

Low-rise in the Sky. The adventures of a social housing estate in London from the seventies to date

As an association promoting sustainability, Embrace2030 pursues an interest in theme of social housing. A hot theme, especially at an international level. We recently put on an exhibition about the career and research conducted by architect Paolo Meluzzi in low-cost construction and residential typologies (<embrice2030.com/2018/02/14/paolo-meluzzi-e-il-dibattito-low-rise-high-density-1990-2000-inaugurazione-mercoledì-21-febbraio-2018-17-30/>) that travelled to the Department of Architecture of Rome Tre University (<<http://architettura.uniroma3.it/?eventi=mostra-in-memoria-di-paolo-meluzzi>>). On these occasion, a volume within our collection Embrace Theme Format Digital (<embrice2030.com/embrace-formato-a-tema/>), Paolo Meluzzi e il dibattito internazionale Low-Rise High-Density, was also published. Of course, we found affinities and correspondences elsewhere, namely across the Channel, where a case study in terms of low-rise social housing is in progress. Page High Estate in North London is a 92 home development that provides homes for 218 people with density at 60 pph. Built to Parker Morris standards, the estate contains 2 one-person bedsits, 55 one-bed flats, 9 two-bed flats and 26 two-bed maisonettes. It was built by Dry Halasz Dixon Partnership in the seventies and won a Good Design in Housing award in 1976. A recent urban regeneration plan backed by the council, Haringey, foresaw its demolition, in accordance to a general tendency to sweep away social housing estates – whether well-working or not – to make way for gentrification and property developers. The tenants, led by Adrian Chapman, whom we talked to, established a tenants' association to fight for their homes. Not without difficulties, they managed to be acknowledged and even stop the Wood Green Area Action Plan, with a little help from their MP.

This story presents several levels of interest, in terms of architecture, urban planning, and society. It represents a topical case study in social housing but also in participatory democracy, told from within.

by Carla Scura

The case in which Page High Estate in which you live is involved is incontrovertibly at the core of a crucial issue of our times, i.e. the relationship between public and private as far as urban space is concerned. It is a real emblem/case study of a problem that was initially felt in London but is now spreading to other capitals (such as Rome): the tendency to demolish existing

dwellings to make room for high-end apartments, with the added scorn that the latter are far from mingling with the extant urban environment, not to mention communities, the residents of which are often obliged to relocate and therefore disperse. Page High Estate (<<https://pagehighestate.wixsite.com/haringey/about-page-high>>) was under threat of being demolished due to Haringey Council's Wood Green Area Action Plan (<www.haringey.gov.uk/planning-and-building-control/planning/planning-policy/local-plan/wood-green-area-action-plan>).

Interestingly, this comes at a time when, quite outrageously, Patrik Schumacher (the current leader of ZHA and a parametricism theorist) spoke at the 2016 World Architecture Festival and advocated an extreme rein-free real estate market, including the suppression of social housing, the abolition of state-funded art schools, and even the possible sale of Hyde Park for urban development. This was discussed in *The Guardian* (<<https://t.co/Fqvs86FmCO?amp=1>>) in an astonishingly sympathetic light in an article under the aegis of Guardian Cities (the newspaper's top-notch section supported by The Rockefeller Foundation), while a prior article in the same newspaper by its regular architecture critic, Olly Wainwright, was pointedly critical (<<https://t.co/5FSEdBzbZb?amp=1>>). I would like to cite another example of the Zeitgeist, this time in Italy, where the much-awaited redevelopment of Rome's former industrial port area – let's say, a mini-Docklands – and a fairly central one, regardless of individual tastes, is not being carried out according to the letter of the Master Plan, with 5- and 6-storey high-end apartments transformed overnight in 9 and 11 storeys respectively (<<https://embrace2030.com/2016/02/11/porto-fluviale-ultimo-atto/>>).

Carla Scura: But let's proceed gradually: would you like to tell Embrace2030 the story of the estate that you represent (historically, socially, architecturally, personally...)?

Adrian Chapman: Page High Estate is a 92-home group of apartments in Wood Green, which is in the borough of Haringey in North London. The estate is between two tube train stops: Turnpike Lane and Wood Green; six or seven minutes' walk from each. We're about 20 minutes on the tube away from Kings Cross—so close to central London. Why am I telling you this? So you can get a picture of where we are, and also so you can see that the estate is in a desirable location for property developers. Properties near tube stations sell for huge amounts of money. Transport-wise we're extraordinarily well connected at Page High.

The estate was built in the mid-70s. It lies on the site of a former variety theatre (The Empire), part of which later became a TV studio. Page High is unusual because it lies above a car park

(Bury Road car park), which itself lies on top of shops. The brickwork on the estate was chosen to be sympathetic with existing buildings below. Curiously, while up at Page High we are about six or seven stories up, unless you look out of your bedroom window it seems that you're on the ground. The estate is arranged around a veritable street in the sky, a track that runs the length of the estate. On one side, all the flats have front gardens and front and back balconies; on the other side, all the flats have back balconies. Most of the flats are single-bedroom, but there are some maisonettes with two bedrooms, some two-bedroom flats and a couple of bedsits.

When people come up to Page High for the first time, there are always surprised and often say, "Has this been here all along?" Page High, just a stone's throw from the very busy High Road (a long shopping road with a mall), is abstracted from the hue and cry of Wood Green. When I first came up here before moving to the estate in the mid-90s, I thought the place had a sci-fi feel to it. It seemed like I'd chanced upon a sequestered space, an alternative reality. OK, I'm speaking rather colourfully, perhaps; but I find such a reaction to be common amongst visitors. It's an unusual, and a special, place. It would be a good place to locate a Robinsonade, perhaps. One or two people have remarked to me that Page High is Ballardian, but I think that's quite wrong. J. G. Ballard's vision of the high rise, like his other sequestered communities, is a luxury development for high-paid professionals. Page High is a working-class community.

These days when people want to see what a house or a street looks like they often go to Google Maps. Well, Page High isn't on Google Maps. So far, we've been able to escape the Google gaze, and that's rather nice. But you can go to our website for pictures of the estate.

Architecturally, it's very seventies (which I like very much); and it speaks of ambition and commitment to social housing from the local authority. Haringey council owns the freehold and leases the building to a social landlord, Sanctuary Housing Association. By comparison to the private sector, rents are low here. For something like my flat, I'd be paying perhaps twice as much, maybe more, if I were renting on the open market. We pay a social rent here; pretty much the same as people pay in council housing. Rent might be comparatively low, but remember that salaries are for the most part, too; and remember, too, that private landlords' rents tend to be ridiculously high.

Haringey is, and has been for a long time, one of the poorest parts of London. Wood Green, where I live, doesn't tend to get in the news much, but Tottenham (a mile or so up the road and also in Haringey), the site of the large Broadwater Farm estate where there was a riot in 1985 in

which a policeman was killed, is of far more interest to the media. Gentrification has come to parts of Haringey (a borough divided administratively into 19 areas or “wards” as we call them); but gentrification has not yet significantly affected Wood Green (or Tottenham).

There’s widespread agreement that Wood Green, like some other parts of Haringey, requires improvement. The High Road is increasingly shabby and grimy. The council’s housing waiting list is huge, standing at roundabout 10,000. Thousands are housed in highly unsatisfactory temporary accommodation (bed and breakfast ‘hotels’) at great expense to the local authority. Local authority budgets have been massively squeezed by central government. Quite simply, Haringey (like other boroughs) has extremely little money to invest. This is the context in which the council decided to redevelop the borough. The principal means of ‘regeneration’ (dreadful word!) was to be a public-private partnership with an Australian property development firm, Lendlease. The so-called Haringey Development Vehicle (HDV), a 50-50 public-private arrangement, was designed to redevelop several estates, including the much-publicised Broadwater Farm in Tottenham. But people were not adequately consulted, not given convincing assurances about where they would go and for how long or quite what they would return to (if they could at all).

The HDV was a political disaster, dividing the controlling Labour Party group on the council, and, finally, resulting in the resignation of the council leader. It was seen widely as an instrument of social cleansing. I’m talking in the past tense about the HDV here. Prior to the May 2018 election, the HDV was “parked” by the previous council administration, and the new administration has abandoned the scheme. It’s no longer politically acceptable to demolish housing estates without the support of tenants.

Parallel to the HDV there was another scheme, the Wood Green Area Action Plan (AAP). This set out the demolition of two social housing estates in Wood Green, Page High and Sky City (another, later ‘rooftop village’). The HDV attracted an enormous amount of local and national publicity. The AAP barely caused a ripple. Unfortunately for us, the media is much more interested in Tottenham than poor little Wood Green!

CS: How does this individual story fit in the big picture? Would you say that London is an exception, a sample of the future, or...?

AC: As I was saying, Page High, close to central London and close to two stations, would be a developer’s dream. Cash-strapped, the council would be able raise funds through selling the

site. A 'regenerated' estate—with, of course, most of the existing tenants moved out—would be far more up-market, and the council would be able to raise the 'community charge', the local tax it can levy on those living there. Now this, as I and my fellow residents understand it, was basically the idea underpinning the Wood Green Area Action Plan (AAP). While the council offered limited assurances about the so-called 'right to return' for existing residents, we were far from reassured. We understood, rather, that like residents in the HDV target area, we faced being moved out of our homes to make way for a style of regeneration that had little to do with our interests. We made a detailed submission to the AAP consultation process (https://docs.wixstatic.com/ugd/7f23b6_49b87e3e278d4df9d79fce480ff9d7.pdf)

The plight of Page High is of course far from unique. Up and down the country, we have seen regeneration programmes that have resulted in what can only be termed social cleansing.

The council had little idea about Page High. The masterplan AAP document didn't even mention the number of homes on the estate. Now Page High is far from perfect, but in many ways it is a model for social housing: small scale, low-rise, a little community that blends in well with its locality. The estate requires improved maintenance, certainly, but it is not a failing estate, not a 'sink.' I can't help but think that imagining that Page High might have been, throughout most of its 40-odd year life, largely a very successful estate – just imagining this could well have been beyond the ideological capacity of the previous council administration. Social housing has come to be seen by many as a 'last resort', an option only for the desperate or terribly unfortunate. Social rent properties – both council and housing association-run – have over the past 35 or 40 years been more and more devalued. It is as though tenants living on estates are utterly shiftless, the 'undeserving poor', inimical to what Thatcher referred to as 'the property-owning democracy.' We can relate this more broadly to the demonization of the poor, about which Owen Jones has written so well in his book *Chavs*. I think it's difficult for many people now to see estates as locations of community. And now many TV viewers are unfortunately likely to see estates in terms constructed by 'poverty porn' documentaries such as *Benefits Street*—programmes that present the desperation of ordinary people as a source of excitement to the amused and aghast gaze of a 'superior' viewer. (There's a nice line in Zadie Smith's novel *NW* about such programmes. One of the characters remarks ironically that poverty "has become a character trait.") Of course, such presentation of working class communities ties in very well with the privatisation of public assets so much a part of what the Marxist geographer David Harvey

writes of as the neoliberal project of accumulation by dispossession. In order for people to be dispossessed, how much easier if they have already been degraded.

So there's something for you placing the situation of Page High in a larger context. But I should also tell you something about the particular management of the estate. Page High is run by a housing association, Sanctuary Housing, which has become a huge housing provider. Like many other housing associations, its emphasis has changed from caring for its tenants to making money. Sanctuary, like several other housing association associations, has become enlarged through a merger. Those managing the estate are for the most part now very distant. Now tenants' enquiries are routed through a call centre outside London. We now have no housing officer detailed to keep a close eye on the estate. Repairs are increasingly unreliable. Here Page High residents' experiences are shared by many residents living in other housing association properties. Once again, then, what is happening at Page High offers a picture in miniature of a wider trend.

CS: Would you describe the grassroots strategies adopted by High Page tenants to fight not only for their dwellings but also the quality of their living? What should be done, in general, to maintain a decent standard of living in cities, especially as regards homes? (Of course, each city has their story. London has a fairly particular one, with urban plans that privileged what we now call the sprawl, a low skyline, and the typical 19th-century slums gradually replaced by 20th-century concrete high-rises -- all of which well cared for by a very good public transport network and services for the community. But at some time something went wrong in this model of development

AC: The prospect of demolition and the increasingly poor state of repair on the estate prompted us to set up a tenants' group last Autumn (2017). There had been a tenants' association in the past, back before I took up residence in 1995. The previous tenants' group ran out of steam, largely, I'm told, because the estate was basically well-managed. There wasn't much for the tenants' group to do!

It wasn't easy setting up the new tenants' association. I was keen that the group be constituted such that it would be recognised by the housing association as the tenants' legitimate representative. This we did in the end, but getting the necessary information from Sanctuary Housing was very difficult. I made several phone calls, e-mailed, put in two official complaints. In

the end, I contacted our member of parliament, who wrote to Sanctuary on our behalf. Very soon I got the information required.

Our first meeting was in mid-November 2017. Since then, the group has gone from strength to strength. Now we're getting about 35 people along to our meetings. We have an elected committee to keep the ball rolling between general meetings. Representatives from the committee meet Sanctuary now once a month. Getting Sanctuary to discharge its responsibility as landlord feels at times like a Sisyphean task, but, over time, I'm sure, we're going to make progress.

The tenants' association is online—we're on Twitter, and we have a blog. The Twitter account (@PageHighTenants) has been very helpful. We've been able to make connections through Twitter with other housing campaigners and tenants' groups. Now we invite representatives from neighbouring tenants' groups to our general meetings. We're trying to build a Wood Green-wide network of residents' groups.

We've met council officers several times, and we have good relations with our ward councillors and our MP (who wrote a foreword to our AAP submission). I mentioned that the HDV plan divided the last council administration. Haringey is a Labour council; the Labour Party's majority is massive. On May 3rd 2018 all the council seats were up for re-election. It was no surprise that once again Labour won convincingly. But, following the dispute with the party over regeneration, prior to the election, most of the candidates supporting the HDV were deselected and so could not stand again as Labour candidates. In their place, candidates opposed to the HDV and the Wood Green AAP stood and were elected. So we now have a rather different sort of council. Not a perfect one, by any means; but a rather better one. I'm concerned, for instance, about the council's style of consulting people on its plans. Some practices are deeply embedded and I don't expect the council to suddenly become expert in democratic engagement. But there are reasons for hope.

Now Page High Tenants' Association is very much part of the conversation in Haringey about Wood Green and social housing in the borough. And I expect the conversation to change. The emphasis will no longer be on demolition. I hope that the accent will rather be on renovation. (The council's problem, however, is that its funding has been slashed and is likely to be cut further.)

Page High sits on top of a car park that is itself on top of shops. The upper floor of the car park isn't used much. The car park lifts aren't reliable. The car park, it seems, has been run down. It must either be improved or re-purposed. That's a conversation that we hope to have. We also want to speak about entrances to the estate—entrances that are the responsibility of Haringey council; as well as an alley-way that runs down the side of the estate—again the council's responsibility. Now, I hope, we'll be able to consider these problems. And that's good.

We'll also be looking to our councillors and our MP to aid us in putting pressure on Sanctuary housing in the matters of security, repairs and maintenance. When Sanctuary finally registers that the estate will not be subject to the wrecking ball, we hope that they will recognise that further investment is necessary.

Thinking beyond Page High and Haringey, and considering your question about how we can ensure a decent standard of housing, I must say that London (and the UK) requires a massive public housing building programme. Planning should involve community groups as far as possible. Alongside rent controls that prevent landlords exploiting tenants, the government must ensure that there is a very significant increase in accommodation available at social rent. We must also stop the privatisation of public land and assets. In short, government must learn again to prize, and properly fund, social housing, public spaces and the common good.

Endpapers: Shortly before posting this, an interview with Mayor's Design Advocate Paul Karakusevic was released (<www.dezeen.com/2019/01/25/paul-karakusevic-london-public-housing-design/>). As it seems to take over from the issues discussed above while discussing the history and role of London in defining and practising social housing, we will get back on the whole theme.

Page High's cross-section is to be found in "Housing in Haringey, London; Architects: Dry Halasz Dixon Partnership", *Baumeister* vol. 73, no. 2, 1976 Feb., p. 111. Acknowledgments: Susie C. Cox.

Photos by Carla Scura.