

# Architecture, Citizenship, Space: British Architecture from the 1920s to the 1970s

15-16 June 2017, Oxford Brookes University

## Where and How to Live

Chair: Professor John Gold, Oxford Brookes University

*By 1939 a consensus had emerged that British cities were inadequate to the task of accommodating modern life. Architects and architectural students increasingly sought to promote new models of urban form and dwelling.*

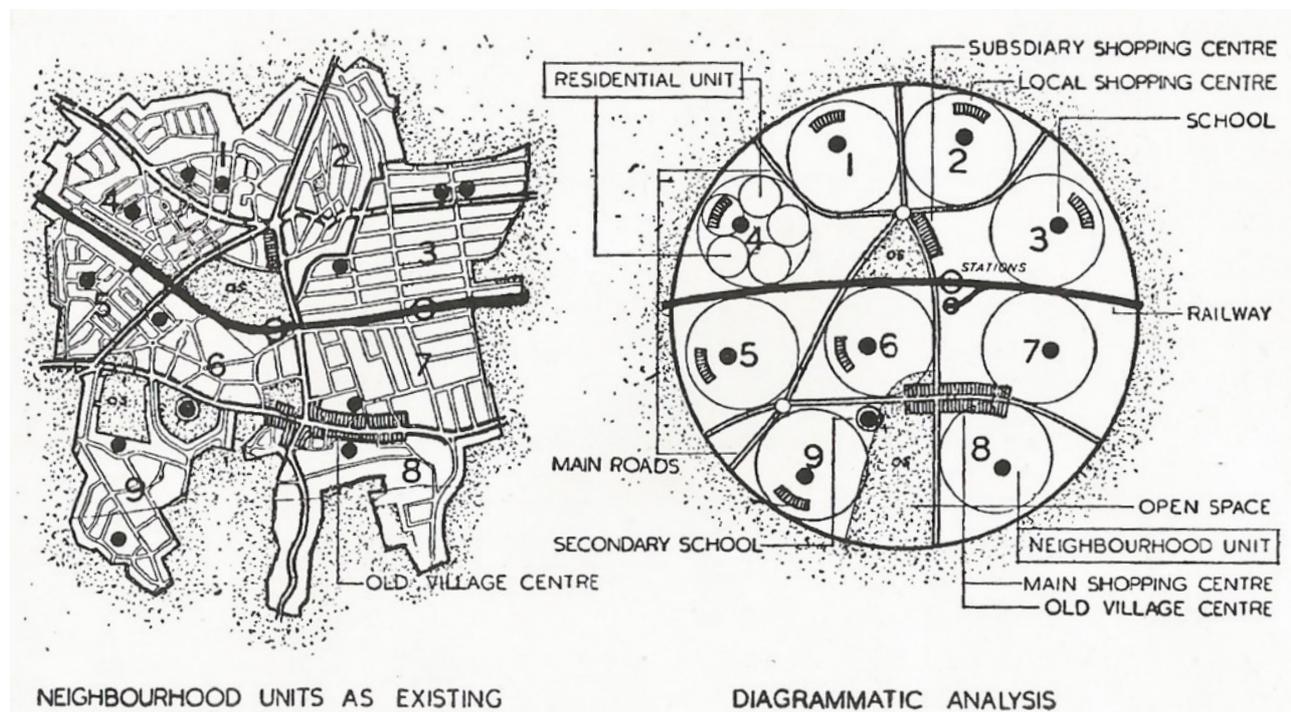
## London County Council : A Plan for the Model Community

The London County Council Architect's Department renown for creating innovative architectural spaces, facilitating interpersonal interaction to establish a strong community ethos. In order to enable the delivery of these spaces, they also restructured those in which they practiced architecture along similar lines, the architecture of practice becoming a generator of the architecture of product.



Published in 1943, the County of London Plan established the Council's intentions for a renewed post-war society in a holistic and proactive manner. The break in building necessitated by the war and the LCC Architect's Department location within the mechanisms of local government facilitated the proposition of a strategy which previous plan authors such as the Royal Academy plan and MARS plan for London1, both of 1942, the RIBA's London Regional Reconstruction Committee proposals of 1943, and another Royal Academy plan in 1944 -and even historically Christopher Wren - could only propose in a theoretical manner. The Plan maps different scales of intention,

from citywide planning to aspirations for housing, industry, commerce, open spaces, with the small scale interventions informing the intentions for the overall scheme – one could not have been considered without the other. It was not intended as just a physical urban rewiring, but as an "assessment of London's physical, economic and social conditions", rooted in an understanding of the material and immaterial parameters of its context.



## NEIGHBOURHOOD PLAN

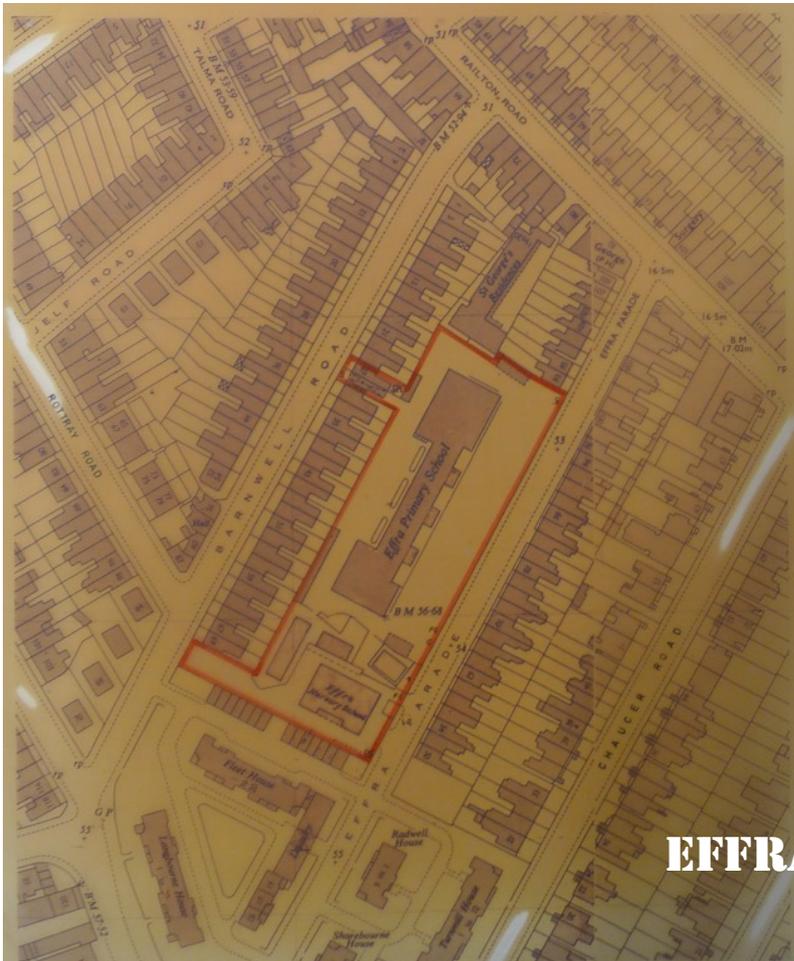
County of London Plan, 1943

Its central tenet was to restructure the County to create healthier, well planned neighbourhoods which would enable future generations to build communities with a strong interpersonal ethos. Addressing the overcrowding and toxic industries which blighted existing residential areas required relocation under the powers of the new compulsory purchase powers of the 1947 Town and Country Planning Act, to create new green spaces and revived housing estates. Within the self-contained entities of these nodal neighbourhoods, each connected by a rewired transportation network, 6 000-10 000 citizens would be appropriately educated, well housed, and provided with places to work, meet and relax.

These were to be developed incrementally, despite the urgency of housing provision, imbued with the foresight for building community bonds in the longterm, the strategy thereby addressing their intentions for both "immediate provision and future possibilities<sup>2</sup>".

At the heart of these neighbourhoods - both geographically and socially – were the Council's proposals to address the requirements of the burgeoning 1944 Education Act. The size of the estates forming each neighbourhood were set by the estimated number of pupils living there who would feed this school, and who would not need to cross any main roads on their way to and from their homes.

Due to compact nature of London's urban fabric, this was not always implemented as an ideal translation of the intended diagram beyond the wholesale Regeneration Areas such as in Stepney and Poplar, where plans for slum clearance and extensive bomb damage combined to free the architects from the constraints of the existing urban fabric.



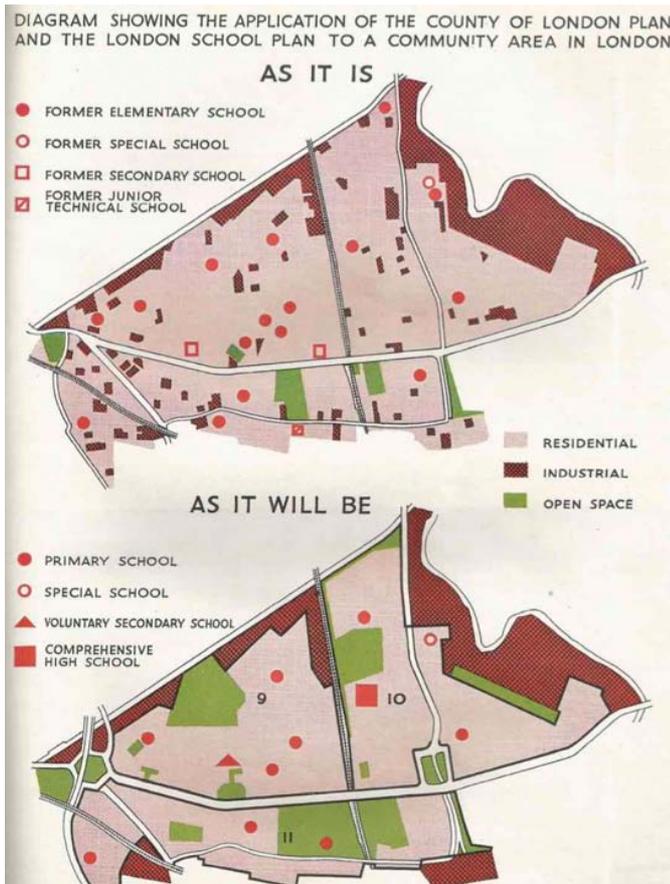
## **PLAN FOR EFFRA PRIMARY SCHOOL**

Lambeth Council

As the plan for Effra Primary School in Lambeth shows, the LCC's sites were often far from the ideal, open sites surrounded by playing fields which were intended to be inhabited by the Ministry of Education. Instead, a sensitivity to retained community infrastructure and the density of existing development provided new parameters within which to operate.

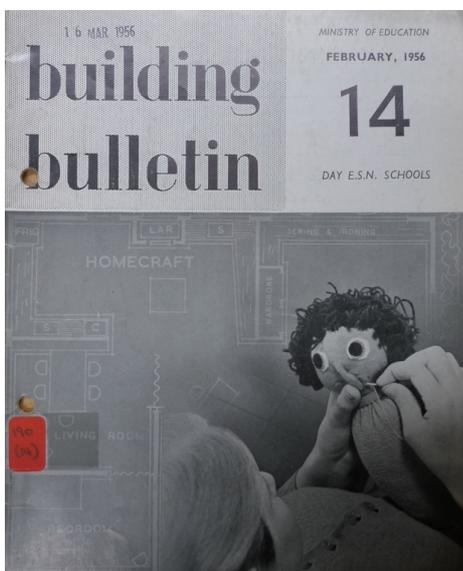
The LCC's 1947 Plan of London Schools proposed that school provision would be more concentrated within the neighbourhood layout<sup>3</sup> providing densely populated Comprehensive, Primary, Secondary and Technical schools in place of more dispersed educational buildings.

Much of the existing building stock had been inherited from the previous School Board<sup>4</sup>, which had been “built before 1920 and [was] now out of date” (London County Council, 1947). These old schools were at odds with the new educational intentions, which proposed “an element of reaction against the ideas which have gone before[...] [to] use our school buildings differently from a few years ago, to match our changing and developing educational ideas” (Morrell et al, 1960, 15). One of these educational ideals was the integrated provision of education for pupils for newly defined categories of disability. This was to be made within a specialist institution, with environments designed specifically to accommodate the effects and requirements of physical, learning and mental handicaps<sup>5</sup>. The challenge here was to establish an appropriate typological precedent appropriate to the new parameters of use this entailed.



## LONDON SCHOOL PLAN

London County Council



Although guidance was published by the Ministry of Education for these new typologies in Building Bulletin, a non-statutory magazine published by HMSO on an ad hoc basis for an audience of architects, teachers, schools inspectors and “all those whom architects regard as their clients”<sup>6</sup>, the architects had a fairly open remit in terms of delivery, with few parameters to constrain their creativity.

Project architect, Bob Giles, notes that “There were no design guides within the Division. I took the lead from existing school plans and current education theory”.<sup>7</sup>

The intention outlined in the London School Plan had been for schools for physically handicapped children to be located on the edge of the County, in order for them to afford them better access to “the light and air that they need”.

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Ruth Lang, Newcastle University

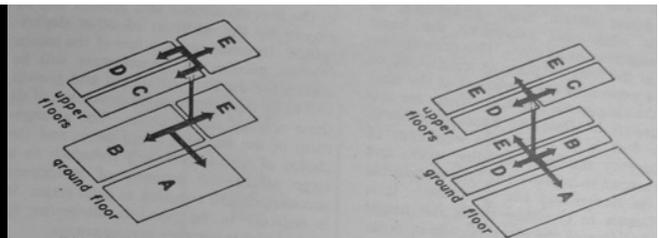
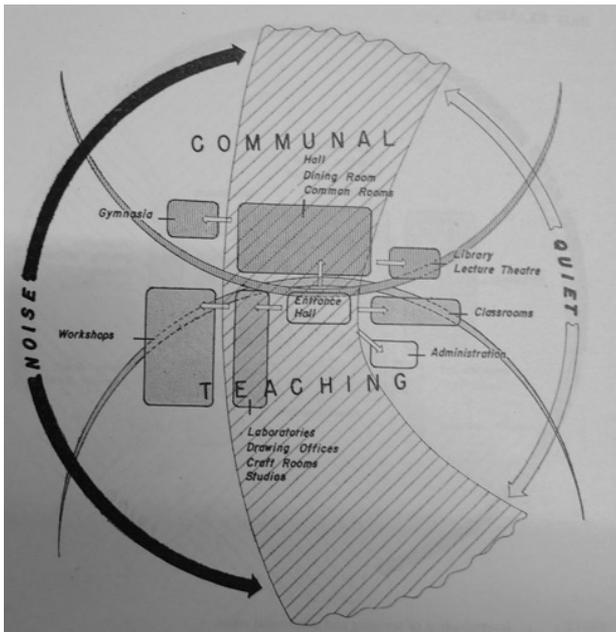


Figure 1

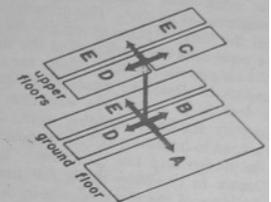


Figure 2

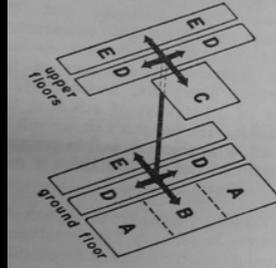


Figure 3

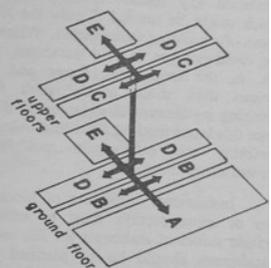


Figure 4

## BUILDING BULLETIN

Spatial arrangement guidance  
 Ministry of Education  
 1955 onwards

Yet for central schools such as the proposed Bromley Hall in Bow, the industrial context of the site necessitated a novel response. a series of courtyard spaces were integrated within the plan of the proposed school.

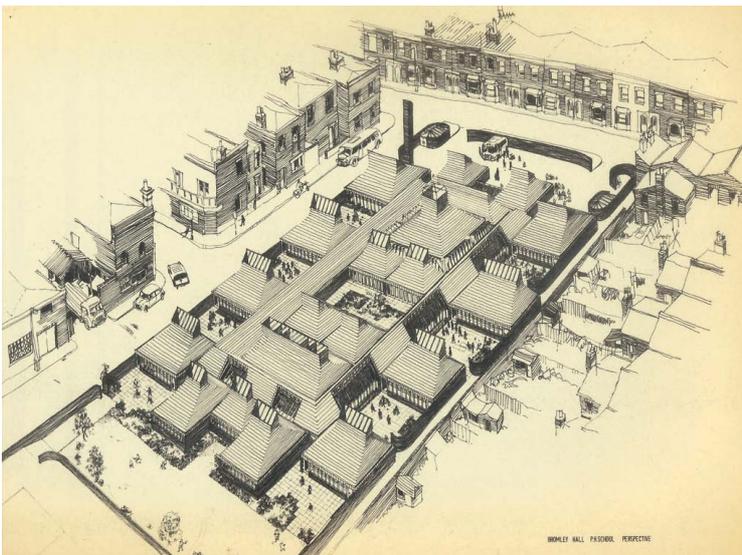


These spaces were to provide distinctive relationships between inside and outside, and enable entire classrooms to be opened up, providing a continuation of the Open Air School design philosophies experimented with by the LCC at Bostal Wood School in 1907<sup>8</sup> and evidenced in the school's precursor.



## **BROMLEY HALL OPEN AIR SCHOOL**

previous location

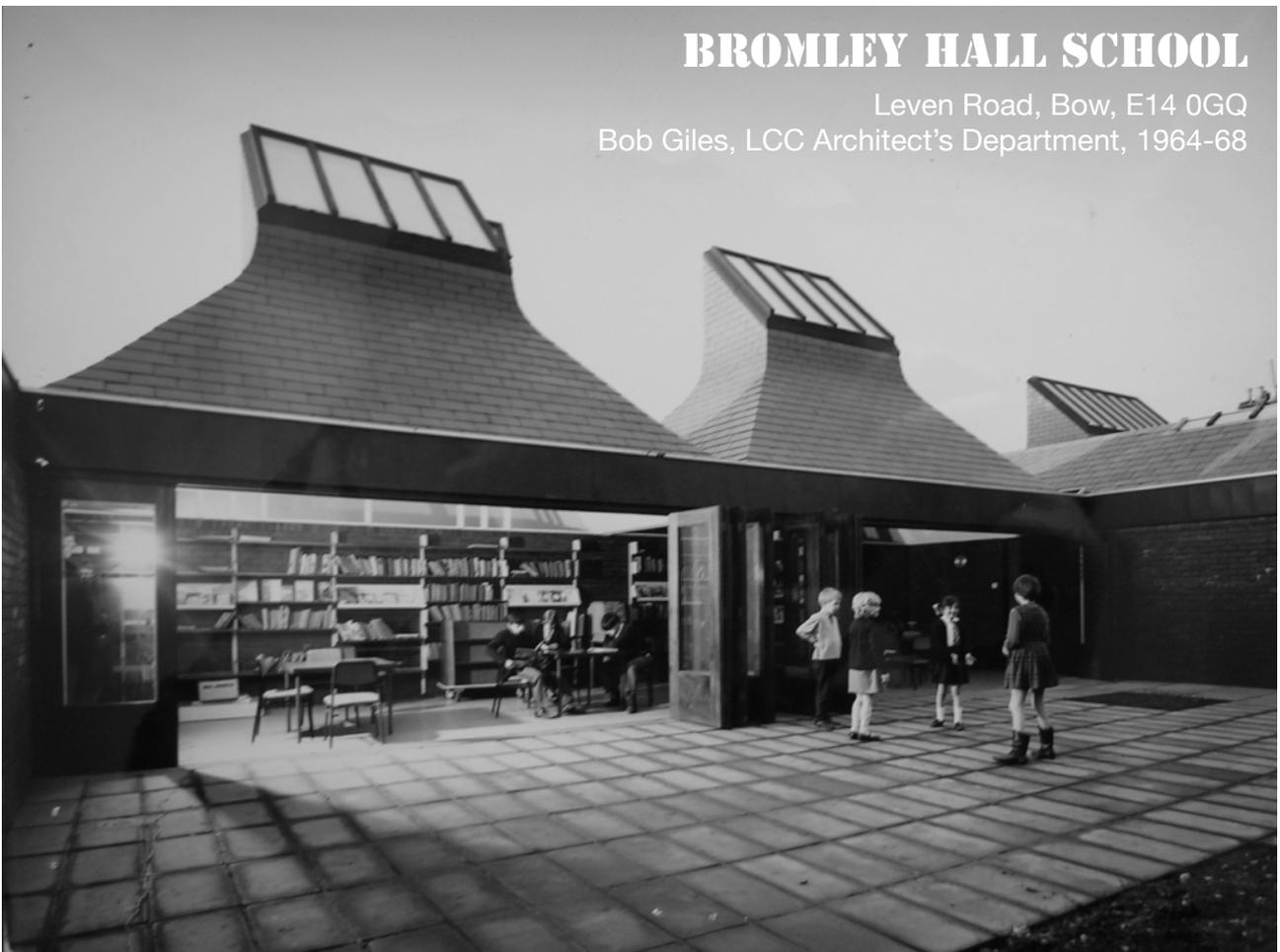


Mindful of meeting the constraints of the number of pupils, to be delivered at a cost-per-head also determined by the Ministry, Giles was able to dictate the form of the school based on his own experience on comparative schemes. His familiarity with the “New Empiricism” and “functional tradition”<sup>9</sup> led to the use of engineering brick - a material choice appropriate to the physical requirements of a school for students with heavy wheelchair use, and with small-scale spaces in response to the new ethos of child-centric tectonic design.

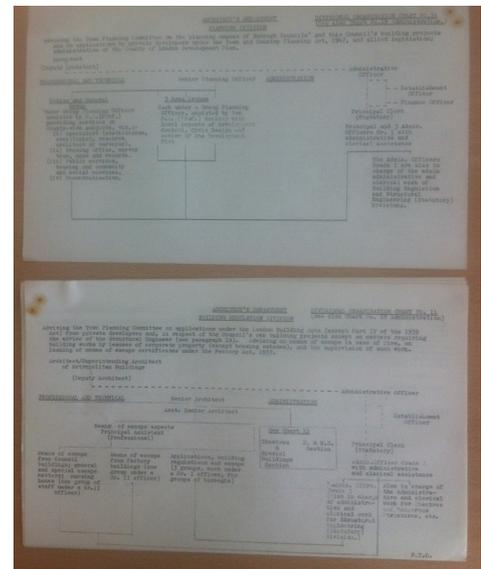
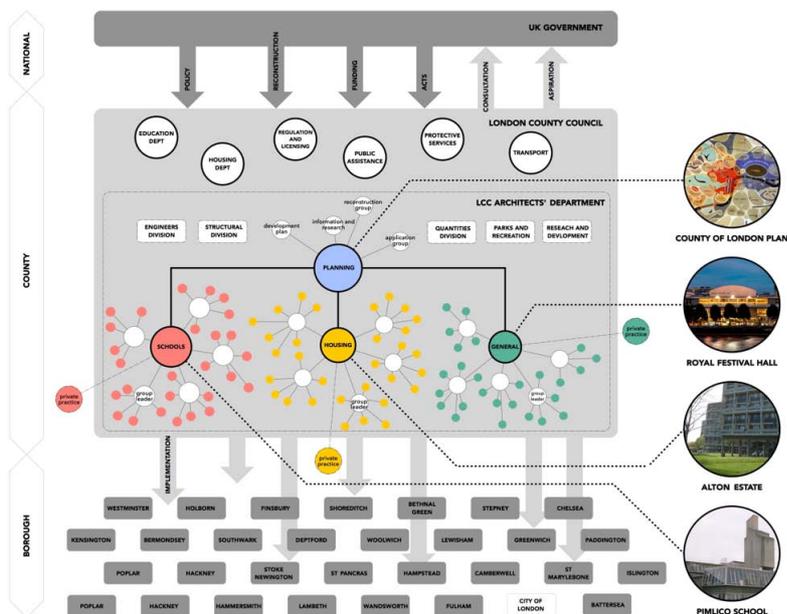
The quality and experimental nature of the scheme has been appraised by English Heritage and afforded Grade II listing (though soon to be refurbished) for being “one of the architecturally outstanding schools of the 1960s [...] combining intimate, child-scaled interiors with bold, expressive external forms reflecting the local industrial vernacular.” (British Listed Buildings, 2014)

# BROMLEY HALL SCHOOL

Leven Road, Bow, E14 0GQ  
 Bob Giles, LCC Architect's Department, 1964-68



Schools such as Bromley Hall School were able to achieve such levels of ingenuity thanks to the COLP's co-author Forshaw's restructuring of the architect's Department at LCC. A restructuring which mirrors the restructuring he'd proposed for the county itself.



It was important to establish how these groups operated internally, but also how they would communicate with each other - in much the same way that the overall infrastructure was essential to the successful establishment of introspective Neighbourhood units set out in the Plan.

Individual groups, mini communities – Giles was working in a studio atmosphere which was a continuation of Studio environment akin to the university environments many had just come directly from, through teaching links with the AA, Regents Street Polytecnic, Edinburgh. The small scale enabled the architects to have close contact with their Group Leaders such as Peter Moro and Colin Lucas, who had been looked up to in education. This was complemented by the encouragement of a continuing education<sup>10</sup>, with visits organised by the Council from Le Corbusier, Walter Gropius and Frank Lloyd Wright. These were thought of as small studios, rather than faceless bureaucrats.



**GEORGE FINCH**

Architectural Association, 1950



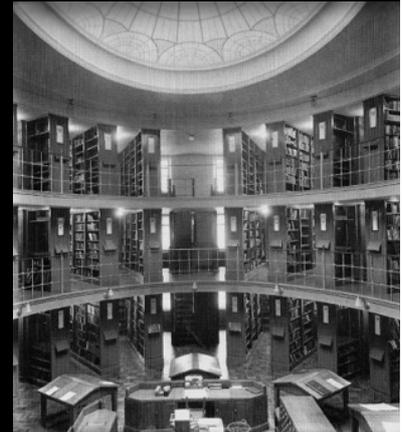
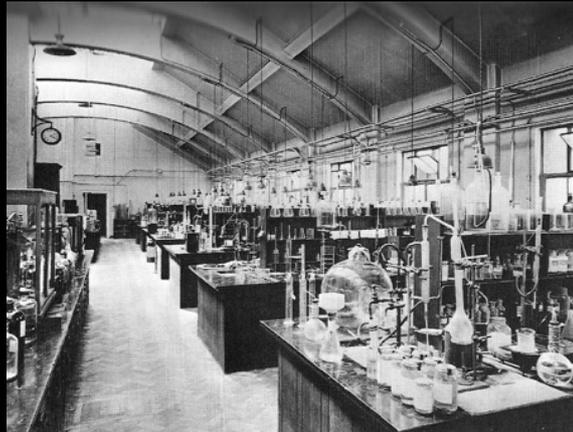
**ROSEMARY STJERNSTEDT**

Housing Division, 1950s

Forshaw's structure - later expanded by Robert Matthew, and restructured again under Hubert Bennett and Leslie Martin in 1956<sup>11</sup> - created "streams" of reporting between the Chief Architect, divisional heads<sup>12</sup>, Group Leaders and the individual architects who worked these studio teams of 12-16<sup>13</sup>, a scale more familiar to private practice than the structures of governmental bureaucracy. The human links were made essential due to the spatial separation of the Department's operation - groups forming the Schools Division worked<sup>14</sup> in groups of two to thirty three across rooms 275, 667, 668, 669, 670, 671, 766, 768, 769 of North Block (and sub-rooms thereof). Michael Powell - the Schools Division Head architect of the time - was based in room 666, and Chief Architect Hubert Bennett in room 172.



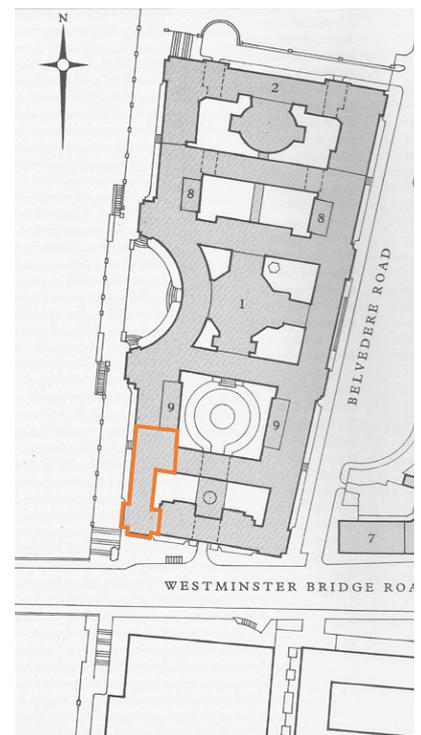
Clockwise, from top left  
administrative support,  
staff canteen, library,  
laboratory



In its location after the Council moved from Spring Gardens to the site at County Hall, the architect's department was positioned alongside the other primary functions of the council, with proximate access to the educational, housing and planning committees which operated within it, as well as internal quality surveying, regulatory, and research resources – as well as the services of a sociologist, Margaret Willis, development laboratories - thus establishing physical support infrastructure of amenities of the department.

The practices they adopted parallel the bureaucratic working practices outlined by Henry Russell Hitchcock, depending “not on the architectural genius of one man, [...] but in the organisational genius which can establish a fool-proof system of rapid and complete production.<sup>15</sup>” But rather than homogenising the output, this process encouraged greater experimentation through the autonomy it imbued.

The work of the LCC was inherently pluralistic, not individualist - much to Frank Lloyd Wright's chagrin upon visiting<sup>16</sup>. Yet it was able to project an image of operating as a coherent whole, accommodating variety of lives of the inhabitants.

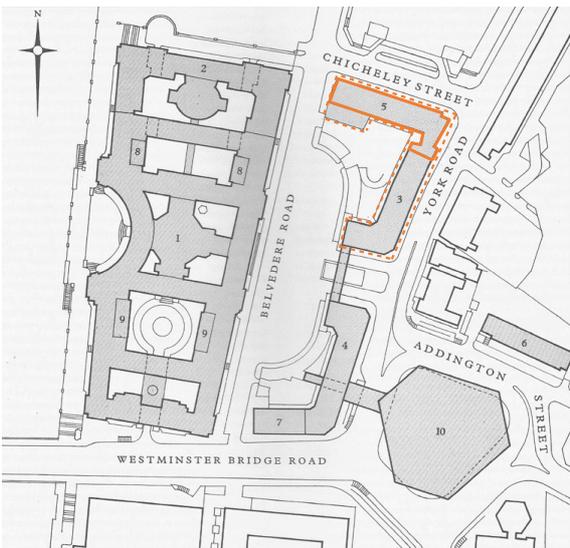


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As its staff and its remit grew, the LCC reached a critical mass by which “The LCC organisation, carrying out numerous types of projects, staffed by over 3000 people, was too big for any strict rationalisation<sup>17</sup>.” In the mid-1950s, 585 architects<sup>18</sup> were working in the Department, with a support staff of around twice this number.

Spatial and interpersonal relationships in County Hall, enabled strategic separation, but also moments of meeting together, as for the County of London Plan – can be seen as a microcosm.



The Department’s relocation to the North Block extension in 1958 developed a more insular, specialist community, the structure of reporting became more important to maintain this ethos of coordination to balance their creativity, despite physical separation.

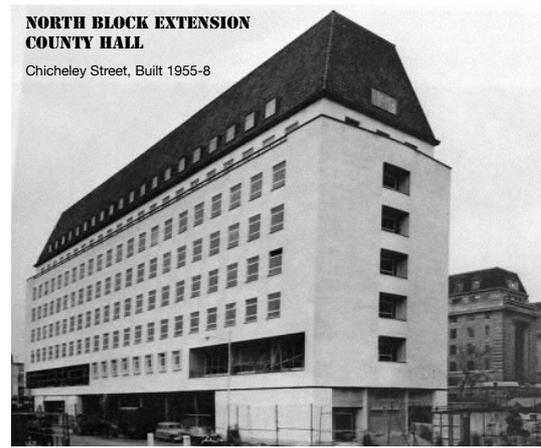
But as for the realization of the County of London Plan, issues arose whereby these communities became rather insular, with little crossover between groups. In contrast to the seeming homogeneity and anonymity of the Department and the spirit of collaboration at its heart, this served to create a large number of what are frequently referred to as “Prima Donnas”. The renowned architectural freedom and potential influence of social

betterment<sup>19</sup>, and the development of architecturally and financially significant schemes had drawn<sup>20</sup> a series of strong personalities to the Department. Ostensibly the anonymity of authorship of each scheme to the outside world opposed this, though an internal sense of competition was instilled<sup>21</sup> in its place, forged by the employees’ awareness of their own privileged position and

expertise. While the size and nature of the Department could have proven oppressive, it instead empowered its employees.

They were felt to be far from a sense of overall control – this was a shift from being seen as an innovative avant garde, to being considered Prima Donnas, their power and renegade nature in the face of higher authority reflecting the issues seen with the LCC and later GLC, which brought about its dissolution.

The Department's location, and the social and interpersonal connections it embodied, instigated an ethos of creativity for the community it contains, which facilitated their creation of such innovative architecture.



We can see that it is not only the material manifestation and disposition of our buildings, but also the immaterial strategic approach. The architects of LCC were experimenting with the composition of spatial arrangements not only in the schemes they designed, but also in how they approached their practice. This spatial consideration translates from the urban plan, to architectural development, to building interpersonal connections, and back out again.

From this we can see how architecture as product, architecture as practice, are intertwined, and how Lewis Silkin's spirit of friendship, neighborliness and comradeship, translates through to how good citizens build good architecture, and vice versa.

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<sup>1</sup> A. Korn and F.J. Samuely, A master plan for London, *Architectural Review*, 91, January (1942). 143–150 This was authored by Arthur Korn, Maxwell Fry, Arthur Ling and Felix Samuely. Despite the crossover in collaboration - and in explicit employment of Ling within the LCC's team developing the Plan - these were developed independently, and parallels with the MARS Plan for London are denied by Ling himself. Yet this enabled the integration of a broader range of expertise than those available in-house.

<sup>2</sup> Forshaw, J. H., and Patrick Abercrombie. 1943. County of London Plan. First Edition. Macmillan.  
p. iv

<sup>3</sup> The numbers of students to be provided for of course having a symbiotic relationship with the neighbourhood proposals themselves, and the quantity of housing (and potential residents) they accommodated.

<sup>4</sup> The inheritance of the built legacy and reaction to it, as quoted from Britain's New Schools.

<sup>5</sup> A section on the varying parameters dependent on type was outlined by their in house publication *Replanning London Schools* (London County Council, 1947)

<sup>6</sup> *Building Bulletin No. 1 (second Edition)*. 1955. P.1. HMSO. Institute of Education.

<sup>7</sup> Bob Giles, e-mail message to author, January 21, 2015

<sup>8</sup> An outline of the ascertained benefits and related experimental schemes are outlined in *England's Schools* (Harwood, 2010)

<sup>9</sup> Reference is given to Arne Jacobsen's Munkegård School of 1948-57 in Dyssegård, Copenhagen, Aldo van Eyck's orphanage at Amsterdam of 1960-61 and Erich Mendelsohn's Hermann Hat Factory in Luckenwalde, Germany (*British Listed Buildings*, 2014) although Giles cites Colin St John Wilson's "The Other Tradition of Modern Architecture" as a key reference in developing his familiarity with similar such works. (Bob Giles, e-mail message to author, January 21, 2015)

<sup>10</sup> See also CONTRACT chapter for elaboration of working practices established for sabbaticals, teaching, and lunchtime gallery visits characteristic of employment at LCC.

<sup>11</sup> REF PJM archive : Percy Johnson Marshall's archival notes regarding reshuffles to the Department structure

<sup>12</sup> introduced by Martin to Schools and Housing Divisions. Saint, Andrew. 1987. *Towards a Social Architecture: Role of School Buildings in Post-War England*. 1st edition. New Haven: Yale University Press. P.186

<sup>13</sup> Deemed "the most that could be managed by a senior architect" Harwood, Elain. 2013. "London County Council Architects (act. c. 1940–1965)." *Oxford National Dictionary of Biography*. Oxford University Press. <http://www.oxforddnb.com/templates/theme-print.jsp?articleid=97268> This article notes that Group Working had been popular since the 1930s, but substantive evidence of when this was implemented at LCC has not been forthcoming.

The work of the Department reflected the educational background of many of the architects who worked there, who had come from the Architectural Association with the LCC seen as a "finishing school" following their studies. E A A Rowse, the principal since 1935, had introduced acceptance for the submission of collaborative rather than independent projects.

<sup>14</sup> "London County Council Architect's Department Telephone Directory." 1958. Percy Johnson-Marshall archive, University of Edinburgh.

<sup>15</sup> Hitchcock, Henry-Russell. 1947. "The Architecture of Bureaucracy and the Architecture of Genius." *Architectural Review*, January. P.4

<sup>16</sup> As documented

<sup>17</sup> [Classey p.91 / *Architect & Building News* 3 Sept 1971, P.10]

<sup>18</sup> Exact numbers differ - this figure is taken from an internal memorandum: T J Jones, letter to F Holland, Deputy Comptroller of the Council, 25 May 1951, Ref: LCC/CL/ESTAB/01/195. However, this excludes large number of "temporary" staff not yet employed for 2 years : Council's policy in relation to staff, London Metropolitan Archives, Ref: LCC/CL/ESTAB/01/105  
This overall figure differs from the "1,577 staff (of which 350 were professional architects and trainees)" in 1953 noted by Elain Harwood, for which the source is not identified. Harwood, Elain. 2013. *Oxford National Dictionary of Biography* "London County Council Architects (act. c.1940–1965)". Oxford University Press. <http://www.oxforddnb.com/templates/theme-print.jsp?articleid=97268>

<sup>19</sup> Furneaux Jordan, R. 1956. "LCC New Standards in Official Architecture." *Architectural Review*, November. P.324

<sup>20</sup> along with recruitment strategies

<sup>21</sup> In comparison with the teamwork evident in the Hertfordshire Architects' Department, the autonomy this created at LCC meant that often "groups consisted of individual architects trying to produce the avant grade on a competitive basis." Classey, Eric. 2008. "The Architecture of the Urban School: London's Comprehensive Schools 1945-1986". PhD, University of East London. P.91