

A Brief History of the Architects Behind Luxborough Tower

Luxborough Tower is a fine example of 20th century architecture, designed by the architects' department of the London County Council after the old Luxborough Lodge (previously the St Marylebone Workhouse) was demolished in 1965. It contains 115 apartments in 21 stories, and is 67 metres high. A notable feature of the design is that all apartments have full-width balconies. The design was strongly influenced by Le Corbusier, whose famous *Unité d'Habitation* in Marseilles had been completed in 1952. Corbusier had argued that to provide healthy and enjoyable accommodation apartments should be built in tall towers or slabs which would have balconies, and which would stand in green parkland.

The LCC architects department was the UK's leading driving force for modern architecture in the 1950s and 1960s. To quote from a history of the LCC by Elaine Harwood of the 20th Century Society:

“London county council architects (which was active from 1940 to 1965) were a group of young, highly talented, and enterprising practitioners who looked back to, and drew inspiration from, the first generation of architects - the ‘band of brothers’ to work for the London county council (LCC) in the decade after its creation in 1889. Then, under its first Progressive (Liberal) administrations, the council’s architecture department had been noted for the first housing schemes, such as those at Boundary Road and Millbank, that were both attractive and sanitary.”

After the Second World War those working in the four divisions of the LCC's architects' department - schools, housing, planning and general - were likewise responsible for a remarkable and extensive programme of planning, rebuilding and modernization of the capital's municipal buildings, open spaces, schools, and above all, housing, which had been severely depleted by the war (of the 98,000 dwellings owned by the LCC 11,000 had been damaged or destroyed).

Oliver Cox, an architect working in the department, wrote “There was a very heady feeling at the time, that we were building a new Britain, there was no question about that” In its obituary of Cox, the Guardian wrote, “For the leaders of the post-war architectural generation, the goals seemed clear and compelling. The world was theirs to reshape and improve, and architecture was the means of doing so.”

The head of the LCC architects' department at the time Luxborough Tower was built was Sir Hubert Bennett. The following is extracted from Bennett's obituary in the Guardian in December 2000:

"Sir Hubert Bennett, who has died aged 91, took over the London county council's architect's department in 1956. It was then at the height of its prestige, with a staff of 3,000 and a boundless prospect for rebuilding the capital. By the time he left in 1970, the optimism had faded. The LCC had given way to the Greater London council, a change which deprived Bennett of his planning powers. Many of his best architects had been tempted away to private firms and Thamesmead, the flagship project of the Bennett years, was mired in the intractability of the Erith marshes.

"Bennett was a vigorous and debonair figurehead, and many of the LCC's best projects were completed under his leadership. But his reputation has been tarnished by the fact that the currents of architectural power and fashion alike ran against him throughout his period at County Hall."

"His ascent to what looked like the most enviable post in public sector architecture had been a surprise to many. He was a Lancastrian by birth. His father was surveyor and architect to the Duke of Bridgewater's estates near Manchester, so it was to the Manchester School of Architecture that he naturally went, the year after Leslie Martin. He did well, gathered prizes, and spent some time in American offices, admired for their efficiency in the early 1930s. He taught and practised for a while in Leeds, where he designed a structurally advanced school for disabled children, and then in pre-war London.

"Bennett's first break came when he won almost the only architectural competition held during the war, for a site at Ilkley. Though nothing came of it, it must have helped him to become Southampton's first chief architect in 1943. After two years there, designing layouts for estates of wartime bungalows, he transferred to the more gratifying post of architect to the West Riding county council.

"It was here in the post-war years that Bennett made his reputation. By influencing the licensing system for building materials, he managed to bring his 300 architects together in a new headquarters at Wakefield known as 'Bennett's plan factory', where the talented few sat up on an open balcony doing the designing, and the masses down below sorted out the banalities.

Still, the West Riding of those years did some excellent schools and housing, mostly of a modernising rather than outright modernist tendency, of field stone with plain pitched roofs. Indeed, such was the house that Bennett built for his family outside Wetherby. He had some facility and ambition as a designer, and on one occasion designed a school in the idiom of Frank Lloyd Wright's 'Fallingwater'.

“At the LCC, he inherited a quite different structure, set up by his liberal predecessor, Leslie Martin. The atmosphere was one of creative inefficiency. Bennett's department was split into many cells - studios, really - of independent-minded architects doing their own thing, often in contention with one another and resenting interference. He must have itched to intervene. But he forbore, confining himself in the main to strategy and civic design.

“This had some odd consequences. At Hyde Park Corner and Marble Arch, Bennett proudly reserved to himself the styling of the subways and architectural landscaping for the new traffic system. They emerged in a late *Beaux-Arts* manner which left his younger staff agape and earned a tirade from Ian Nairn.

“On the South Bank, Bennett only got wind at the last minute of the mound of monolithic concrete proposed by the longest-haired of all his teams (under Norman Engleback) for the Hayward Gallery and Queen Elizabeth Hall. Too late, he poured all his energies into a revised proposal. Nevertheless, compromises were made; the pre-cast panels on the complex as built derive from Bennett's insistence on modifications.

“After 1965, the GLC took over and the augmented London boroughs started to do more housing, often under architects who had been Bennett's minions. The loss of authority over planning was especially grievous. He had difficulties in blocking the initial scheme of the first road-crazy planners for dismembering Covent Garden, and could not protect the ambitious township of Thamesmead from the damping down of vision and expenditure. He was therefore pleased to depart local government in 1970 with a knighthood.”