

THE BRUNSWICK

A CONTROVERSIAL MEGASTRUCTURE



Table of contents

Abstract

Introduction: The Brunswick.....1

1. Historical Review.....1

 1.1 Politics and Business.....1

 1.2 Communities.....4

2. Architectural Design.....7

 2.1 Mix Use.....7

 2.2 Stepped Design.....11

Conclusion.....14

Reference List.....15

Abstract

The Brunswick Centre is among one of the largest post-war listed buildings in Britain. Built between 1968 and 1972, the Brunswick has received tremendous controversies over its mega scale, alienation, lack of community and so forth. It has experienced a troubled history with major changes in its designer and developer, and for a very long time with the incompleteness of its original design and the failure of its construction plan. This essay looks into the social and historical context where the Brunswick was situated, and how business, politics and communities could interact and influence a pioneering utopian design. After being Grade-II listed in 2004 in recognition of its 'architectural and historical significance', the Brunswick went through comprehensive refurbishment, and the original scheme of the designer was further realized. By analyzing the design of the Brunswick , it is illustrated in this essay that although controversial, the architectural

design of the Brunswick, including its mix-use scheme and its low-rise and high-density design featuring in its stepping back of each flat, is pioneering and innovative which should have received more recognition. The failure and revitalization of the Brunswick may indicate that 1970s was a time when the value of modern architecture was ruminated, and that some radical experiments at that time were excoriated too quickly.



Figure 1.

The Brunswick

The Brunswick Centre is a giant complex of reinforced concrete structure containing about 400 flats above retail units including shops, restaurants and a cinema¹. There seems no middle ground for people's attitudes towards this brutalist structure - they either love it or hate it². On one side the scheme was fiercely condemned by certain critics as 'the social disaster of the new built environment'³, and the construction of it has received such controversies that graffiti was painted on the site hoardings and described it as 'Bloomsbury Prison'⁴. On the other side, it was considered by some others as pioneering and stylish. Daily Telegraph described it as 'reminiscent of Mediterranean shores'⁴. The chair of the Tenants Association in 1990 considered it honor to 'live in such a paradise'⁴.

It has remained a question what made the opinions on the project such a farrago. Was it the original design, the actual construction, the influence of business and politics or the elements combined, that led to the failure of this idealist project in 1970s? How was this dilapidated project revitalized? What



Figure 2 .

architectural significance of the Brunswick made it Grade-II listed? By looking into the historical context and architectural design, these questions may be better understood.

1. Historical review

The Brunswick centre is now vibrant and prosperous, but before its refurbishment between 2004 and 2006, it was extremely unadmired and fiercely attacked by the public. This corner of Bloomsbury has been one of the worst places in London - a 'rain-streaked, litter-strewn concrete bunker of empty shop units', whose 'ambitious, space-age design only accentuated its sense of failure'⁶. 'Council housing ghetto'⁶ as it appeared, it was far different from what it was originally designed into.

1.1 Politics and business

The area of the future Brunswick was initially developed in the late 18th century as speculative housing for governors of the Foundling Hospital nearby ⁷. Surviving the second world war aerial bombing, it was identified for future urban redevelopment, and all properties on the site of Brunswick was bought by Alec Coleman ⁷. After the initial scheme by architects Covell and Mathews were rejected, Patrick Hodgkinson conceived the design for two large tower blocks on the site of the Brunswick centre in 1959 ⁸. However, changes came afoot in 1964 when new laws by the Labour government started to require compensation for the evicted tenants from the Brunswick ⁸, yet the costs weren't in the developer's budget ⁹.

The viability of the project being challenged, the Borough of Camden took over the project since the it agreed to rehouse the tenants⁶. This led to a far less diversity of habitants for Camden wanted only 1 type of housing type instead of 16 ⁹. Another immediate consequence was that some of the upmarket shops pulled out when they found that they couldn't be in their premised location⁹. There was a change on the constructor as well, as the developer sold the project to McAlpine, who insisted on cheap and rapid construction and led to Hodgkinson's departure ¹⁰. Brian Ingram, and then T.P. Bennett and Son were later commissioned as architects¹¹.



Figure 3 .



Figure 4 .

The cost-cutting measures resulted in the heavily-compromised buildings¹¹. Flaws can be found all around the flats, such as the omission of retractable glazed roofs over the balconies, the frequent leaks at the junctions below door thresholds, a problem of water penetration due to the shallow asphalt of drainage, and leaks between balconies resulting from inadequate maintenance to the mastic⁷ (Figure 5). The more evident compromise was that the ‘Crown Commissioner’s cream’ painting of the elevations was replaced, leaving corroded and cracked surfaces⁷ (Figure 4), which aggravated the feeling of dilapidation.

The process of re-construction was another source of problems. Long being an unwanted run-down terraced housing, the massive and comprehensive refurbishment led by architect Levitt Bernstein in 2004 was considered a success commercially,¹² yet for those living there the picture was not as rosy as it seemed¹³. Noise, dust, vibration and other disturbance due to the breaking out of large areas of reinforced concrete were common complaints from residents in the 1970s¹³. The limited pre-construction consultation and the lack of discussions over the issues meant that their correspondence and meetings with the contractor were taken little account¹³.

Tappin¹⁴ suggests that the shared ownership and split responsibilities of freeholders and the Camden are the major cause of all the residents' problems. For example, the maintenance of the metal frames and broken grazings was left unattended, as the freeholder was responsible for maintenance of structures and the Camden was responsible for the internal finishes¹⁴. It is safe to conclude that the problems during the construction and later maintenance of the Brunswick to a great extent lie in the systematic defects including the unstable ownership, change of policies, separation of responsibilities and so forth. The effects of construction companies and the government combined made the project stutter.



Figure 5.

1.2 Communities

The constantly-changing ownership, constructors and architects of the project to a great extent led to the failure of the Brunswick in 1970s. However, the controversies over the scheme was not only on its construction level, but also about the design itself, which has caused ongoing debate among critics and local communities.

One is the tremendous volume of the project. The Brunswick is frequently described as 'concrete jungle' (Figure 6), which describes the mega scale of the architecture, the labyrinth-like routes and the proliferation of concrete elements¹⁵ (Figure 7). The narrow and tall A-frame structure of the corridors (Figure 8), the vast space on the podiums of the retail units and the repeated structures of the flats (Figure 1) are inevitably impressive¹⁵, which is partly why the Brunswick is constantly criticized as 'too imposing and overpowering'¹⁷. However, it is also deemed by some people that the grandeur of the Brunswick could provoke a feeling of awe and a sense of overwhelmingness at the same time¹⁶, which is maybe what brutalism is trying to convey.



Figure 6 .



Figure 7.

The alienation of the Brunswick causes ongoing debate . Apart from its sheer scale, its unabashed use of exposed concrete and the cascading glass terraces in both sides of the blocks also give a sense of overwhelmingness. A metaphor by tenants, that the Brunswick is ‘a giant spaceship landed in genteel Bloomsbury’¹⁸, is a vivid description the feeling given by the Brunswick. Indeed, the polished concrete, the glass elevations and the ‘winter gardens’ seem ‘actively opposed’ its environment rather than integrating with it¹⁹ and are criticized as ‘harsh, impersonal and inhumane’¹⁹. However, it remains unknown whether the Brunswick relates or differentiates the sense of ‘community’. Melhuish¹⁸ argues that though seemingly alienating, this piece of modern architecture has the potential to establish a sense of identity and blur the spatial hierarchy experienced by the residents. The idealistic original schemes for the Brunswick aimed at integrating people from all social strata¹⁶ by putting a mixture of inhabitants in an equal framework of the same room type and common public space. Instead of a place of domestic identity, the Brunswick represents a space with a much broader community consisting of tourists, visitors, students and commuters²⁰ . Stewart²¹ worries that

there's therefore a loss of the focus of community , suggesting that the first floor should be better built into a open space as heart for the community.

The mega scale, the feeling of alienation and a lack of communities of the Brunswick may be the main sources of controversies among the public. Both radically loved or disliked, there's no consensus on whether the Brunswick has improved or weakened the sense of community, but it can be an implication that more considerations should be taken into the establishment of communities in projects like the Brunswick.

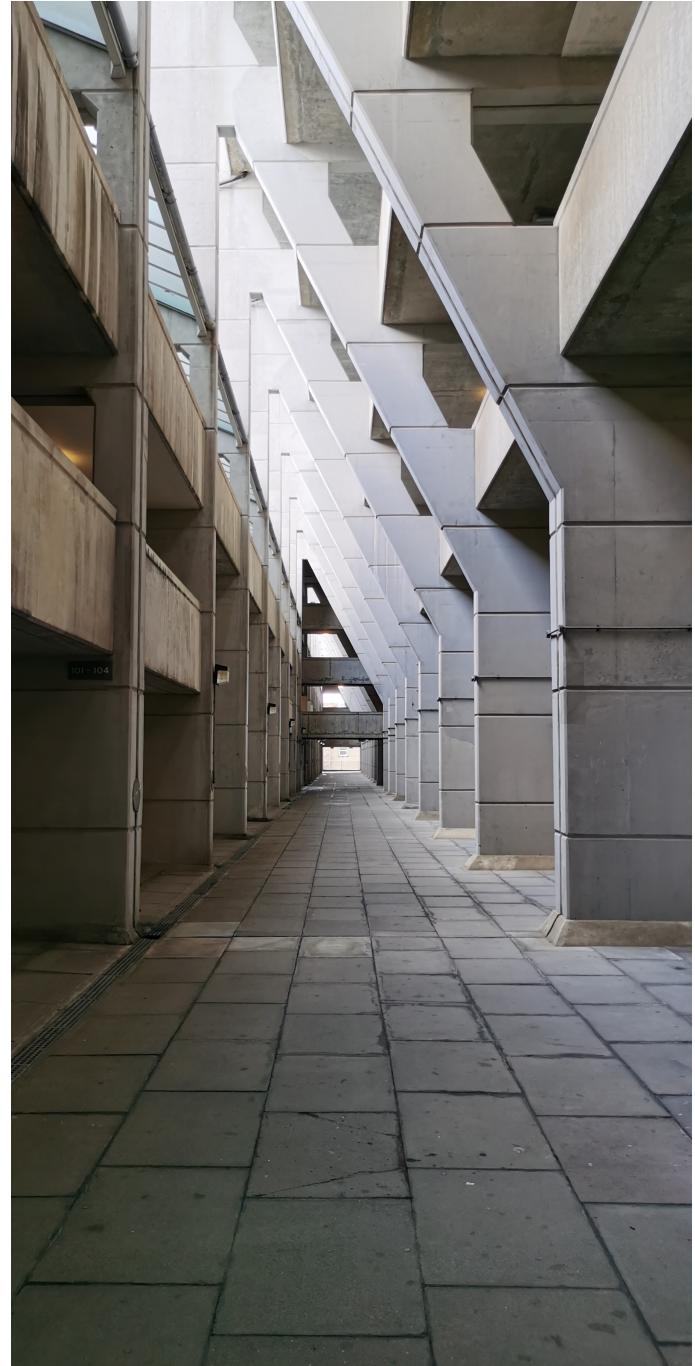


Figure 8 .

2. Architectural Design

The revitalization of the Brunswick further realized the original architectural design proposed by Hodekinson. As Tappin¹³ suggests, the problems of the Brunswick were more with the construction, less with the design. The scheme of the Brunswick was better appreciated and recognized, for example in Sep 14th 2004, the Department for Culture, Media and Sport said in a press release that the building is 'a fine example of an important strand of 1960s urban design—an innovative and significant "mega-structure"'¹. The failure and revival of this pioneering project may also indicate that some of British architect's radical experiments in the 1960s and 1970s were condemned far too quickly¹⁰.

2.1 Mix use

Hodgekinson stood outside the 'Le Corbusier camp' and was strongly against the idea of zoning areas for varied uses, which was seemed as the way forward city redevelopment at that time⁹. The mix use of the Brunswick, as Hodgkinson put it, provides 'an opportunity to bring together living, work and recreation to stimulate each other, against normal practice of the time'²³.

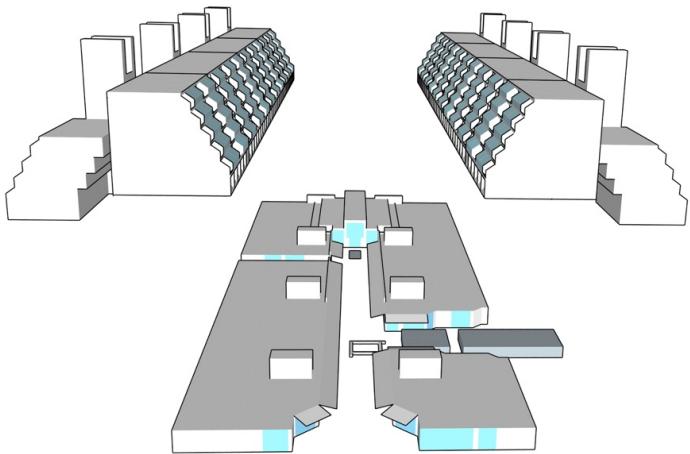


Figure 9.

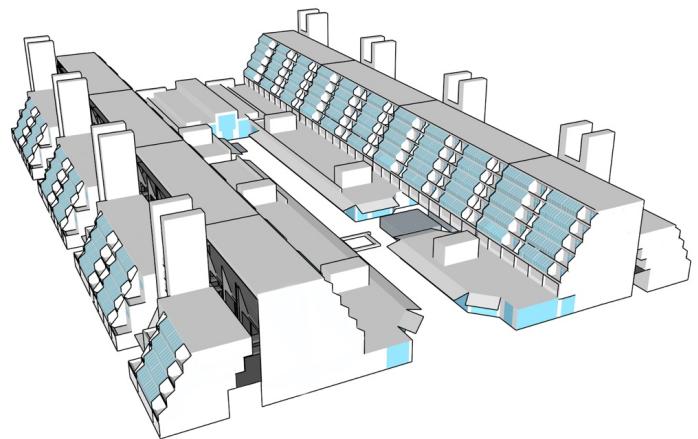


Figure 10.

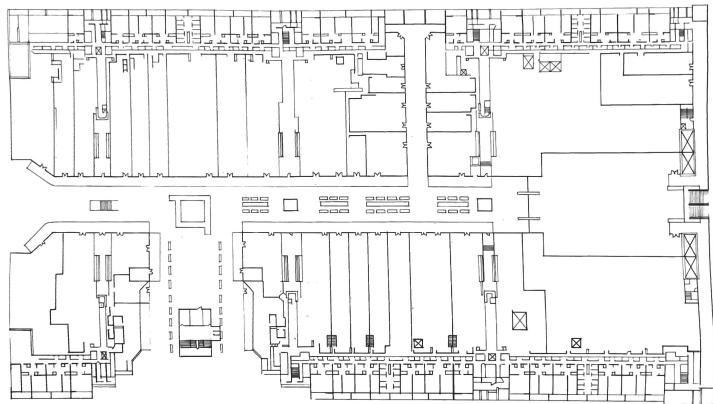


Figure 9 is a demonstration in Sketchup of the zoning of spaces, and Figure 10 shows the overall look of the Brunswick. The plan and elevation drawings in Figure 11, and the axonometric views in Figure 12, have given more details about the structure.

Figure 11.

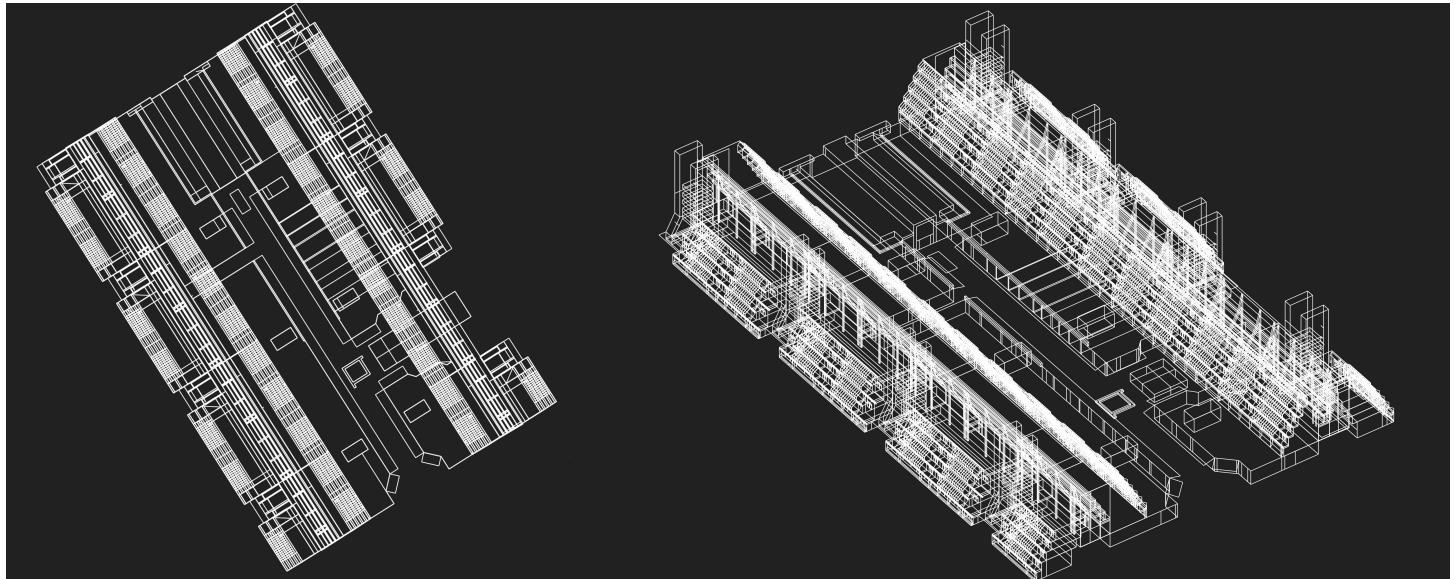
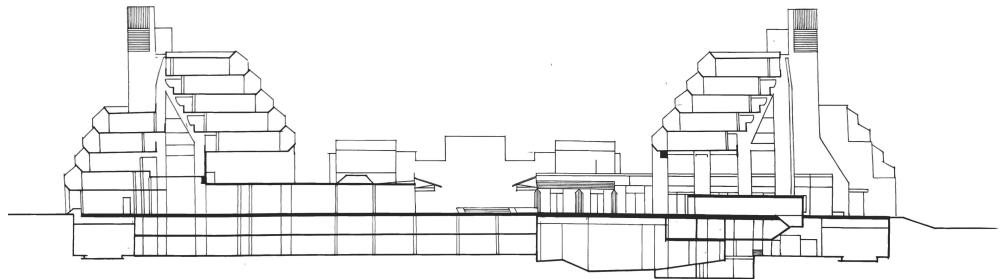


Figure 12 .

The design for mix-use communities can be challenging , for it has to both integrate and divide space, and at the same time ensure privacy, security, convenience, acoustic comfort and many other vital aspects of the buildings ²². The zoning for retails and flats for the Brunswick, as shown in Figure 9, has sought out a solution. The lower-ground retail level consists of café, restaurant and shops and forms a ‘horizontal’ feeling of space (Figure 13), and the private housings are composed of flats facing the street, flats facing the middle shopping centre and tower blocks which serve as entrances and stair cases. The roof of the retails, also the ground floor of the ground floor of the flats facing the centre, provide a ‘semi-private’ space where people walking inside would have a strong ‘vertical’ feeling (Figure 14).



Figure 13.

Circulation can guide the differentiation and relation of space. Visitors and inhabitants would circulate in the Brunswick in different ways and thus form zones of different uses,

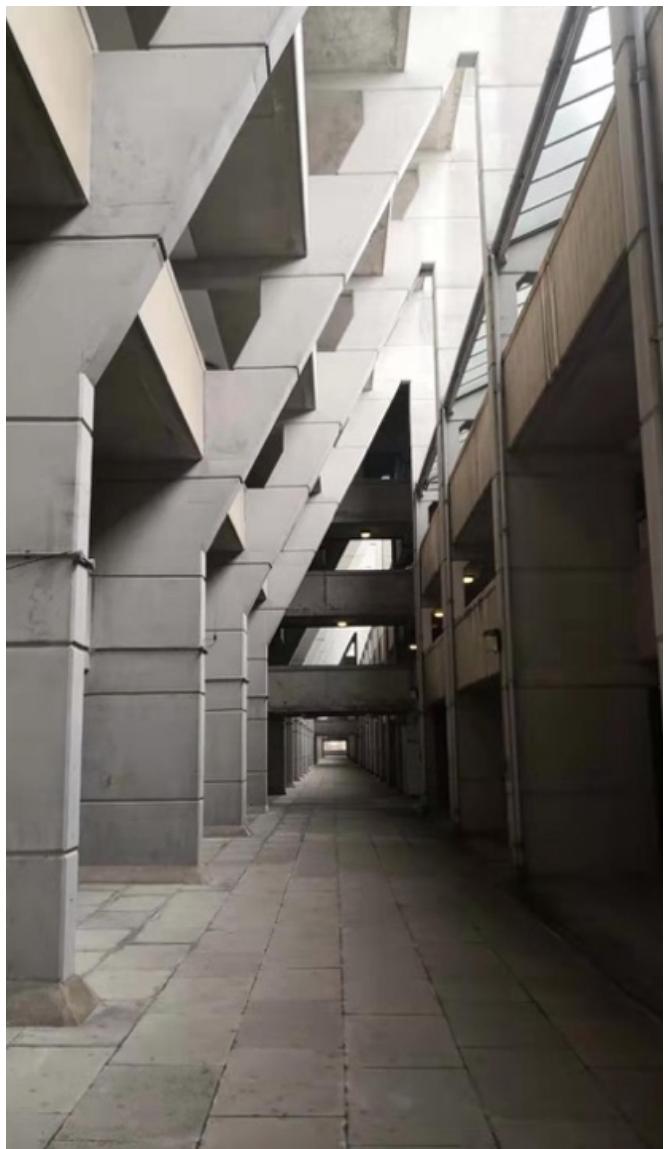


Figure 14 .

as illustrated in Figure 15. Visitors for the shops and restaurants can either go through the main entrances on Guildford Street and Handel Street, or through the entrances from the Hunter Street and Marchmont Street from the sides, onto the central shopping walkway (shown as blue dots). There are four tower blocks on each side of the buildings, from which residents in the Brunswick enter and go through the corridors to their flats (shown as red dots). Yellows dots represent the semi-private space for the residents to walk, communicate and interact, where according to Hodgkinson, is ‘a liner without class distinctions on its promenading decks’²³ (Figure 17).

It raises a question whether the mix of residential and commercial uses of the Brunswick could be a way forward for sites in

city centre¹. Mix-used development has been a flourishing trend in where significant population growth is experienced or where impetus for revitalization is needed²². Similar examples of mix-use commercial buildings in London include the Hoxton Southwark and the Oxo Tower Wharf, which mostly coincide with Bady’s argument that mixed-use buildings often strategically locate in walkable communities where commercial tenants can be woven into the local fabric²². According to Bady’s research in the USA²², key to mix-use strategy include transit-oriented neighbourhoods, redesign of failed shopping centre, creative office space and the ascendant modern architecture. The pioneering and anti-trendy experiment of the Brunswick in 1970s fit in all these features, and can serve as an experience of how a vibrant mix-use community can be built.

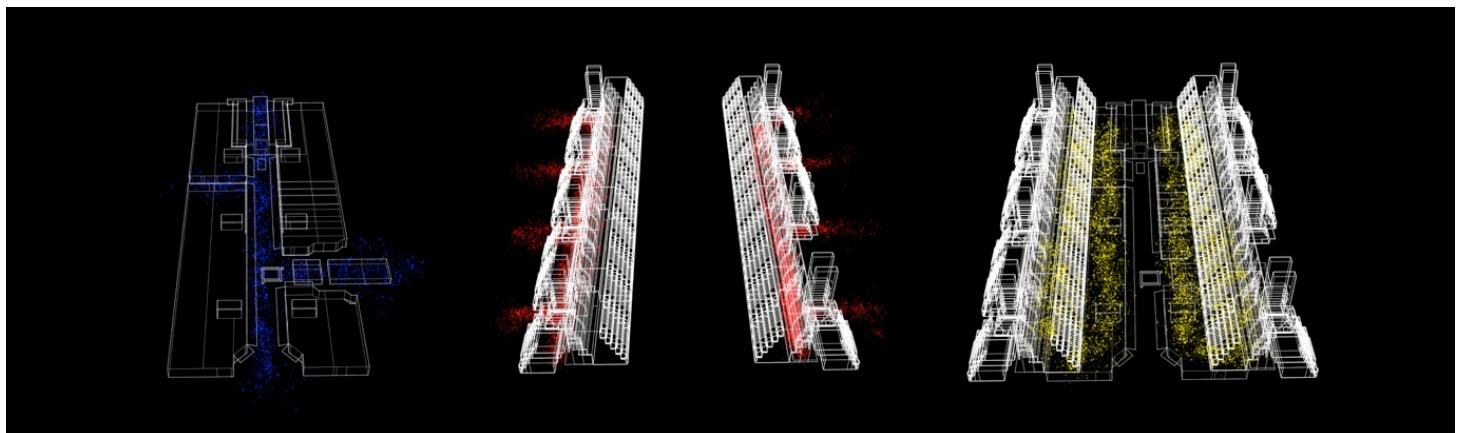


Figure 15.

2.2 The stepped design

The stepped design of the residential buildings may be considered as one of the most iconic features of the Brunswick. The initial proposals by architects Covell and Mathews, in fact, followed the orthodoxy of the 1960s with a 40-storey office sitting on a podium connected to decks above roads on ground floor ⁷. After this scheme being rejected for exceeding the height limit, Leslie Martin and his assistant Patrick Hodgkinson produced their solution which was approved in February 1963 ⁷. This low-rise and high-density scheme was a balance between the demand of the London county council (LCC) who would only permit buildings lower than 80ft, and the developer who wanted two large tower blocks and more profit. The 'stepped design', with two large rows of residential housing above public retail flanking an open shopping street in the middle, would achieve the same density as two tower blocks without exceeding the height limit ⁸.

The stepping back of each floor has opened up the shopping street with an enormous sense of light and space ⁸. At the back it forms a semi-private space with reinforced concrete A-frames, where sunlight naturally sheds into the public corridors that would have been insufficient lighting (Figure 18). To the front it provides a balcony for every flat and guarantees it at least two-hour direct sunshine per day ⁶ (Figure 19). The distinctive 'winter gardens' glint under the sun and give the view of sky from within ²⁴, which according to Sennet ²⁵, have connected life in flats and street activities in contrast to normal concept that the modernist architecture often posit alienation of individuals and the external material world. However for Hodgkinson, the stepped section allowed people to 'live in clouds' that provided an escapement from the quotidian surroundings and an engagement with existential awareness ²⁶.

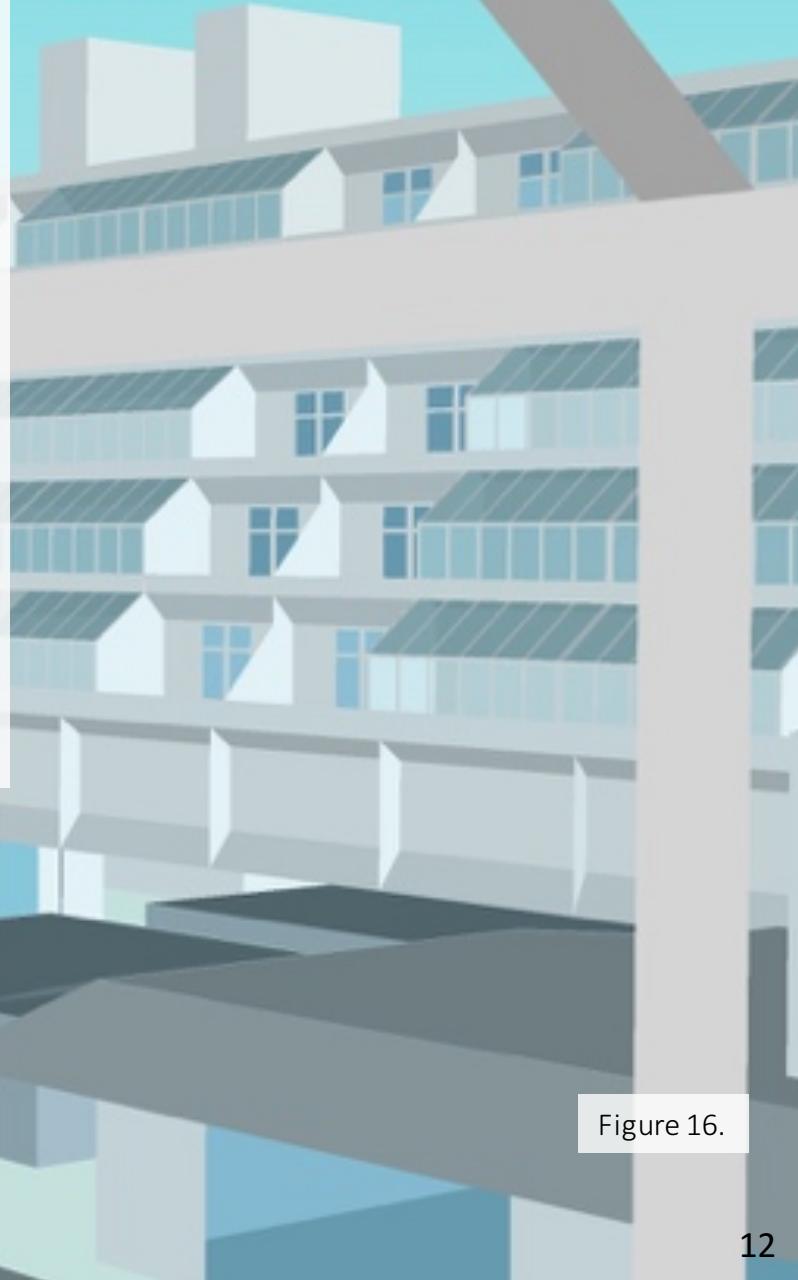


Figure 16.

The scheme of the Brunswick is considered as a pioneering low-rise alternative to high-density housing, which represents an inspired challenge to the prevailing high-rise housing policies of the time ¹⁵. With its distinctive stepped design, huge space was opened to the shopping centre, unique balconies were provided for every flat and majestic structures were formed in the corridors. The stepping back of flats was not just for aesthetics, but more for practical considerations.



Figure 17.



Figure 18 .



Figure 19.

Conclusion

The Brunswick is an extremely controversial building, yet it provides opportunities for multiple readings and meanings. It has been both admired and criticized in terms of its architectural design, but its construction and reconstruction process was an ongoing source of complaints. Though controversial, the Brunswick should be recognized both of its historical and architectural significance. Historically, its troubled history resulting from the frequent changes of owners, architects and constructors renders an thought-provoking implication of how politics, business could together 'ruin' an idealistic utopian scheme and how modernist architecture was re-considered at that time. Architecturally, it is deemed as a pioneering mix-use scheme in the 1970s that integrated a wide range of community, whose iconic stepped design managed to utilize space efficiently. Meanwhile as a low-rise and high-density scheme it represents a challenge to the high-rise housings which prevailed at that time, and it's one of the series of architectural experiments of its time.

The Brunswick managed to withstand the test of time both physically and politically, and it's still evolving as a vibrant mix-used

community. However, Problems still exist with the buildings now, and the problems are likely less with the design, but more with the construction itself. Problems due to construction flaws around the buildings need to be dealt with in a more sensible manner.

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Image credits

- Figure 1. The open space of the Brunswick Centre.
- Figure 2 . The empty shops and shabby housing in the Brunswick before refurbishment ⁵
- Figure 3 . The location and scale of the Brunswick centre compared to the bartlett
- Figure 4. The corroded and cracked surface before refurbishment ⁶
- Figure 5. Leakage seen everywhere in the Brunswick
- Figure 6. 'Concrete jungle' of the Brunswick
- Figure 7. Proliferation of concrete structures
- Figure 8. The A-frame structures formed by the stepping back of flats
- Figure 9. An illustration of the zoning for the Brunswick. The upper part is the housings, and the lower part is the retails including shops, restaurants and a cinema.
- Figure 10. Overall look of the Brunswick constructed in Sketchup
- Figure 11. Plan and elevation sketches
- Figure 12. Axonometric views of the Brunswick in Sketchup
- Figure 13. The 'horizontal' feeling on the shopping street
- Figure 14 . The strong 'verticle' feeling in the corridors.
- Figure 15. An illustration of the circulation in the Brunswick. Left: circulation of visitors. Middle: circulation of the residents into rooms. Right: circulation in the semi-private space for residents.
- Figure 16. View from a balcony to the open space, model constructed in Sketchup
- Figure 17. The 'promenading decks' in semi-private space
- Figure 18 . Sunlight naturally sheds into the corridor.
- Figure 19. A balcony in the flat under sunshine ²⁷