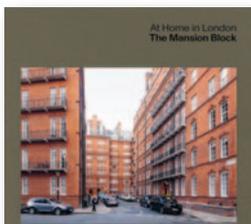


At Home in London

The Mansion Block

In the context of London's housing shortage, the mansion block might be a strong contributor to a planning-led solution writes Lee Mallett in his review



By Karin Templin,
published by MACK and
the Architecture
Foundation
160pp £50



Lee Mallett is a founder editor/publisher of PiL and urban regeneration consultant/writer

A sumptuous tome from art publisher MACK in partnership with the Architecture Foundation, as part of a promised series looking at London housing types – and where better to start than with the most salubrious of residences, the mansion block?

Author Karin Templin, is a seasoned academic hailing from UCL and the University of Cambridge shares, she shares her interest with husband Alfredo Caraballo, Allies & Morrison director and designer of A&M's modern mansion blocks in Victoria. These feature in the book among 27 fine examples ranging from the 1850s to the present day.

Why a review in Planning in London? Because, in the context of London's housing shortage and the need to densify, and much dislike of towers, the mansion block might be a stronger contributor to a planning-led solution.

Templin's opening essay refers to the potential of the mansion block as an antidote to character-depleting towers, and a way of creating more affordable housing. It's an ambition worth exploring in more detail, which this book doesn't really offer, but it is an interesting examination of how the mansion block evolved as a distinct London typology.

Mansion blocks were the answer to socio-economic necessities and drove three main periods of building. 1852-1903, when we were awash with ill-gotten gains from Empire before WW1 put paid to development; 1930-1937 when industrialisation and expansion demanded inner city homes for a burgeoning middle class, and latterly, from 2010 to date, when the mansion block has to a limited extent been revived and updated in the effort to achieve a more 'gentle' densification of London while emptying overseas investors' piggybanks. 'Gentle density', you may recall, is the Government's official preferred approach. And London's population is not getting smaller.

Nine exemplars illustrate each era of building, central and suburban. But the forces that produced them were driven by very different economic models.

The earliest, grandest blocks were for rent. To produce an income stream for their developer-investors. The concept of widespread home-ownership, no mortgage market in a modern sense, the absence of an evolved long-leasehold system, meant developers did not sell the apartments they created. But they offered nice amenities to attract tenants.

Apartments produced in blocks more recently, however, were and are for sale, because the faster capital receipts produced from sales, rather than long term rental income, produces better returns on the capital employed to create them. And that in turn bolsters the price developers will pay for a site, which cuts into the budget for quality and shared amenity.

This is particularly the case for short-term developers, who will usually include an element of 'other people's money' to build. The newish Build to Rent model, fuelled by institutional

money, has yet to fully demonstrate a superior cash flow, lacking the big bang of bucks up front in the appraisal, so competition for suitable sites still favours speculative developers. But their short-termism has stripped most apartment blocks of the civilising elements we love the mansion block for. Maybe that is changing, or greater civic and aesthetic virtue might be encouraged by the planning process.

In this uneven battleground for acquiring land, the spec' developer of the private-for-sale block has found viability progressively eroded by social or affordable housing quotas, by increased interest rates and inflation recently. This drove the race for towers. Build higher, sell more.

If this wasn't intended as a book primarily for architects, it would have been interesting to explore the economic models and planning conditions that created each era of mansion block development. What appeals to architects is that mansion blocks require their input to a greater extent than the traditional terraced house, or indeed today's housebuilder product. In the 19th century the Architectural Association and the RIBA hosted lectures about the proliferating mansion block, while there was widespread press coverage because of public interest. But if architects do believe in mansion blocks, and planners want more of them, they have to engage with the market in understanding the forces that produce them.

Then there's the question of opportunity. Most mansion blocks were produced in the pre-planning era. As with towers, mansion blocks today have to jump the hurdles strewn across the existing built environment. It's not easy assembling the kind of sites they require. Yet the parts of London we like most, Kensington say, or St John's Wood, would be virtually impossible to repeat east of the River Lea (outside the Olympic Park of course) where most development is now set in the aspic of two to three storey terraces, or semi-detached/detached estates. It seems impossible today to densify existing built up areas, although that might be desirable if we want to tackle climate change.

Perhaps this book is most important for bringing to our attention a favourite housing type that is slowly reviving. That needs nurturing in policy and in public. We like them. We need more homes. Why not let planning encourage their development?

Curiously the book does not focus much on the lifestyles that made mansion blocks so appealing. More interiors, with people, and detailed apartment plans at a larger scale, and the clear delineation of apartments within blocks, would have made it more persuasive. And despite being sponsored by Lend Lease and residential investor Dorrington, if the book had been targeted more at developers and planners, and included some opinions from them, it would be even better than it is. ■

SEE leader on mansion blocks in our last issue no 127

Modernism Beyond Metro-Land

*Celebrating
"Art Deco,
Modernism and
Brutalism in the
suburbs of
London and
beyond" – by
Joshua Abbott*

Paperback 144 pages
£9.99 on Amazon
Publisher: Unbound

Joshua Abbott first started documenting the moderating and Art Deco buildings of the Metro-Land era when he moved to South Harrow, a London suburb that formed part of the early Metro Land expansion during the 20th century.

His labour-of-love website is a treat, comprising a series of photographic slideshows with buildings categorised by area and type. And now there is a book to go with it, celebrating "Art Deco, Modernism and Brutalism in the suburbs of London and beyond".

Modernism Beyond Metro-Land continues the work of Joshua Abbott's first book, *A Guide to Modernism in Metro-Land*, in mapping and documenting the art deco, modernist and brutalist buildings of London's suburbs. Taking in the eastern and southern boroughs, the guide will feature art deco cinemas, modernist tube stations, brutalist office blocks, stunning post war houses and much more. It will include the work of renowned architects and designers such as Charles Holden, Richard Rogers, Wells Coates and Owen Luder, as well as more contemporary designers such as Peter Barber.

The guide covers twelve London boroughs from Waltham Forest in the north east to Kingston upon Thames in the south west as well as a portion of Surrey. Each section features a map, descriptions of each building and colour photographs. It also features extended sections on areas of interest like Croydon town centre, the Central Line stations of Charles Holden and the self built houses of Walter Segal.



between Victorian grandiosity and the coming modernity. Acton Town employs the 'Sturbury Box' model: a rectangular ticket hall in Buckinghamshire brick with double-height windows. Northfields repeats the trick, albeit slightly less successfully, with a rotated ticket hall. Holden wouldn't make such a giant leap in design again; however, he would introduce the circle alongside the square to great effect.

HOOVER FACTORY

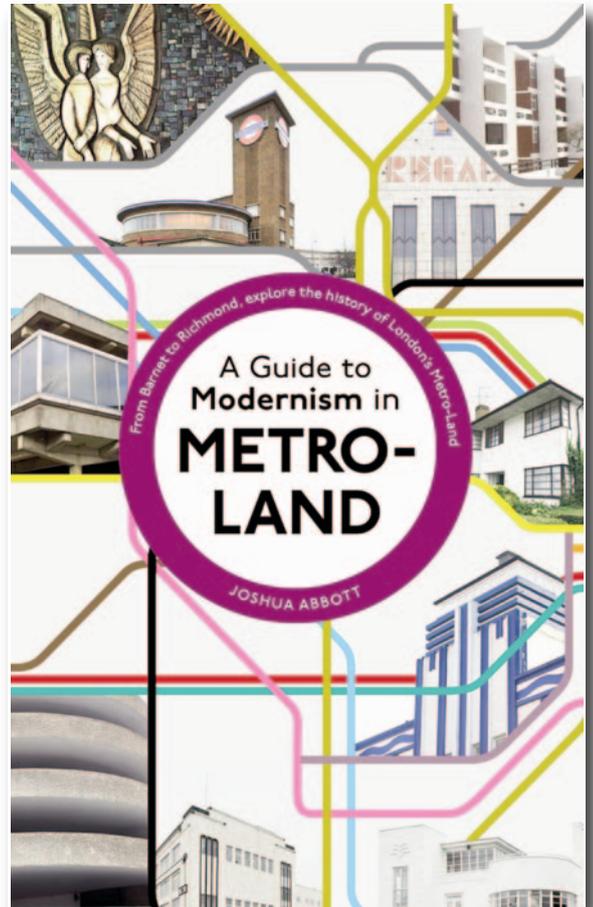
1932-5 Grade II*

CANTEEN BLOCK

1938 Grade II*

by Wells, Gilbert and Partners

both Periodic UB6 SDW



As well as exploring the architectural history of the suburbs, the book examines how this area has changed from the start of the 20th century, when much of it was part of the neighbouring counties, Essex, Kent and Surrey. The expansion of the capital's road, tube and rail network allowed people to commute to London from further away, creating new housing estates and kickstarting the growth of suburbia. New architectural styles from Europe and America like Art Deco and Modernism were imported to sit alongside more traditional building forms.

Modernism Beyond Metro-Land will give centre stage to suburbia's most radical architecture of the last 100 years. ■



CHISWICK PARK STATION

What does an architect do in retirement?

Paul Davis tells the story of who he is, how, why and what he changed

A large format 300gsm cover, thread sewn paperback with 250 pages. 194 drawings, paintings and photographs are embedded within the text. £30 from mrchelsea.co.uk

Paul founded two practices (Davis & Bayne 1976 -94 & Paul Davis + Partners 1994-2013) which were responsible for regenerating much of Sloane Street and the King's Road through three decades, culminating in Duke of York Square and the new the Saatchi Gallery as well as Cadogan Hall for the Royal Philharmonic Orchestra.

Paul worked for seven of the central London landed estates as well as developers and private clients in Westminster and RBK&C, notching up almost 300 projects in the two boroughs. Other major projects include award-winning towers in Hong Kong and Tokyo as well as restoration and new build at Sir Christopher Wren's Royal Hospital Chelsea and a hotel for The Dorchester at 45 Park Lane. Sequential projects along Sloane Street on behalf of the Cadogan Estate led to a creative understanding and interpretation of conservation policies.

Working over almost 30 years, his practices reinvented multiple buildings whilst retaining the memory of place. Thereby transforming the street, its uses and activity.

This is a memoir of a life in design and architecture. It begins with a small boy being made to stand in a corner by his teacher because he was partially deaf. Aged 10, an operation restored his hearing and from there he went from strength to strength. Teenaged years were spent learning to draw at Alleyn's in South London while being inspired by live performances by Bob Dylan, Jimi Hendrix, David Bowie and the Rolling Stones, often at intimate local venues such as the Bromley Court Hotel or Chislehurst Caves.

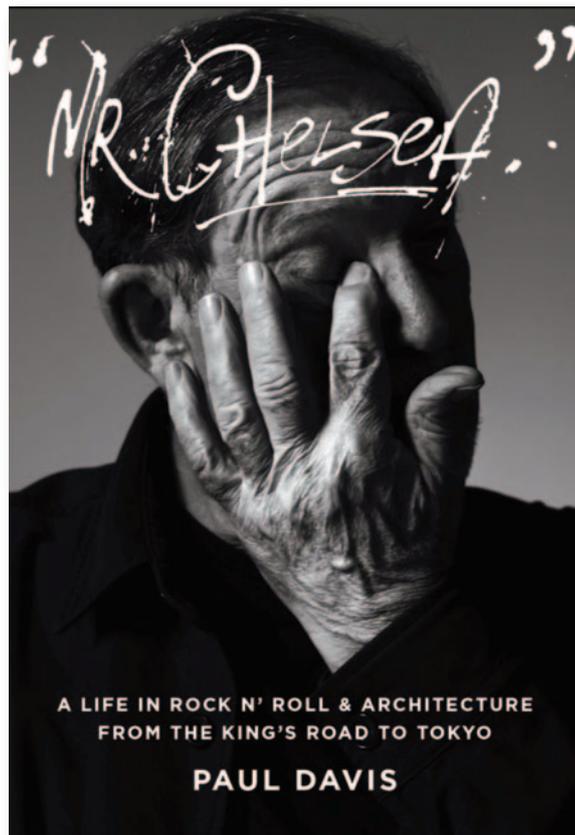
Never a mere spectator, he created some of the first 1960s lightshows for bands including Pink Floyd and The Who. This would lead on to designing innovative recording studios for Roxy Music in the UK, then New York, Oslo and Paris. Houses for members of Roxy Music and four of Duran Duran in the 80s was fun and the source of entertaining anecdotes. Strong relationships led to commissions for touring stage sets for Supertramp, Roxy Music, the Moody Blues and Duran Duran. Collaborating with Nicky Haslam, he restored a major country house for Beatle Ringo Star and his wife, Barbara Bach.

Whilst studying at Nottingham and Kingston, Paul set out on adventures across North Africa and Iran in the early 70s in search of sustainable indigenous architecture. Journeys almost impossible to experience today.

He deals frankly with both the pride of success as well as the difficulties and frustrations of being a practising architect, including fights with planning officers, work with difficult clients, and projects that go awry, including major ones at Cliveden in Berkshire and Chelsea Barracks (where he worked with Thomas Heatherwick).



Paul Davis, author, architect and past president of the Association of Consultant Architects



Inspiration and insight into the specific skills and approach to residential design were gleaned from student-day pilgrimage visits to Charles Rennie Macintosh's famous Hill House on Loch Gare and Frank Lloyd Wright's Falling Water in Pennsylvania. More than 30 private house designs for different families and characters lead on to inform major speculative residential projects in London, Hong Kong and Tokyo.

Themes of placemaking are discussed in short essays about the Alhambra and London's Inner Temple, both of which underline his core philosophy of 'place' being of more fundamental value to people's lives than icons.

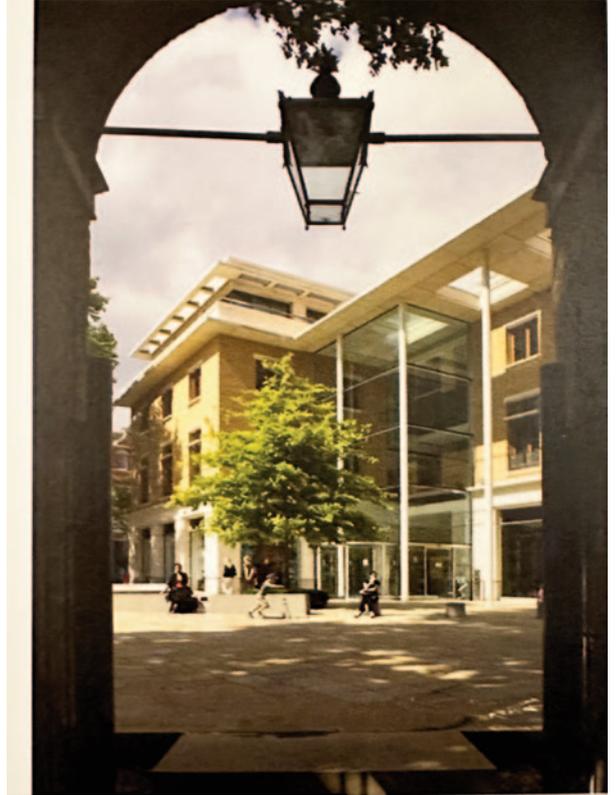
The aim of the book is to provide a lavishly illustrated account of the hands-on difficulties of being an architect, whilst maintaining passion and vision. This book will hopefully be of use and inspirational to students and practising architects whilst its diverse episodes in the world of rock n' roll will entertain a wider audience. Paul's contribution to changing Chelsea will no doubt focus and broaden its appeal and market.

"Mr Chelsea" is a memoir of a life well lived written with honesty and humanity. ■



Left:
1 Hans Street
© Adam Parker

LEFT:
1 Hans Street



RIGHT:
Duke of York Square,
King's Road Chelsea

BELOW:
Cadogan Hall



Right:
Cadogan Hall exterior:
A neo-Byzantine/Fatimid
extravaganza in Portland stone

Opposite:
Cadogan Hall at night:
A beacon viewed from Sloane Square
Photos © Adam Parker

Lubetkin and Goldfinger The Rise and Fall of British High-Rise Council Housing

Much of significance in the life stories of Lubetkin and Goldfinger occurred in the 1930s when they were young and modernism was still the future. Nicholas Russell tells their story

Paperback £8.39 on Amazon

Tower blocks of council flats, relics from the mid-twentieth century, are dotted all over the country. For many people they are symbols of deprivation, overrun with antisocial children and drug dealing teenagers who terrorise the local population. They ask how such abominations could have been built? The culprits must surely be arrogant modernist architects in league with unfeeling local politicians who filled the towers with dysfunctional families. What were they all thinking?

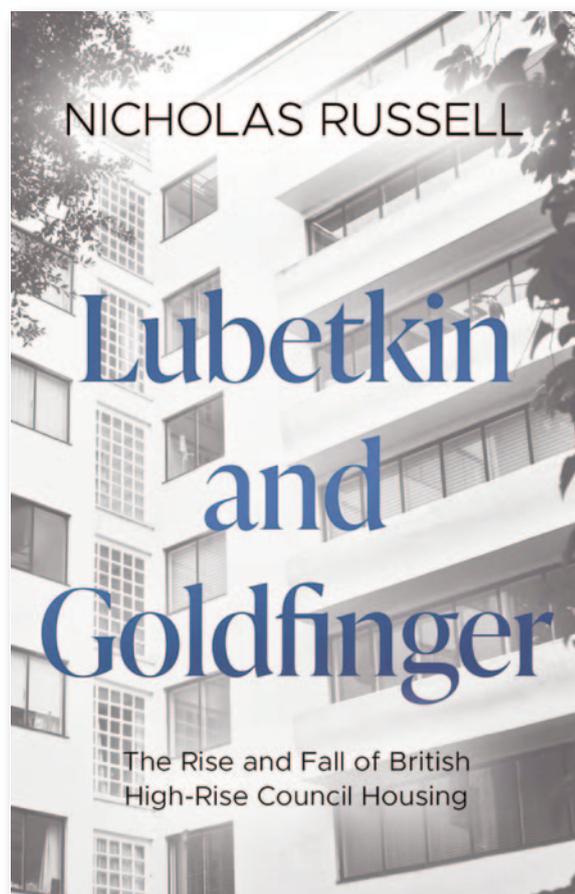
And yet high-rise, residential towers are going up again in city centres, not for deprived council tenants, but as homes for ambitious professionals who want to live close to city facilities. High-rise was and remains an important part of any solution to housing people decently in big towns and cities.

The designers of mid-twentieth century high-rise council housing were not to blame for its demise. It was the result of cost-cutting and neglect by local authorities struggling to cope with social breakdown from rising unemployment, insecurity and homelessness in the 1970s and 1980s. The situation was not helped by the slow loss of faith in any role for the state in housing after its highpoint in the post-war Labour administration.

Many architects of high-rise council housing in the three decades after the war have been forgotten. This is true for Berthold Lubetkin and Ernö Goldfinger, idealistic communist migrants from central Europe, arriving in the 1930s and in a good position to take central roles in post-war council housing design. They understood the virtues of the key construction material, steel reinforced concrete, which allowed tall towers to be built for an acceptable price. They also realised that residents of high-rise buildings needed to feel emotionally engaged with their homes and tried to ensure the buildings they designed were warm and welcoming places.

In practice they had only minor roles in the post-war high-rise boom because their design principles, aesthetic concerns and belief in quality reduced their opportunities as pressure increased to build housing cheaply and fast. Lubetkin is well-known for the aphorism 'nothing is too good for ordinary people' but the cost of providing quality accommodation for most ordinary people proved beyond this country's political will and economic capacity then (and now).

Too many high-rise council estates were bad places to live. Poorly constructed, badly positioned and under maintained with minimal security and no adequate infrastructure and facilities, many such estates deteriorated so badly they had to be



demolished. Many that survive have been refurbished, often by covering them in cladding to improve insulation and hide the exposed concrete on their facades, which stains and cracks in Britain's climate. That cladding, applied without adequate regulation, has proved a disaster, from the lethal Grenfell Tower fire in 2017 to the large number of unsafely clad buildings that have yet to receive remedial treatment. The old towers have been cursed a second time, the responsible architects and planners further vilified, their reputations buried deeper under the rubble that the towers may eventually become. Lubetkin, Goldfinger and their peers do not rest in peace.

Like any type of building, concrete tower blocks are not perfect but the best of them provided (and still provide) good homes for large numbers of people. Lubetkin and Goldfinger tells these architects' stories to re-evaluate their reputations. They were almost the same age, shared aspects of architectural



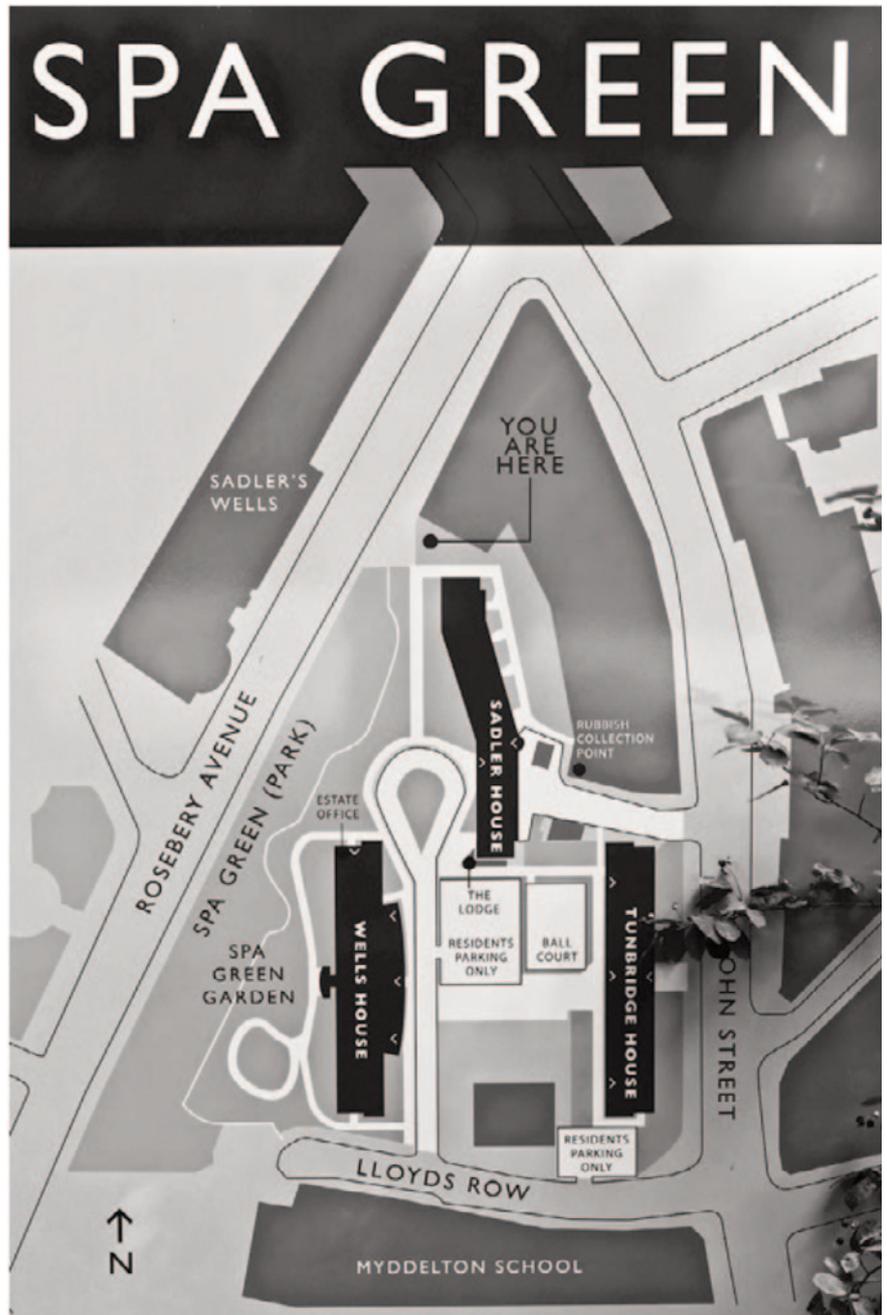
Nicholas Russell

training and worked with similar design principles, although they did not like each other. They both came from wealthy assimilated Jewish backgrounds, arriving in this country before fascism drove many of their friends and colleagues to flee to Britain and beyond in the late 1930s. They were modernists without close association to the Bauhaus school in Germany, another possible reason for their neglect. They were also difficult and, at times, unpleasant characters. Their solutions to Britain's chronic housing problems were flawed, though not necessarily disastrous.

While the heyday of tower blocks was in the 1950s and 60s, much of significance in the life stories of Lubetkin and Goldfinger occurred in the 1930s when they were young and modernism was still the future. Our protagonists wanted to put modernist ideas to social use, believing that if people lived in good housing, they would be better citizens and lead happier and more fulfilled lives. That idea was certainly naive, but there is something in it, as most critics of Britain's present housing crisis will admit. There is no doubt that bad housing is associated with bad social outcomes. So let's encourage better (and higher) social building once again. ■

Upcoming talk

Nicholas Russell will give a Zoom talk based on his book on Tuesday 6 February. The title will be: 'Communism, Concrete and Council Housing. Lubetkin, Goldfinger and High-Rise Council Building.'



FAR LEFT:

Wells House front facade with main entrance and parabolic cover, Spa Green Estate, Finsbury

LEFT:

Stairwell, Mödling House, Cranbrook estate, Bethnal Green. A relatively subdued example of Lubetkin's love of staircases.

Nicholas Russell was a university reader in science communication and college lecturer in biology and history of technology. Always interested in art and design, he keeps busy as a heritage volunteer spending several seasons as a National Trust guide at the architect Ernö Goldfinger's house at Willow Road in Hampstead. He has also written on industrial invention and design exemplified by the history of the manufacturing firm, Russell Hobbs.



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looking to the future*

Projects In Property

Author Denis Minns introduces his book on the business of residential property development

Published October 2023
 Hardback
 £35 + £4 P&P from
 bathpublishing.com

This book is directed at small scale developers and those wishing to become small scale developers. It is not directed at the national house builders. Many of these have all the resources of a public company and a whole range of expert staff to turn to. The national developers are well placed to provide the volume of homes our country needs. So why do we need small scale developers?

Small scale developers are defined as those who undertake small developments, both new builds and restoration projects. These developments are not of interest to national developers but they are more often sited in sustainable urban areas close to all the facilities and where there is strong and established demand. Potential development sites are often identified long before these sites become available for construction with small developers engaging in negotiations and often acquiring interests for site assembly.

Small development sites frequently require demolition of obsolete buildings or restoration of existing buildings - it is rare for such sites to consist of open fields. Individual homes (which could include bespoke houses for clients) are regularly designed to enhance an existing neighbourhood rather than designed from a standard plans book.

So why is it that the number of small developers active in the market is at an all-time low? As you read through this book you will begin to discover Who are you?

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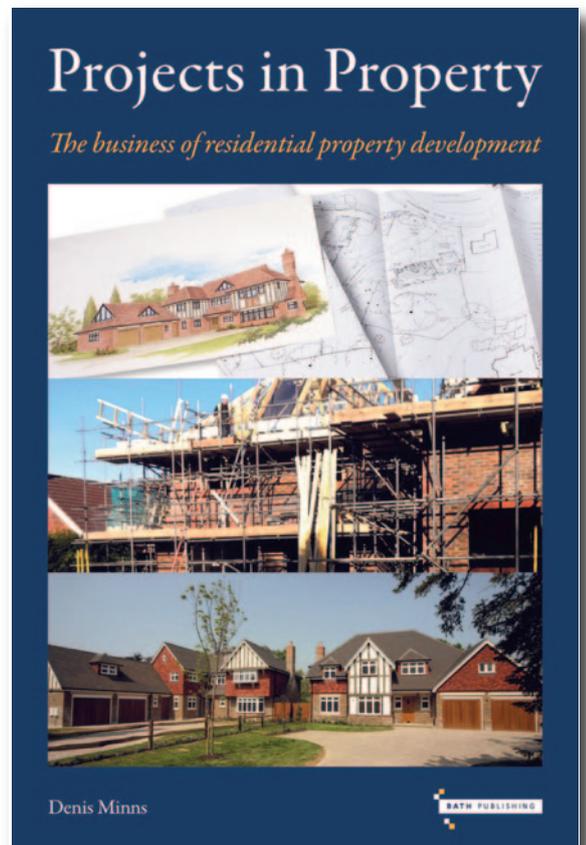
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Denis Minns



hope that this book will help to identify issues and provide solutions.

There is potentially a large number of small scale developers and those wishing to become involved in the industry. However, the complexities encountered by the small scale developer restrict the numbers willing to take the risk. If this book helps to de-mystify the process and assists the would-be developer in their quest, the country will benefit hugely from the creation of more new homes.

It is my aim to see more small scale developers profiting from projects in property. ■



Denis Minns is a chartered surveyor and a specialist in property law. He has been developing projects in property for over forty years both speculatively and for housing associations and custom build clients

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