

END OF THE ROAD

HOUSING, CHELSEA, LONDON
 ARCHITECTS:
 ERIC LYONS,
 CADBURY-BROWN,
 METCALFE &
 CUNNINGHAM

2, view from the embankment. The Tower is, of course, well back. The real comparison can be made in 1, the view from across the river: *Chicago-on-Thames*.

If you walk down the Kings Road, Chelsea from the Sloane Square end westwards, by the time you get to World's End, you feel that you must have reached the End of the Road. In fact, you haven't, not by a long chalk. Even so, the name of the public house which stands at this point and gives it to the neighbourhood seems poetically appropriate.

The World's End scheme is more than housing: with its shops, school, church, community centre, garaging and open space it is really an essay in Metropolitan Reconstruction. This is certainly how it was seen back in 1963 when work was first started on its design. The problem was how to rehouse people living in what we then thought of as 'monotonous little streets' at the same density (about 200 persons to the acre), but in a way which would give them more light and air and the communal facilities they lacked.

This was, in itself, a noble objective; though, with the wisdom of hindsight we can see that the problem was phrased by people who were more alive to the structural possibilities than sensitive to the real requirement. A 'monotonous street' may look such to an outsider, but to someone who lives there it is a place packed with small meaningful incidents, and a street is a more exhilarating place to play in than a balding patch of grass set aside for this purpose. Even at this level 'functionalism' does not really work.

By the mid-sixties, when the enquiries were over and the 830 houses had been pulled down, doubts had already been expressed about the wisdom of high rise. The design therefore sought to re-interpret high rise in a way which would off-set such shortcomings

as had been observed at that date: brick was used instead of concrete, the towers were articulated on plan to reduce their overpowering presence and they were linked by five storey blocks to give enclosure at ground floor level. In the dwellings themselves every trick was employed to give sunlight and views to those inside and to give an effect of particularity when seen from outside.

Thus the complex represents a genuine attempt to reconcile belief in the Megastructure with what was then known about human preferences and reactions; and it was designed by architects with a clear record for humanity and for skill in handling the modern architectural idiom.

Yet, as a 'nice place for living in' it fails; and in failing illustrates the gap which exists between the ways in which architects and non-architects see things. It is, of course, 'interesting'. An architect walking through the scheme will find himself entranced with the changing silhouettes of the towers, with the long and intricate vistas down the open-sided walkways and with the consistence and agility shown in the design of the brick detailing. The flats, too, though a trifle odd on plan are well thought-out and the views from the higher ones are stupendous. . . .

But how does the layman view it? If you put your architect's eyes into your pocket you see that you are standing in a sort of paraphrase of a medieval castle. The beetling, craggy walls reach up into the sky, their angular profiles seeming to have more to do with defence than comfort; the internal courts have an air, not of modern domesticity, but of castle yards; while the squat galleries with their hard finishes, thick

key

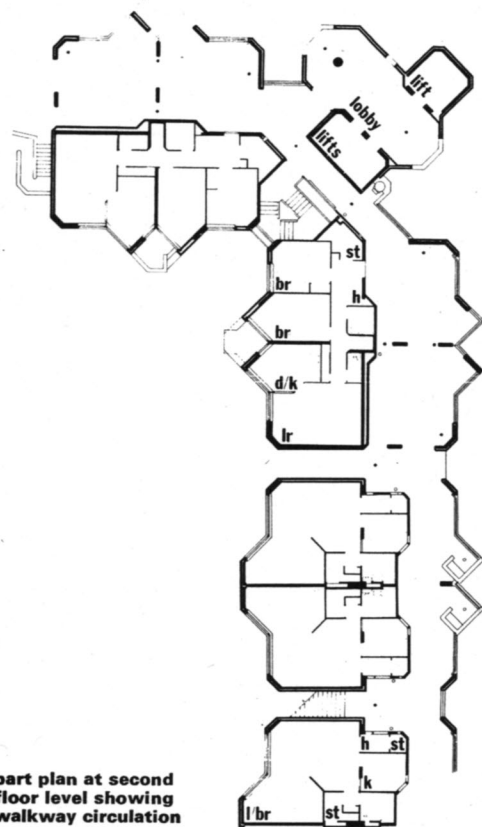
- 1, Whistler Tower
- 2, Asburnham Tower
- 3, Blantyre Tower
- 4, Chelsea Reach Tower
- 5, Berenger Tower
- 6, Dartrey Tower
- 7, Greaves Tower
- 8, supermarket
- 9, St John's church
- 10, World's End Place
- 11, World's End pub
- 12, community centre
- 13, Asburnham school



site plan (scale 1:2000)







part plan at second floor level showing walkway circulation

iron grilles and dark, squalid corners, seem designed for the onslaught of brawling men-at-arms.

Sadly, life in World's End is not unlike life as we imagine it to have been in the era of the Wars of the Roses. Is this perhaps because the image of civility has been effaced? The image of popular housing from the fifteenth century to the birth of communal housing forms at the end of the nineteenth century shows a steady advance both in amplitude and in the expression of human dignity.

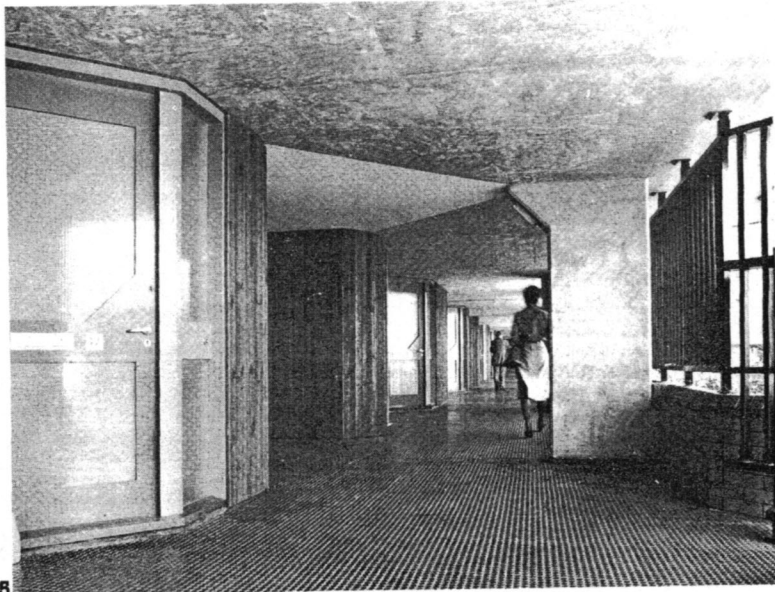
With the coming of communal housing these historic aims were bartered for gadgets. No longer visibly a 'home' the dwelling is sunk within an abstract super-image. This may be impressive—as here—but to the home-maker it is not to the point; and being not to the point is a standing invitation to be rough and rude. World's End rises up from the Chelsea Plain as a distinguished architectural marker. But let us hope that it marks the end of this particular road.

**HOUSING, CHELSEA, LONDON
PHOTOGRAPHS BY
MARTIN CHARLES AND
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3, a courtyard.



4



5



**HOUSING,
CHELSEA,
LONDON**

4, close-up of sensatio
brickwork.
5, open access-gallery.
6, towers viewed above
temporary hoarding.

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