's thoughts when he said of the spa green estate “we will deliberately create exhilaration”

The site had been designated for slum clearance but was then partly demolished by German bombing similar to the site for Bevin Court. Some say it is the most complete post-war realisation of a 1930s, a radical plan for social regeneration

through modernist architecture and that Lubetkin intended this project as a manifesto for modern architecture.

Two parallel blocks create a central plaza, which also contained a nursery school and Lubetkin's design made sure that everyone had a balcony on the street side. No flat is overlooked by another and there is no hierarchy of back and front or flats with good views and those without. All these brightly lit interiors have the bedrooms on the quieter side and a spacious living area with direct access to the balcony. Quality and equality were embedded into the design, with a civic balance of socialism and philanthropy (Wikipedia, undated).

### ***Priory Green Estate***

The Priory Green estate stunning by his design and scale with Lubetkin features such as large communal areas and long balconies. Sadly in the 1980s this estate became notorious for drugs and prostitution. Used needles and contraceptives and open drug dealing would often litter and plague the grounds of his work. It was sold to the Peabody Trust in 1998 who really turned the estate around.

However Peabody renovated the buildings, constructed a new playground, introduced landscaping and a built a new entrance block and concierge. One of Islington's commissioned services (Help on Your Doorstep) an embedded team now have an office on site. Their aim is to make a difference to health and wellbeing in the communities by empowering individuals to overcome the barriers they face and improve their lives. Aims that both Lubetkin and George Peabody would be proud.

Not only does this chapter have a happy ending as one of the finest examples of regeneration complete with an embedded task force to remove housing hazards and to improve people's lives. There are numerous other additional websites listed at the end of this chapter which readers are urged to visit.

### ***Bevin Court***

Bevin Court is perhaps the jewel in the Lubetkin Islington crown. Despite austerity measures forcing Lubetkin to remove some of basic amenities he had planned such as balconies, community centre or nursery school, Lubetkin decided instead to design a healthy social space. He created a stunning staircase which forms the heart of the building. The project was initially to be called Lenin Court and the building occupies the site of the 1902–03 home of Lenin, which he and his wife occupied while in exile editing the Russian socialist newspaper *Iskra*.

However as the cold war intensified the scheme was renamed Bevin Court, a bust of Lenin decreasingly popular and vandalised by anti-communists was at one stage was under 24 hour police guard. Legend has it that Lubetkin buried his memorial to Lenin under the central core to his staircase. Recent lottery funding has restored the stunning mural in the communal area (Wikipedia, undated). Again, readers are referred to websites for a visual journey through Bevin Court.

## **Implications for current policy and practice**

As we have seen, the modernists – including Lubetkin – sought to bring radical new ideas into how we could, and perhaps should, live. With contemporary public health policy and practice, it seems timely to review some of these ideals and to understand why Lubetkin's architecture remains popular and provides desirable, aesthetic places in which to live, attend for health care and even visit in leisure time – he of course also designed the now Listed Penguin Pool at London Zoo and the elephant enclosure at Whipsnade Zoo.

The way in which we use buildings and how they make us feel and behave is also important. Lubetkin also surely has some influence on innovative modern health venues and healthy living centres such as the Bromley by Bow Centre, which try to engender more holistic and sustainable approaches to health (see <http://www.bbhc.org.uk/>).

The work of Lubetkin and other pioneers still serve as a reminder that our work to ensure adequate provision of well managed and maintained housing regardless of tenure is still not done. Other key drivers prevail in today's modern public health agenda and help keep the focus is clearly on housing and health.

Finally analysis of some of wider determinants of health on the Public Health Outcomes framework are a clear indicator of how housing is informed and informs some of the broader determinants of health. Another example of how Lubetkin's work was cutting edge not just by design but already achieving public health goals long before accurate health data and evidence was widely available of the impact of living in a decent home.

## **Conclusions**

Lubetkin believed that architecture should be a potent weapon that empowers people, he certainly achieved that and by doing so helped win his battle against unfit housing and disease (Lewycka, 2016). We can still learn lessons from Lubetkin's work and his buildings serve as an (in)convenient reminder that for some that good housing should not be beyond the reach of ordinary people and that we should continue to strive for decent housing to be a social right and not a traded commodity.

Lubetkin gave us hope, a message from the future he taught that we all deserve to achieve and can achieve greatness no matter how ordinary we may be perceived. His work had quality, equality and wellbeing for all embedded in his design. His healthy futuristic homes were to compliment a free health service and sowed some of the seeds for a functioning NHS and can be considered to be a true modern public health pioneer.

For many, Lubetkin epitomises empowerment, hope and wellbeing, in his own words using his genius of design to be a positive and committed driving force on the side of enlightenment. Indeed, "nothing is too good for the working classes."

## References

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Round, G. (2016) RIBA Commission and Exhibition (The Architecture Gallery): We live in the office, a façade style book RIBA Architecture.com 2016, online, available: <https://www.architecture.com/RIBA/Contactus/NewsAndPress/PressReleases/2016/WeLiveInTheOffice%E2%80%93ACommissionByGilesRound.aspx>

Stewart, J. (2016) Housing and Hope: the influence of the Interwar years in England, available from <https://itunes.apple.com/gb/book/housing-and-hope/id1138338603?mt=11>

Wikipedia (undated) Berthold Lubetkin, Online, available:

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Berthold\\_Lubetkin](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Berthold_Lubetkin) (9 December 2016)

## Useful websites

<https://www.architecture.com/Explore/Architects/BertholdLubetkin.aspx>

<http://www.amwell.org.uk/docs/History/Berthold%20Lubetkin%201901.pdf>

<http://www.lovelondoncouncilhousing.com/2013/02/a-lesson-in-love-priory-green-estate.html>

<http://www.locallocalhistory.co.uk/municipal-housing/bevin/index.htm>

<https://bevincourt.wordpress.com/>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PV5UNQcfWU>

<http://www.locallocalhistory.co.uk/municipal-housing/bevin/index.htm>

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I remember sitting in a conference hall at the RIBA at one of the many children's events they helped organise in the 1980s to inspire young minds hearing about exciting plans to convert the Battersea Power station site into an enormous theme park. How apt that some 30 years later the site is finally being developed instead for housing. The one remaining question is how much of this new build site like many similar sites will offer an affordable housing provision.

My Aunt and Uncle were both very lucky enough to meet Lubtekin although a frail man when they met. They also helped me access several RIBA journals that had preserved conversations with Lubetkin including his RIBA gold medal acceptance speech. They have both helped me appreciate and be inspired by architecture and Lubetkins work is where both our professions have dovetailed into the public health agenda.

I'd also like to thank Anita Poulter for access, information and inspiration for Bevin Court

