

# The Guardian

## A tale of two brutalist housing estates: one thriving, one facing demolition

*Colin Wiles*

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Flats in London's privately owned Barbican go for £4m, while four miles away a similarly iconic social housing estate is set for demolition



In the late 1960s, when the Barbican was built, New Brutalism had become a key architectural expression of the welfare state. Photograph: James Barr (work experience)/The Guardian

Last month I cycled the four miles between two of London's most iconic brutalist housing estates, the Barbican and Robin Hood Gardens.

Both were designed by eminent architects around 40 years ago. Both have been praised and condemned in equal measure. One is a private estate and one is social housing. One is thriving, the other facing demolition. Their contrasting fortunes say a great deal about British housing policy over the past 40 years.

The Barbican, with more than 2,000 homes, is a frequent winner of London's ugliest building award. Yet its homes are very desirable, with penthouses going for more than £4m.

Designed by Le Corbusier devotees Chamberlin, Powell and Bon it features raised walkways, gardens and lush greenery. The estate has an army of caretakers and porters, and service charges range from £1,700 to £16,000 a year.

Robin Hood Gardens, a stone's throw from Canary Wharf, was designed by Alison and Peter Smithson for the Greater London Council (GLC). There is a wonderful film online made by cult novelist BS Johnson which catches their rather snooty attitude. Two massive slab blocks enclose a large open space and a two-storey high hill. It was modelled on the "little pool of calm" at Gray's Inn and it is astonishingly peaceful, given that the site is surrounded by major roads.



Robin Hood Gardens: 'astonishingly peaceful, given that the site is surrounded by major roads'. Photograph: Construction Photography/Corbis

The estate is innovative, with deflecting acoustic walls, "streets in the sky" and innovative internal layouts. It has become a battleground brutalism's defenders - Richard Rogers likens it to a Nash terrace and says it is post-war Britain's most important social housing development. The Twentieth Century Society has tried in vain to have it listed, but Tower Hamlets council is determined to knock it down and replace its 214 flats with up to 1,575 new homes. Whether this will include a higher or lower number of genuinely affordable homes is unclear, but the decision to demolish has split the architecture profession, with some calling for a boycott of work on the estate.

I visited on a bleak December day with London-based British artist Jessie Brennan. She has worked on the estate for the past two years and has published a book, *Regeneration!*, about the experience. Her drawings depicting the metaphorical crumpling of the estate were commissioned by the Foundling Museum for Progress in 2014.

We met on the hill in between the two blocks, like spies in a cold war film. The windows and concrete mullions are crumbling and the blocks have none of the greenery that softens the concrete facades of the Barbican. Many residents have fitted security grilles to their flats, suggesting a fear of other residents or outsiders, or both. The lifts are coffin-like and slow, unlike the Barbican's spacious and efficient lifts. But the flats, built to Parker Morris standards, are spacious, and the structure appears mostly sound. The estate cost £1.8m to build, a figure that has been wiped away by inflation.

Brennan said that when Robin Hood Gardens was designed in the late 1960s, New Brutalism had become a key architectural expression of the welfare state. As part of her project she invited residents to explore the uncomfortable story of redevelopment and the ideological attack on council homes.

If Robin Hood Gardens had been blessed with a different owner perhaps it would now be as desirable a place to live as the Barbican. But it would be easy to blame the management and allocation policies of the GLC and Tower Hamlets for its decline. The wider issue is the sustained assault on social housing over the past 35 years. Councils have been forced to send half of their rents and most of their receipts from house sales to Whitehall and the level of management and investment could never match that of the wealthier residents at the Barbican.

There is no doubt that the Robin Hood Gardens estate could be refurbished, but the costs would be high and the land it stands on has become increasingly valuable as London's centre of gravity has shifted eastwards. Housing providers are being forced to take an increasingly commercial approach to their assets. The fate of the residents often takes second place.

Abdul Kalam, a former resident who participated in Brennan's project, summarised how many resident feel: "They are basically driving the poor people out".

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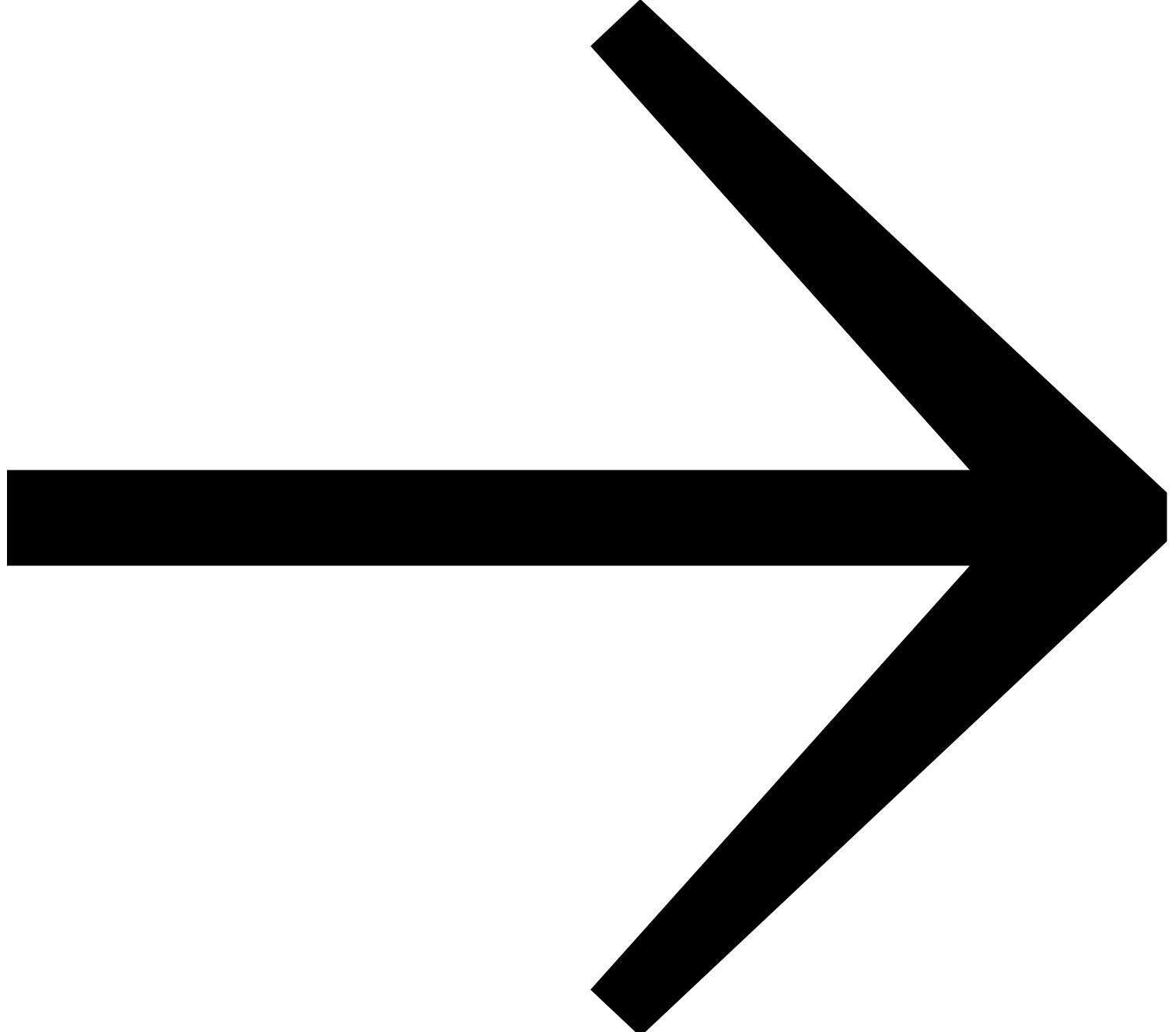
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