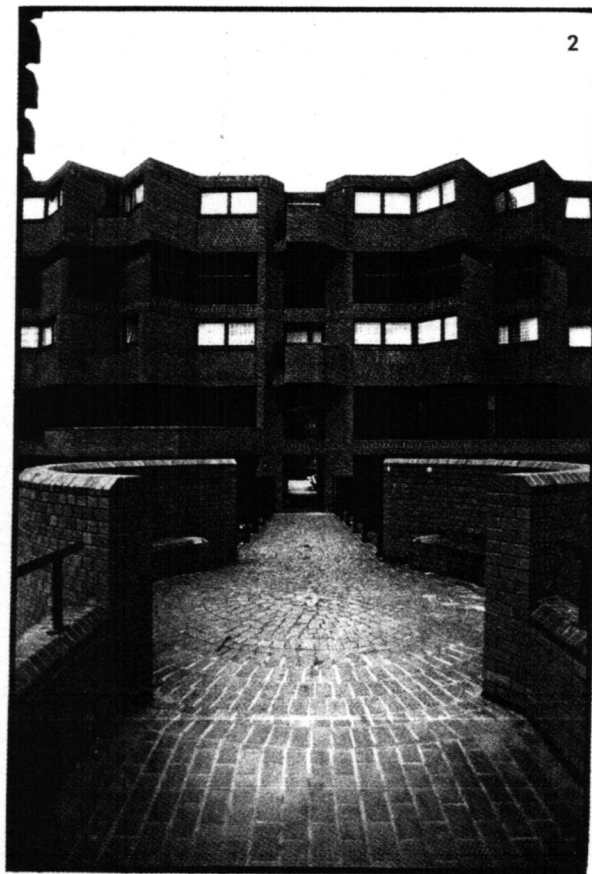
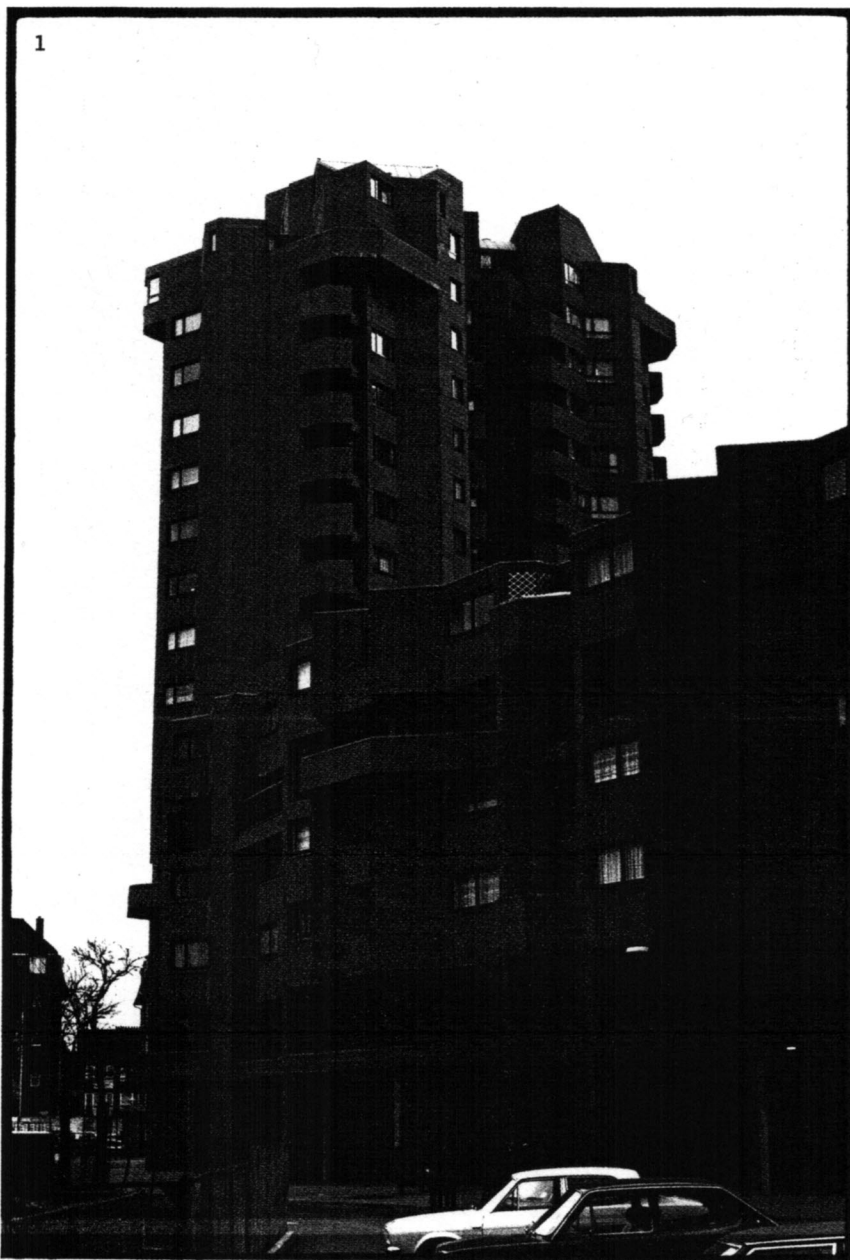


# LIVING PROOF OF SUCCESS

When World's End was built, it was deemed a failure as a place to live. It has had its problems but 30 years on, Eric Lyons and HT "Jim" Cadbury-Brown's housing estate is recognised for the enduring excellence of its design by architects and by the people who live there

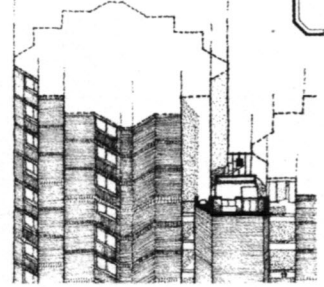
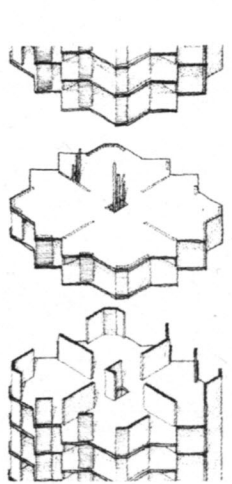
Words James Dunnett Photography Dennis Gilbert



1 & 2 Archive photography used in BD's 1977 building study. 3 This temporary St John's Church was later housed within the new estate. 4 Aerial view showing the first tower to be occupied by residents in January 1975. 5 Indicative floor plan. 6 Tower axonometric.



4



'Each of the tower flats had a small balcony. Last summer it was de rigeur to block up the outlet, fill up the water to the threshold level and there was a small paddling pool for the kids just outside the 20th storey living room window'

Sutherland Lyall, Building Design, March 18, 1977



Then and now: in 1977 *The Architectural Review* said World's End featured castle yards; in 2008 the matured landscaping enhances the buildings.

When completed in 1977 after 10 years under construction, the World's End social housing development in Chelsea, west London, did not get a good press. It had long outlived the housing philosophy of the early 1960s that allowed its creation. *The Architectural Review* thought that "as a 'nice place to live in' it fails."

It continues: "An architect walking through the scheme will find himself entranced by the changing silhouettes of the towers... But how does the layman view it? If you put your architect's eyes in your pocket you see that you are standing in a sort of paraphrase of a medieval castle... the internal courts have an air, not of modern domesticity, but of castle yards; while the

**'The scheme was in "Eric Lyons" modern', and I felt we could improve the architecture'**

HT "Jim" Cadbury-Brown

squat galleries with their hard finishes [actually timber clad], thick iron grilles and dark squalid corners, seem designed for the onslaught of brawling men-at-arms.... 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 the point... 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."

The Review explicitly preferred the close-packed streets of 19th century terrace housing that previously occupied the site. Its attitude dated back at least 10 years to the special housing issue of November 1967, themed by chief hand-wringer Nicholas Taylor with his keynote article, *The Failure of "Housing"*, and a commentary "based on a joint examination of the schemes illustrated with Cedric Price and Brian Richards". Richards, who also contributed a five-page article, *Neighbourhood Transport*, was a collaborator of HT "Jim" Cadbury-Brown, who at about this time formed a partnership for



All of the flats have balconies offering river and parkland views that the wealthy pay substantial sums for on the other side of the Thames.

the sole purpose of carrying out the World's End scheme with its original designer, Eric Lyons.

In the teeth of opposition from the GLC and after two public inquiries, Lyons had by 1967 finally won planning permission for the exceptionally high-density scheme on behalf of the client, Royal Borough of Kensington & Chelsea, which was determined not to see a reduction in population on the site.

Lyons had a high reputation for humane housing design, especially the Span estates, but his office, never large, was fully occupied; Cadbury-Brown, who had just completed the Royal College of Art and the Gravesend Civic Centre (with Richards), was looking for

something to replace them. Cadbury-Brown had been Erno Goldfinger's first assistant in England in 1935; a prewar member of the Mars group; organised the two postwar Ciam conferences in England; had taught under Gropius at Harvard, and was to become professor of architecture at the Royal Academy.

So this was no common transfer of a project from a "star architect" who had won planning permission to a lesser who would build it. If anything, it was a transfer from an easier-going architect to a more astringent one. But Cadbury-Brown's stance has always been flexible, more so than that of his AA near-contemporary Denys Lasdun, or of his teacher Goldfinger, whose

Cheltenham Estate, including Trelick Tower, was to rise at the same time as World's End in the north of the borough (World's End, however, was much larger — 744 housing units as opposed to Cheltenham Estate's 317).

The layout of World's End — two irregular linked garden courtyards above two storeys of parking and surrounded by six-storey gallery access housing, punctuated at corners by 18- to 20-storey embedded towers (see front cover) — can be attributed to Lyons, as can the ingenious basic flat plans, which with only minor modification could cope with varying orientation. But it would seem that the architectural expression now visible is largely ▶



Though little improved, the architecture is robust enough to survive the addition of residents' personal satellite dishes.

the work of Cadbury-Brown.

Cadbury-Brown says: "The scheme was in 'Eric Lyons' modern', and I felt we could improve the architecture," adding, with characteristic modesty, "I don't know whether we did." The planning, with the loose disposition across the site, is characteristic of many Lyons' Span schemes, as is the excellence of the landscaping by his partner-in-practice Ivor Cunningham, but the polygonal planning was unprecedented in his work while curiously it had been a feature of recent schemes by Cadbury-Brown such as the Essex University lecture halls and the common room and library block for the RCA.

Apart from his conical entrance pavilions at

the Festival of Britain, Cadbury-Brown's earlier work such as the Ashmount School in Hornsey (currently threatened with demolition) had been purely rectilinear with a horizontal roofline. But on his return from teaching in the US in 1956 where he had been exposed to Frank Lloyd Wright's polygonal approach, he discovered a looser, more romantic side — for example, exploiting the double-height studios at the RCA to create a dramatically jagged skyline while introducing polygonal planning in recognition of the importance of the sideways glance; of the angled wall that catches the light; of the analogy of architecture with dance.

What we have at World's End is the

extraordinary efflorescence at the summits of the towers, where the flats are cantilevered out and piled up into an irregular skyline of great romantic appeal, incorporating studio windows for the artists Cadbury-Brown imagined living there. Universal brick cladding to the towers which he introduced, sometimes with vertical coursing and with ingenious projecting soldier-courses of pistol bricks cast into the edges of the floor slabs, allows the faceted modelling of the towers to be read with maximum sculptural effect. The result, with its insistent all-over angular brickwork is reminiscent of German expressionist work from the early 1920s such as Fritz Hoeger's Chilehaus, Mendelsohn's



The irregular lines of the buildings are accentuated by brickwork reminiscent of work by German Expressionists Mendelsohn and Hoeger.

#### THE RESIDENT'S VIEW

I have lived on the World's End estate since my tower was finished in 1977. I like the unusual and quirky design a lot — not many flats have nine walls in one sitting room. It's awkward for fitting furniture but infinitely more interesting than your average council block. I really appreciate the intention and thought behind the plan, and I think it was fairly well executed, especially the original planting which was done with regard for the buildings and to enhance rather than detract from the plan.

It is a pity that the council seems not to

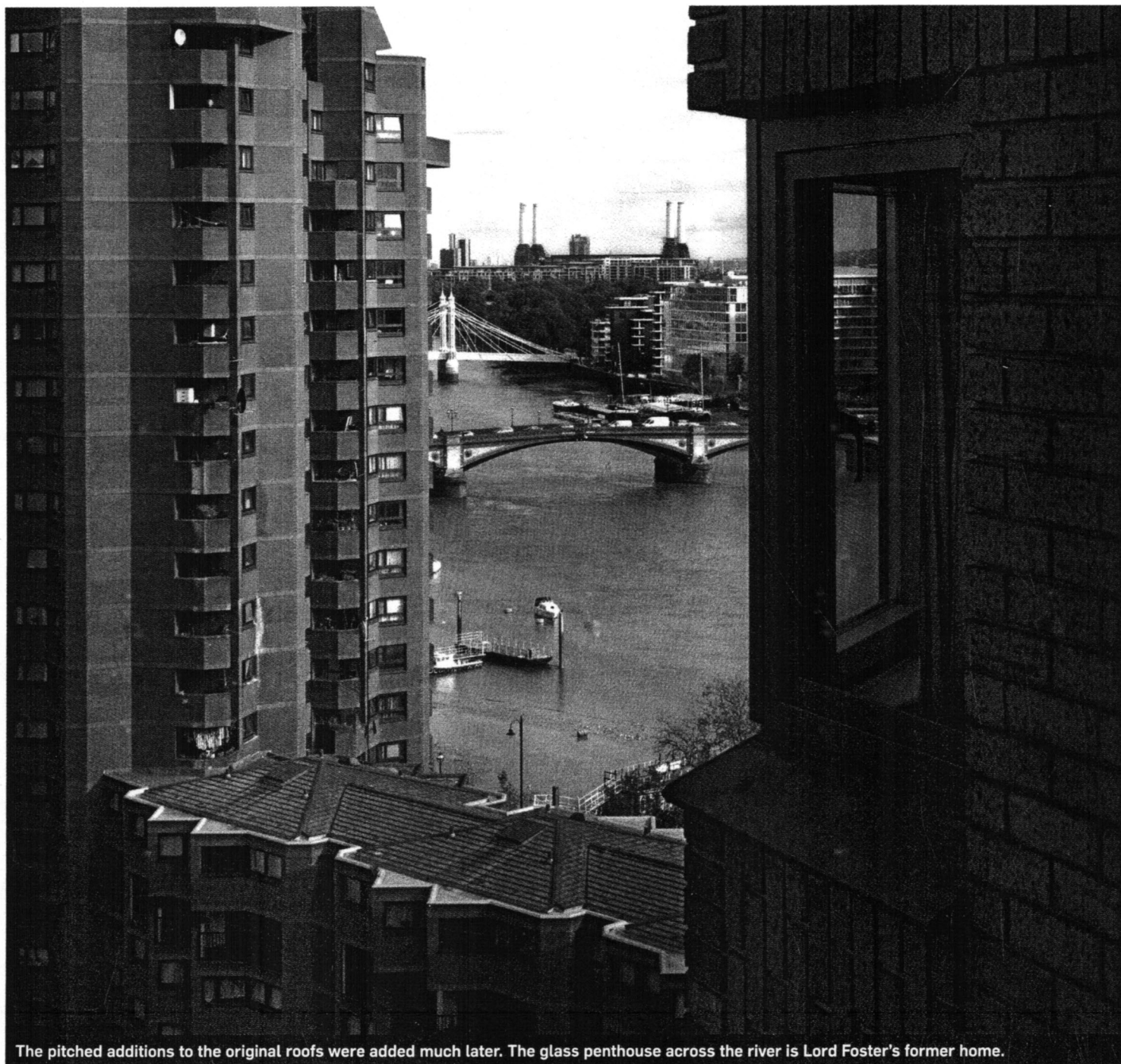
appreciate the fine design it has at World's End. It is responsible for several blunders that have conflicted with the original design. The windows no longer sit smoothly in the fabric of the buildings as their sections are now out of line with the original lines. Doors were replaced with a ghastly neo-Victorian style with hideous and cheap brass fittings, ruining the design's original coherence.

It is a nice place to come home to in terms of design, but my view is coloured slightly by the antisocial aspects of this kind of 1960s

and 1970s brutalist architecture, where people are "marooned" in the towers with only four flats per floor. My father was an architect and I remember him being very impressed by the construction and finish of the buildings when I moved in. The whole estate would be in a much worse shape had it not been so well constructed in the first place.

I don't think I'll leave World's End. A couple of my neighbours sold up for a big profit last year, but I think I will be here until I die.

**Eryl Humphrey Jones**



The pitched additions to the original roofs were added much later. The glass penthouse across the river is Lord Foster's former home.

Doppelhaus, or of the Amsterdam School housing from the same period, which Cadbury-Brown admits to having seen in 1950.

So is this just looking at the estate with the "architect's eyes" dismissed by the Architectural Review? The personal identification of each housing unit demanded by the Review is nowhere practical at densities as high as this, and was not present in the former housing mostly in multioccupancy. A broader architectural effect must be aimed for, and is here provided.

The highly modelled and variegated facades allow a feeling that these buildings, unlike other modernist examples, are indeed comprised of an aggregation of individuals. And these individuals

**These buildings allow a feeling that they are indeed comprised of an aggregation of individuals**

each have a balcony receiving sun; direct access to 3.25ha of private open space; a well-planned, purpose-designed flat; covered parking; wide views; plus a school, community centre and playground. Mostly, this cannot be said for the residents of the former terrace houses. Across the river, millionaires pay large sums to enjoy similar facilities in the Richard Rogers-designed housing that rises to a similar height.

The landscaping has matured and the internal

courts no longer seem like castle yards — if they ever did. The polygonal planning adapts well to the irregular edges of the site, and the brickwork links the estate to the older terrace housing around and to the Peabody-type tenements which are also a feature of Chelsea. The windows have recently been carefully replaced with aluminium/timber composites (regrettably with PVC in the school and community buildings) and there is no sign of failure in the pistol-edge bricks. The architectural vigour of the estate contributes inevitably to its liveability and the warmth with which residents regard it.

After 30 years of use, it has settled in to its environment and is a success.