

## **'Model For A Short-lived Future': The genesis of the Barbican estate in the City of London, 1950-1975**

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The Barbican estate is a vast complex of residential flats in the heart of the financial and business district of London called the City. Originally conceived in the 1950s, it was built by the Corporation of London on a site largely obliterated by enemy bombing in the Second World War. The construction took the best part of next two decades and it eventually became the biggest single inner-city redevelopment projects undertaken by a public authority in post-war Britain. In its final form, the Barbican estate incorporated on its 35-acre site 2,113 flats for 6,500 people – mainly middle-income families – in a combination of high towers and slab blocks, a school, a music college and various community facilities including a full-fledged arts centre (which was only completed in 1982). The principle of multi-level planning provided for the residential buildings to rise above a podium level thus segregating vehicular traffic to create a pedestrian precinct with ample open space. It was an ambitious attempt to apply modernist town planning to a central redevelopment project and has since attracted worldwide attention.

The paper briefly explores the genesis of the Barbican estate. In the process it hopes to raise some issues surrounding the achievements and limitations of British reconstruction planning [in relation to large-scale comprehensive redevelopment].

## Introduction

The Barbican estate is a vast complex of residential flats in the heart of the financial and business district of London called the City. Originally conceived in the 1950s, it was built by the Corporation of London on a site largely obliterated by enemy bombing in the Second World War. The construction took the best part of next two decades and it eventually became the biggest single inner-city redevelopment projects undertaken by a public authority in post-war Britain. In its final form, the Barbican estate incorporated on its 35-acre site 2,113 flats for 6,500 people – mainly middle-income families – in a combination of high towers and slab blocks, a school, a music college and various community facilities including a full-fledged arts centre (which was only completed in 1982). The principle of multi-level planning provided for the residential buildings to rise above a podium level thus segregating vehicular traffic to create a pedestrian precinct with ample open space. It was an ambitious attempt to apply modernist town planning to a central redevelopment project and has since attracted worldwide attention. (1)

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## The Barbican's uniqueness in British town planning

In many respects the Barbican is quite an unusual project to be realised in the British context. As a prime example of high-density middle-income residential development in the city centre, it went against the very grain of the underlying garden city tradition in British town planning of the last hundred years. In particular it was at odds with the strong trend of suburbanisation in the post-war period associated with rising mass affluence. (2) Its scale and scope also made the project look too grandiose and hence rather suspect in the eyes of the British, who were more used to smaller scale in the planning of their domestic architecture. (3)

The Barbican's uniqueness, moreover, lies in the fact that it was initially intended as a form of social housing for white-collar workers and was sponsored by the oldest and, by definition, a conservative local authority in Britain. The City Corporation, with history stretching back to the 13th century, jealously guarded its autonomous status in the post-war period as the official body responsible for the City. (4) So how did such a unique project take shape and why?

## Genesis of the Barbican estate

The war initially provided the background. Over 50 acres of land in the Barbican area, a pre-war centre for textile trade to the north of St Paul's Cathedral, lay in ruins in 1945, making this the largest single area of war damage in central London. The area was designated as one of the comprehensive development areas in *County of London Development Plan 1951*. But its reconstruction posed a difficult problem of land utilisation: many former businesses had migrated to the West End of London after the war; the underground railway crossed the area, much of it in open cuttings. As a result, it was recognised at first that rebuilding would be carried out mainly by individual private developers on subdivisions of land leased from the City Corporation. (5)

As City rebuilding gathered pace in the 1950s, however, three major factors combined to produce a substantially altered plan for the area that led to the development of the Barbican

estate. Firstly, there was strong intervention by the London County Council (LCC) who, as joint planning authority, was arguing for positive, 'three-dimensional' planning. Increasingly concerned about urban congestion and the problem of journey-to-work for commuters, its planners viewed piecemeal and sporadic office development taking place in areas like Barbican with much alarm. (6) Particularly important within the LCC planning machinery at the time was the Reconstruction Areas Group. It was led by Percy Johnson-Marshall and had figures such as Arthur Ling and Walter Bor, all architect-planners of modernist inclinations. The group actively pursued comprehensive redevelopment in the Barbican area, trying to involve the City Corporation in a preliminary proposal for mixed development of offices and homes (partly realised in the form of office towers and pedestrian decks on the London Wall). Aided by the group's efforts the LCC succeeded in establishing the basis of an overall design with an all-important residential element for the Barbican area. (7)

Secondly, though initially reluctant, the City Corporation's belated initiative was also crucial in advancing the Barbican residential development. As their uneasy working relationship with the LCC on City reconstruction evolved, the debate within the Corporation also came to be centred on the desirability or otherwise of introducing substantial provision of housing into the City. In 1955 the town clerk (chief official) drew attention to the continual decline of the resident population of the City and how it might affect its future status with a reform of London local government on the agenda. (8) To its credit the Corporation then invited a consultant firm of architects (Chamberlin, Powell and Bon) to prepare an outline proposal for the Barbican area. By then the area was also the one remaining site in the City where something could be done to redress the balance between residential and commercial uses. The outcome was the Barbican redevelopment scheme, which would create a genuine residential neighbourhood and provide for white-collar workers and their families who made up the bulk of the workforce in the City. It attracted substantial support in the City and beyond, and in 1959 the Corporation approved the scheme in principle and resolved to carry out the development. (9).

Thirdly, the Barbican estate would not have materialised without the vision of its architects, Chamberlin, Powell and Bon. The three architects formed a partnership after winning an architectural competition to design the Golden Lane estate, a well received small housing scheme for the Corporation. Their thoughts on planning established their modernist credentials:

We strongly dislike the Garden City tradition with its low density, monotony and waste of good country, road, curbs, borders, paths in endless strips everywhere. We like strong contrast between true town and true country. (10)

The basic premise of their Barbican scheme was the creation of a self-contained residential community in the heart of London, with its own amenities and services. Faced with an expensive inner-city site intersected by railway lines, the architects sought to combine high density (230 persons per acre) – necessary to obtain an economic rent on costly land – with a sense of space and seclusion. Main elements of the plan were formulated to achieve this aim. First of all, the architects proposed a re-routing and decking over of the underground railway to create a base foundation for the site – a major engineering feat in itself. They wanted to straighten the route and have the track laid on rubber so as to minimise noise and vibration. Secondly, a system of elevated pedestrian deck (some 12 acres in extent) was adopted as a basic concept of the scheme. Thirdly, accommodation would be provided for 6,500 people in a wide variety of flats ranging in size from 1 to 5 rooms. Their intention was to encourage ' a balanced population of a truly resident nature with loyalties and interest in the City, not to provide a large number of pieds-a-terre'. These flats were grouped in three 37-storey tower blocks and in

a series of long, compactly planned 'terrace' blocks rising 7 storeys above podium level. These blocks in turn formed inter-connecting squares, leaving much ground for open space. Lastly, the scheme also incorporated new buildings for the City of London School for Girls and the Guildhall School of Music and Drama, a theatre and concert hall, museum, art gallery, library, sports facilities, shops and restaurants. (11)

Various strands in modern and traditional town planning influenced the architects in their design. Le Corbusier was an obvious point of reference: a combination of towers and slab blocks (*City of Tomorrow*); blocks set back to form courts (*The Radiant City*); buildings raised on stilts (Unite d' Habitation). Prior to the final submission of the scheme, Peter Chamberlin, one of the architects, and members of the City Corporation had visited Stockholm and Berlin, among other places, to view central residential developments. Moreover, American examples of modern housing proved to be an important source of inspiration. They quoted Mies van der Rohe, especially his Lake Shore Drive Apartments in Chicago, on the design of flats. At the same time, however, the architects also made much of historical examples in British urban design, for instance, Carlton Terrace House and the covered walkways in the Inns of Court in central London. The reconstructed church of St Giles provided a historical focal point for the scheme. (12)

Thus the LCC and the City Corporation, as joint planning authorities, and the architects all played their part in the 1950s to produce a plan which became the Barbican estate. Of course there were other influences at work. By the mid-1950s, the Ministry of Housing and Local Government was recommending the Barbican area for housing and signalled its endorsement once the residential scheme was in place. (13)

Finally, it should be noted that the City Corporation kept faith with the Barbican scheme once it got off the ground. The actual development in fact took twice as long as had been expected. A complex nature of the project and a higher standard of design led to delays in construction and disputes over working conditions. The final decision to proceed with a much expanded arts complex came as late as 1971, while the residential sections were only completed in 1974. By then inflation, high interest rates and on-site labour disputes had pushed up the cost of the development from an original estimate of £20 million to over £70 million. (14)

So why did the Corporation sponsor and continue to support the Barbican project in the face of delays and mounting costs? To be sure, there had always been a vociferous minority of detractors who held that in the City their business was business. They were opposed to 'the introduction of non-commercial uses into the square mile of money'. (15) It was also alleged that the Corporation's Court of Common Council (its governing body) was run by builders, property agents and professional men, not representative of the international trading character of the City. One important manifestation of this was said to be the Barbican housing scheme. (16)

On the other hand, in the post-war period the City Corporation's undemocratic position (with business voters far outnumbering resident voters) in local government was seen as a source of worry. There was no shortage of critics of the City among municipal reformers. Here, political rivalry with its immediate powerful neighbour, the LCC, dominated by the Labour Party, was an important factor. (17) Accordingly the Corporation's original rationale in exploring a housing scheme was that of increasing its resident population so as to widen the City electorate and insure against loss of power in any future reform. Moreover, in business terms, the 1960s saw the emergence of 'a new City' increasingly specialised in its function as a major international financial centre. It brought new opportunities as well as threats of intensive competition from Europe and America. (18). In this new climate, the Barbican residential project came to be seen as the City of London's showpiece, a gesture to society, which at once established the City's image as a forward-looking metropolitan centre to the world and also

enhanced its civic status. As the Barbican estate finally took shape, the architectural correspondent of the *City Press* challenged those 'jeremiahs and philistines' who had maintained their opposition to the scheme over the years:

What would the Barbican have been like if they had their way? A glance at the rest of the City provides the answer. (19)

### **'Model for a short-lived future?'**

Despite some changes to the scheme since 1959, the Barbican realises much of its original vision and represents a notable achievement in post-war urban reconstruction in Britain. However, it has had a mixed reception. The tide of conservation had turned by the time the Barbican estate was completed. Thus it instantly became a period piece, being seen as one of the last examples of 'Brutalist megastructure' in Britain. A 'Model for a Short-lived Future' was how the *Architectural Review* prefaced its extended review of the Barbican scheme in 1973. (20) Subsequently the fact that it was a middle-class housing development did not endear the scheme to those critics who dubbed it variously as 'Britain's largest voluntary ghetto' and 'a council estate for the rich'. Much has been made of the difference between the so-called middle-class and working-class flats. It is true that the Barbican estate has benefited from a higher standard of management and maintenance than is possible for ordinary social housing. Equally, it should be said that a large majority of post-war modern urban housing estates have neither been outright successes nor abject failures. (21)

In recent years, there has been a more positive reassessment of the Barbican estate. A coherent and comprehensive nature of the development has always struck its observers. Many others will no doubt continue to see it as an affront to the garden city tradition. But it is now regarded as a more successful example of how to reconcile high density with privacy and spaciousness to create an attractive urban living environment. As such, it could be seen an attempt at broad community planning, trying to bring people back into the city centre to live – a model for Richard Rogers and his Urban Task Force. (22)

## Notes

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- 9 See, GL: Reports of the Court of Common Council, Special Committee Report 'Redevelopment of the Barbican Area', 26 July 1957 and Barbican Committee Report 'Redevelopment of the Barbican Area', 21 Sept. 1959; City Press, 13 Nov. 1959.
- 10 'Chamberlin, Powell & Bon', Architects' Journal, 15 Jan. 1953.
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