

# The Brilliance of Alexandra Road

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**Neave Brown’s Alexandra Road Estate stretches over a quarter mile and houses 1,660 residents in 520 units. The 16.3-acre site contains three housing blocks, two pedestrian streets, public park, retail, school, and community center. Completed in 1979, the project was part of a major building program for new models of dense, social housing in the Camden Borough of London. Unlike the reductive post-war typologies of towers and slabs, Alexandra Road is a radical reinterpretation of traditional English housing and urbanism. This paper examines the project’s design strategies and describes how these strategies provide uncommon freedoms in high-density housing.**

## Introduction

In October 2017, “public housing pioneer”<sup>1</sup> Neave Brown was presented the RIBA Royal Gold Medal at the age of 88. The award came as the biggest surprise to Brown himself, who called the news “dumbfounding” as he was unaware there was renewed interest in his work until recently. He remarked, “I thought my buildings were a curiosity of the past that people had largely forgotten about.”<sup>2</sup> Brown’s career in the UK had ended almost forty years earlier when his Alexandra Road Estate became mired in financial trouble and political controversy. Negative press labeled it a disaster as construction issues, escalating costs<sup>3</sup>, and unstable politics undermined the project at every turn. For years after completion, Alexandra Road was the scapegoat for mis-managed housing projects of the welfare state and Brown was forced to find work outside the UK<sup>4</sup>.

However, to focus on the turmoil that surrounded Alexandra Road would be to miss its brilliance. Even as the project came under fire from both political parties<sup>5</sup>, future residents couldn’t wait to move in. Today, as the UK is facing a housing crisis, it’s not just the residents at Alexandra Road that appreciate the masterful ingenuity of his work. The resurgence of interest in projects like Alexandra Road comes as the country looks for new architectural solutions for desirable high-density housing.

Alexandra Road was born out of the need to find new housing solutions. The project was part of a much larger effort in the Camden Borough of London to reinvent social housing during the 60’s and 70’s. Led by Sydney Cook, the borough architect, a



Figure 1. Alexandra Road—Block A and Rowley Way.

team of young architects produced a series of influential housing projects including Fleet Road, Highgate New Town, Branch Hill, and Maiden Lane.<sup>6</sup> Each project rejected the ubiquitous towers and slabs<sup>7</sup> of post-war functionalism<sup>8</sup> in favor of low-rise high-density buildings that shaped the urban landscape. And rather than following the rigid formulas of modernist planning, the Camden team was committed to reinterpreting and reconfiguring components of traditional English housing and urbanism. Of all the projects designed by Cook’s team, Alexandra Road<sup>9</sup> stands as the most explicit and most ambitious example of this pursuit.

## ALEXANDRA ROAD

### THE STREET

Brown’s design strategy begins with re-establishing the street as the place for human interaction. In an article, Brown described the prevailing modernist approach to housing as, “providing improved amenities within the home” while, “failing to maintain a similar immediacy of contact” due to its severance from the street.<sup>10</sup> The post-war housing of towers or slabs internalized and compartmentalized human movement. Residents must first enter the building, ascend a stair or elevator, and walk down a corridor to reach their unit. This sequence inhibits interaction among residents. The corridors divert traffic away from the city streets, removing residents from what has traditionally served as the social domain.

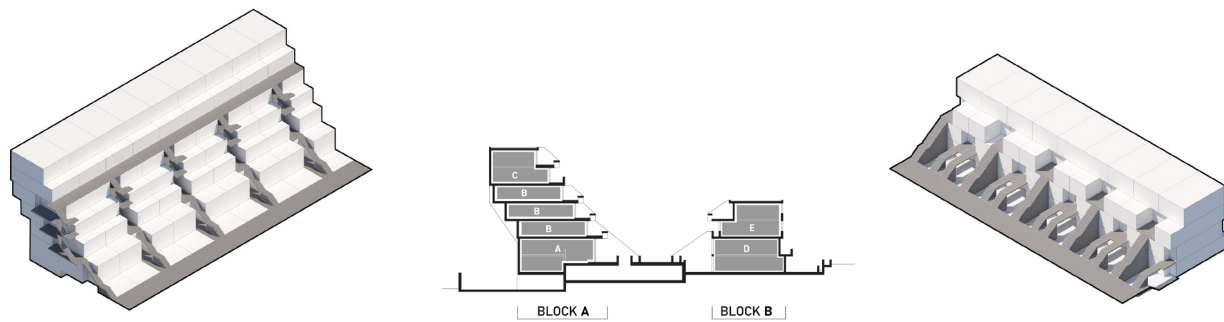


Figure 2. Left: Block A, Middle: Section, Right: Block B. Drawing by author.

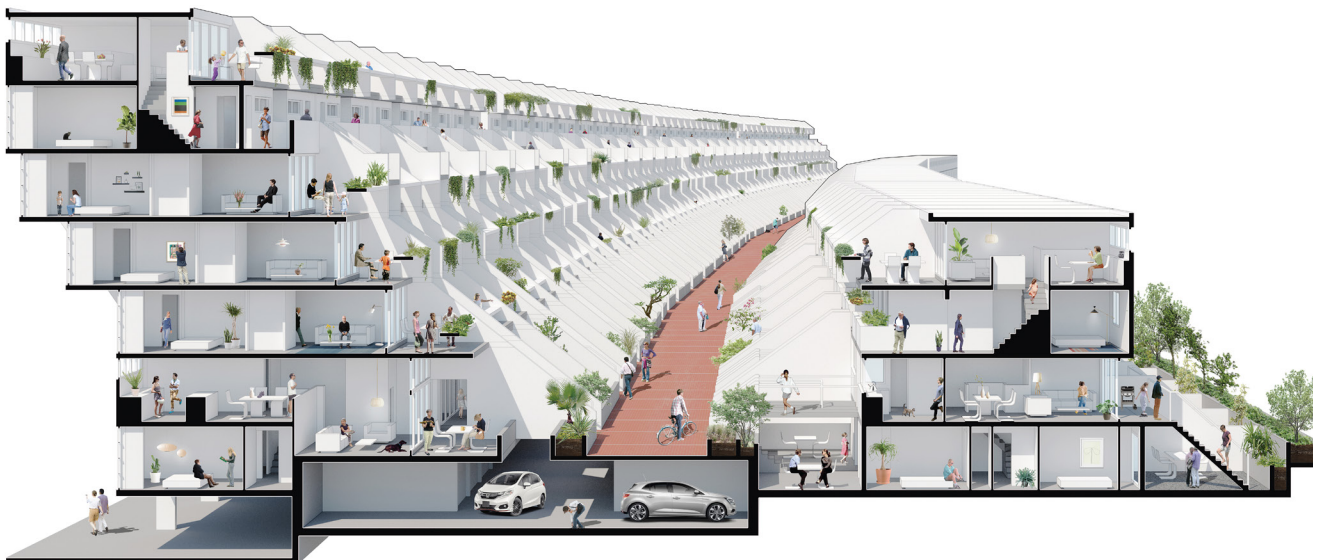


Figure 3. Image caption. Drawing by author.

Earlier attempts to remedy the problem of the corridor can be seen in other London projects such as Lynn and Smith's Park Hill Estate and the Smithsons' Robinhood Gardens. While these "Streets in the Air"<sup>11</sup> were wider and typically open to one side, they were still physically disassociated from the city and units on other floors. By contrast, Brown eliminates the corridor and re-instates the street as the main thoroughfare used by all residents (Figure 3). Unlike the "Streets in the Air" the street at Alexandra Road<sup>12</sup> is a 600-meter pedestrian route that connects back to the city, intersecting with Abbey Road to the west and Loudon Road to the east.

The street at Alexandra Road, however, cannot be considered without the stairs, which were designed as extensions of the street.<sup>13</sup> Brown breaks away from typical vertical cores and extends the stairs directly to the street. As residents arrive and depart their units, the convergence of stairs and street function as intersections around a city block, allowing both structured movement and chance encounters. And because

each stair only serves the two adjacent unit bays, they help break down the large development into smaller and more intimate social enclaves (Figures 2, 3 right).

### ENTRY SEQUENCE

The journey from the street to each unit introduces new patterns of movement. On Block A for example, a straight run gradually rides up the façade at the lower floors. On the upper floors, switchback landings jut out beyond the profile of the building to provide overlooks and stopping points where residents can peek over and converse with neighbors out on terraces. The combination of stair configuration and entry location results in every unit type having a different entry sequence. In some cases, the various sequences allow the residents the freedom to choose between several routes.

The upper maisonette unit in Block A, for example, is accessed by the open gallery<sup>14</sup> on the 6<sup>th</sup> floor (Figures 3 middle, 4). Because the gallery is continuous and connected to every stair,



Figure 4. Left: Block A Upper Maisonette Terrace, Middle: 6th Fl Open Gallery, Right: Block A Stair ACME, 2019-04-FL-209475, April 21, 2019, Flickr accessed January 27, 2021 [https://flickr.com/photos/acme\\_/47664592011](https://flickr.com/photos/acme_/47664592011).

multiple routes are possible. Residents of the upper unit can take the stair directly outside their unit, or they can take any stair and walk along the open gallery to their unit.<sup>15</sup> The gallery route lets residents take in an elevated view of the neighborhood and gives them the option to either drop-by on or avoid certain neighbors along the way.

The lower unit on Block B, on the other hand, has two entries, each with a distinct entry sequence (Figure 5). The 2<sup>nd</sup> floor entry is accessed by crossing a bridge over the sunken court. Through this entrance, the resident arrives onto the public level, occupied by the kitchen, dining area, and living room. The ground floor entry is accessed by taking a stair down into the sunken court. This entry opens onto the private level, occupied by three bedrooms. The 2<sup>nd</sup> floor entry can be interpreted as the formal entry – convenient for guests or if coming home with groceries. However, someone coming home from a jog may prefer to enter on the ground floor to shower before joining a gathering on the public level.<sup>16</sup> Although the two entries are separated by a few feet, the combination encourages a wide range of habits and scenarios.

### TERRACE HOUSE

Brown's springboard for the design of the units was the traditional English terrace house. This was a model he had already experimented with on earlier housing projects such as Winscombe Street and Fleet Road. As Brown put it at the time, "the background into which our housing schemes are projected is to a large degree nineteenth century housing, composed of terraces of houses aligned parallel to streets."<sup>17</sup> Similar to a rowhouse, terrace houses have direct access to the street as well as front and rear exposures. Because units could be deep and narrow, terrace houses were a common model to achieve high-density housing for the working class in the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

At Alexandra Road, the English terrace house serves as the primary building block for achieving low-rise high-density housing. The organizational scheme can be understood as a repeated section of stacked terrace houses (Figure 2). The units follow the deep and narrow proportions using widths measuring 18ft 9in in Block A and 15ft for Block B. Brown then multiplies the density of each block by stacking five units (seven stories) on Block A and two units (four stories) on Block B. This allows Alexandra Road to achieve a level of density that far surpassed the expectations of the planners who set the requirement at 150 ppa (persons per acre). By housing 1,660 residents on the site, Alexandra Road reached a density of 210 ppa.<sup>18</sup>

Brown pushes the concept of the stacked terrace house further by stepping the units back from the street. This lets more light reach the pedestrian street and opens the spatial experience from a narrow alleyway to a more gradual valley (Figure 2). But, more importantly, these step-backs create generous outdoor spaces for each unit. In typical multi-story housing, projecting balconies block sunlight to the units below and can be uncomfortable due to wind exposure and a lack of privacy. At Alexandra Road, stepped back terraces don't extend over other units, allowing them to be generous in size and open to the sky, while letting more light into the interior. Residents also avoid the precarious feeling of being outside, high above the ground. With the terrace spanning the full width of the unit and enclosed on three sides, it becomes an extension of the living room (Figures 3 & 4).

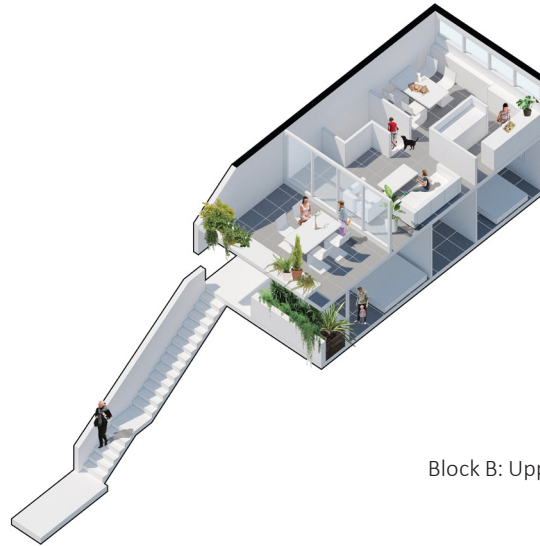
### UNIT TYPES

While the stacked terrace house section offers advantages for all units, it also generates opportunities particular to each unit type. In Block A for example, the differences between the three unit types go far beyond floor area or bedroom count.





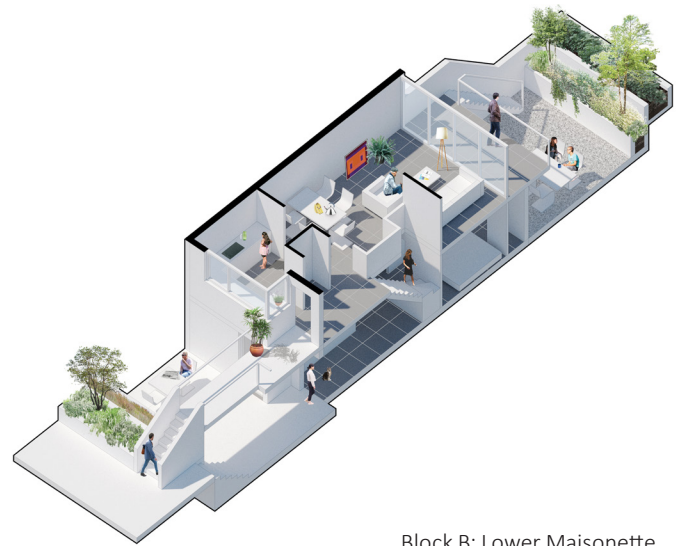
Block A: Upper Maisonette



Block B: Upper Maisonette



Block A: Middle Flat



Block B: Lower Maisonette



Block A: Lower Maisonette

Figure 5. Block A & B Unit Axonometrics. Drawing by author.

Each offers unique spatial qualities that help alleviate the pressures of living in close proximity to others.

### Lower Maisonette—Block A (Figure 5)

The lower maisonette is the only split-level unit in the development and the only unit accessed at street level. Normally, ground floor units on the street are undesirable due to concerns about privacy. However, Brown establishes a series of buffers to create more separation between the public street and private life. Along the street, a concrete planter serves as a physical barrier while the plants provide a visual screen. Beyond the planter, the ground slab is cut away, creating an opening to the parking garage below. Behind the opening, Brown places the outdoor terrace followed by the living room, the only interior space at street level. In this sequence from the street, Brown creates layers of barriers and semi-public zones that insulated the private areas of the unit.

### Flat—Block A (Figure 5)

A single-story flat takes up the 3<sup>rd</sup>, 4<sup>th</sup>, and 5<sup>th</sup> floors of Block A. It is the only unit entered in the middle of the plan, in between the private areas and the living room. Separation between the two zones is controlled by a large sliding panel, which allows the flexibility to connect the bedroom and living room. And despite being a one-bedroom unit, the series of interconnected spaces creates a continuous circulation loop, allowing inhabitants more freedom of movement in a small space.

### Upper Maisonette—Block A (Figure 5)

Unlike the lower maisonette, the upper maisonette is a true 2-story unit with a private lower level and a communal upper level. The stacking order is unconventional, as the lower entry level is typically the communal level. However, this reversal reduces unwanted noise to the unit below.<sup>19</sup> More importantly, the unit combines opposing plan strategies. A tight and compact closed cell plan for the lower bedrooms and utility areas allows for a comfortable open plan for the communal areas upstairs. The entirely open top floor is a relief from crowded urban life and offers residents expansive views of the neighborhood.

By manipulating the traditional terrace house, Brown combines qualities of housing often considered mutually exclusive. The massive scale and high density are achieved while providing front door access and a real sense of ownership of outdoor spaces. With greenery sprouting from the lower yards and

stepped terraces, Alexandra Road is a garden oasis contained within a concrete megastructure.<sup>20</sup> Similarly, the units display an agile organization of space that treads together a variety of scales, proportions, adjacencies, and views. Brown precisely calibrates the relationship between space and movement to allow both privacy and interaction at the right moments.

### CONCLUSION

Alexandra Road demonstrates how high-density housing can break out of the restrictive formulas that have been in practice since post-war modernism. Today, US is experiencing much of the same housing challenges faced in Europe. Driven by economic factors, dense multi-family housing across the U.S. conform to an unquestioned set of practices. Housing widths are made wide enough to fit a double loaded corridor, but not so wide that residents would be too far from a window.<sup>21</sup> And with consideration for light, air, access, and structural spans, these repetitive cells are arranged in predictable configurations. The result is a proliferation of towers and slabs that oversimplify the complexities of private and public life.

By reinterpreting and manipulating components of traditional urbanism, Alexandra Road demonstrates possibilities not typically provided in high-density housing. First, Alexandra Road achieves density and privacy without creating confined spaces, cut-off from its surroundings. With direct connection to the street and integrated outdoor space for all units, residents of Alexandra Road live in a “piece of the city.”<sup>22</sup> Second, the project delineates the flow of movement while encouraging human interaction and offering multiple routes. The relationship between the street and stairs foster social encounters but still form an open-ended framework that allows for choice and interpretation. Lastly, despite the formulaic and generic nature of high-density housing, Alexandra Road displays both variety and dexterity. Brown creates a diverse repertoire of living environments that respond to various scenarios, lifestyles, and family structures. Although completed over 40 years ago, Alexandra Road remains a potent model for possibilities in high-density living.

### ENDNOTES

1. Selin Ashaboglu, “Neave Brown Wins 2018 RIBA Royal Gold Medal for Architecture,” *Architect Magazine*, September 28, 2017, [https://www.architectmagazine.com/design/neave-brown-wins-2018-riba-royal-gold-medal-for-architecture\\_o](https://www.architectmagazine.com/design/neave-brown-wins-2018-riba-royal-gold-medal-for-architecture_o).
2. Construction cost escalated from an initial estimate of 7.15m to 20.9m pounds
3. Beth Hughes, “The Death of a Client: The End of The English Housing Estate,” *San Rocco*, no. 12 (Spring 2016): 158.
4. Both Labour and Conservative parties. See Mark Swenarton, “Reforming the Welfare State: Camden 1965-73,” *FOOTPRINT* 5 no. 2 (Autumn 2011): 44.
5. For more on the Camden project see: Mark Swenarton, *Cook’s Camden: The Making of Modern Housing* (London: Lund Humphries, 2017): 13-107.
6. Slab housing refers multi-story, freestanding, linear buildings with shared access and circulation. Can also be described as straight linear blocks with similar or identical plans from floor to floor. See description in: Oliver Heckmann, Friederike Schneider, and Eric Zapel, *Floor Plan Manual Housing* (Basel, Switzerland: Birkhauser Verlag GmbH, 2018): 21.

7. Post war functionalism describes the dominant planning practices at the time which were presented in Corbusier's Ville Radieuse. The project used a combination of tall towers and slab buildings to leave more open space on the ground. Buildings were freestanding objects pushed back from the street.
8. For this paper, the subject of analysis is focused on housing blocks A & B and Rowely Way. Additionally, the estate contains Block C, Ainsworth Way, Alexandra Road Park, and several community facilities.
9. Neave Brown, "The Form of Housing," *Architectural Design* vol. 37, no. 9 (September 1967): 432-433.
10. Oliver Heckmann, Friederike Schneider, and Eric Zapel, *Floor Plan Manual Housing* (Basel, Switzerland: Birkhauser Verlag GmbH, 2018): 45.
11. Street named Rowely Way
12. Luis Diaz, "The Everyday and 'Other' Spaces: Low Rise-High Density Housing in Camden," in EAAE Conference: The Rise of Heterotopia - On Public Space and the Architecture of the Everyday in Post-Civil Society (Lueven, Belgium: May 27 2005).
13. Open gallery – elevated exterior walkway, usually open to one side
14. Luis Diaz, "The Language of Space and Practice: Camden Housing Estates 1965-1983," Master's thesis, (University of Brighton, 2008): 124.
15. Diaz, "The Language of Space and Practice" 118.
16. Brown, "The Form of Housing" 432.
17. Density is calculated using an area of 7.9 acres, not the entire site area. See Swenarton, *Cook's Camden*, 79.
18. See Andrew Freear, "Alexandra Road: The Last Great Social Housing Project," *AA Files*, no. 30 (1995): 41.
19. Hughes, "The Death of a Client" 156.
20. See Justin Fox, "Why America's New Apartment Buildings All Look the Same." *Bloomberg Businessweek*, February 13 2019, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/features/2019-02-13/why-america-s-new-apartment-buildings-all-look-the-same>.
21. Freear, "Alexandra Road" 46. Hughes, "The Death of a Client" 157.