



# A NEW LONDON

Despite its bureaucratic status, the LCC was a hive of ambitious architects and planners who wanted to create a modern capital city through extensive reconstruction and progressive architecture. In 1943 they published the County of London Plan, the first proposal for post-war redevelopment.

Aiming to break away from pre-war slums and piecemeal private development, the plan envisaged a cleaner and healthier city which would improve the quality of daily life for everyone. Access to public parks and gardens was prioritised and new legislation was proposed in order to protect green spaces. Because of its political power and remit for delivery, the LCC was uniquely placed to see through a plan with such significant urban, infrastructural and architectural consequences – one which could not have been achieved privately.



# THE IDEAL NEIGHBOURHOOD

The brief set for the Lansbury neighbourhood by the local council as part of the County of London Plan included 478 homes, two schools, two churches and a new market on the 30-acre site. A shopping centre and school formed the centre of the plan for Lansbury, as it did for the other neighbourhoods, ensuring children did not have to leave the local area or cross busy roads each day.

Another key feature was the new Crisp Street Market, which replaced the existing market of the area. It was designed by Frederick Gibberd, an architect who had built acclaimed housing schemes across England, but whose aspirations stretched much further. Fusing historic ideas for town planning with modern ideals, Gibberd sought to encourage social interaction between Lansbury's new residents by creating entirely separate infrastructures for people and traffic. Open squares and social spaces were linked by pedestrian walkways and enabled residents to spend time with each other as a community outside of their homes. It was to be the first pedestrianised shopping precinct built in London.





# PROGRESSIVE SCHOOLS

The schools at the heart of the Lansbury Estate were among the first to respond to the Education Act of 1944, which was one of the central components of the newly created welfare state. The Act stipulated that school architecture meet the needs of modern and inclusive teaching methods. In addition, every school was to include a kitchen and canteen for students.

The Susan Lawrence Primary School was designed by architects Yorke, Rosenberg and Mardell. Rather than building in traditional brick, the architects used an innovative steel-frame grid system as the basis for their design for the school, alongside prefabricated elements of reinforced and precast concrete. The professional ethos of the time embraced collaboration between construction and artistic disciplines, and the school's interior scheme was developed with artist Peggy Angus. Her work was incorporated within the overall design and the brightly coloured tiling scheme is still in place today.



# **SOCIAL SPACES**

Areas for relaxation and celebration were integral to Lansbury's original plan and to its ultimate success. Some aspects of Gibberd's designs were initially considered frivolous by the LCC Valuation Department, who viewed plans from a financial perspective rather than for their social and community value. Gibberd's clock tower at the Eastern end of the Market, for example, was nearly cancelled due to rising building costs at a time of national austerity. Its importance as a social landmark was realised, and it has since become an icon for the Estate.

The Festival Inn pub opened on 2 May 1951, and was faced by a Festival of Britain-themed maypole in the square opposite. The nearby Trinity Church was designed by architects Cecil Handisyde and D. Rogers Stark using innovative architectural approaches to structure. It was built of reinforced concrete – a revolutionary technology at the time, also evident in the clock tower – and the church hall was clad in precast concrete panels and light grey terrazzo, with a suspended roof and soaring bell tower. The church's architectural significance has been recognised by Historic England and is now listed with Grade II status.



# THE FESTIVAL OF BRITAIN

The spirit of aspiration to rebuild anew in the aftermath of war was embodied in the 1951 Festival of Britain. The summer-long programme of events boosted morale and encouraged economic and societal recovery by demonstrating the best of the nation's achievements.

People travelled all over Britain to see the festival, and many visitors to Poplar arrived by boat from the festival's main site on the South Bank. The entrance to the 'Live Architecture' exhibition was marked by a specially built 200-foot-high construction crane on an open-air site on the East India Dock Road. Visitors were then guided through the new streets of the Lansbury Estate, which – in contrast to the pristine set-piece exhibition on the South Bank – was still surrounded by bomb-damaged and ruined properties.





# **‘LIVE ARCHITECTURE’ EXHIBITION**

After some prompting from Frederick Gibberd, the festival committee agreed to present a complete urban environment as a ‘live exhibition’. In this ambitious plan, festival visitors would experience first-hand how the streets of British cities might look in the future, in real rather than abstract terms. Although the Lansbury Estate was still under construction, it was chosen to act as this architectural test bed, affirming the Estate’s status as the new benchmark for neighbourhood planning.

On the site, a series of temporary pavilions contained exhibits that questioned how modern planning could meet the needs of the British people. In addition, a ‘house of horrors’ called Gremlin Grange demonstrated the housing issues LCC architects hoped to address: from dangerously poor construction to leaking roofs and thin walls.





# LANSBURY'S FIRST YEAR

The goal for the Lansbury Estate was long-term, and by the end of 1952 around 168 families had moved in. The first residents were the Snoddy family. They already lived in Poplar, as did over half of the 700-strong community. The remainder of their new neighbours came from nearby Stepney, Bethnal Green and Shoreditch, with only a small minority born outside of the East End. Thanks to their existing local connections, tenants felt a sense of continuity despite the radical changes to their architectural environment.

Most residents were delighted with their modern and well-equipped new homes, which offered a far higher standard of living than many had experienced previously. Yet modern housing came at a price: the majority of residents paid at least twice as much in rent, and families soon worried about the cost of living. By 1952 many young mothers were forced to take part-time work to help supplement their family income.

Ninety per cent of Lansbury residents were employed as manual workers. Over a third worked at the port of London or in ancillary trades connected to the docks, while others were employed in nearby factories. It was therefore evident that the success of Neighbourhood Number Nine would be guided by the health of the local economy.



# THE NEW ESTATE

Although it was a showcase for new ways of living, the Lansbury Estate was really only the first phase of a 20-year reconstruction plan for Neighbourhood Number Nine. The next phase of development that would bring more housing to the area was due to start in 1954. However, young families had quickly outgrown their new homes, and by March 1953 one in seven tenants had applied for housing elsewhere.

With a rising cost of living, many families needed two jobs to survive. The cranes and hoists of the docks to the south – visible from Lansbury – marked the engine of the local economy, and so as the decade progressed it became clear that industry, not housing, was to define the future of the neighbourhood.

The next exhibition investigates the role industry plays in the creation of a successful community, and how changing technologies affected the residents of Neighbourhood Number Nine.



## Poplar People

Susan Lawrence Primary School (now Lansbury Lawrence School) was named after Susan Lawrence, one of the first female Members of Parliament. Lawrence also served as a Labour councillor in Poplar and achieved renown in 1921 by defying government demands to increase rates in the area. She was jailed as a result, along with fellow protestor George Lansbury.

George Lansbury was a socialist reformer and supporter of the suffragettes, who later became leader of the Labour party. The Lansbury Estate is named in his honour.





## Poplar Industry

Many industries thrived in Poplar thanks to its accessibility to the docks, and businesses such as Spratts Pet Food, Engert & Rolfe felting, the Far Famed Cake Company and Poplar Plastics were amongst the diverse range of concerns that found a home here. The industries as well as the transport connections they relied upon were all considered constituent parts of neighbourhood planning, which took into account not only where the residents might live, but also how.





## Rosie Lee Cafe

The Rosie Lee Cafe, designed by architect Sadie Speight, featured a yellow and green canopy built over an innovative lightweight metal structure, and an abstract mural by artist Leonard Manasseh.





## Furnished Show Houses

Whilst much of the estate was still under construction, two completed properties were open to the public to view: a house at 14 Grundy Street and a flat at 2 Overstone House. To demonstrate ideas of modern living, both dwellings were furnished with contemporary designs. At the time, the goods on display were criticised for being too expensive, and items such as a television set were seen as a luxury far beyond the budgets of most new residents.





**‘The first plans were completed at a time when the full extent of wartime damage was not yet known, and before victory in the War was yet assured, a remarkable display of optimism during a period of great national suffering and uncertainty.’**

Edward Carter, The Future of London, 1961





**‘One of the best buildings of the Festival exhibition, demonstrating an unusually architectural example of the new interest in child-size, practical spaces’.**

Ian Nairn on Susan Lawrence Primary School,  
Modern Buildings in London, 1964

