

NEWS FEATURE

Central Hill residents challenge architects to rethink demolition

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1/13 Central Hill Estate

Source: All photography by Holly-Marie Cato

For the past 10 years, Lambeth Council has been intent on demolishing and rebuilding the 1970s estate. *Will Ing* visits residents who are urging architects to respect their climate pledges and reject the project

'I'm being socially cleansed,' quips Cliff Grant. The jovial musician and decorator was a child when, in 1973, he became one of the first residents on the new Central Hill estate in south London. Now, aged 60, he is fighting for its survival.

'It's a battle that's been going on so long that I have become numb to it,' he adds, smiling grimly. 'The council are clearing out all the working-class people so they can bring in the rich.'

Central Hill nestles in the southern side of a steep ridge near Crystal Palace. It is strikingly green, even in February. Trees rise with the buildings while patches of lawn are bound by bushes.

Most of the homes on the estate offer sweeping views of London, punctuated by the Shard and the City cluster. On a sunny day the entire hillside is lit up.

For the past decade, however, Central Hill has been under a cloud. Lambeth Council signalled its intention to redevelop the 6.8ha estate in 2012 and formally approved construction of 'hundreds of new, better homes' in 2017.



But years later, a masterplan for the estate has yet to emerge. Now Lambeth is finally set to pick an architect to design 1,200 new homes on the site – and submit a planning application that would see all 450 existing homes demolished. Three practices are shortlisted for the job: Hawkins\Brown, PRP and BPTW.

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Central Hill residents are urging the architects to challenge the council on demolition. They argue that whoever wins the job will be contradicting their [Architects Declare pledges](#) – and would be ‘complicit’ in a scheme that compounds both the climate emergency and London’s affordable housing crisis.

As calls grow for Lambeth Council and its architects to consider the social and environmental damage of demolition, can either be persuaded to rethink?

Central Hill was completed in 1974 by a team at Lambeth Council's planning office, which was overseen by renowned Modernist Ted Hollamby and included pioneering architect Rosemary Stjernstedt.

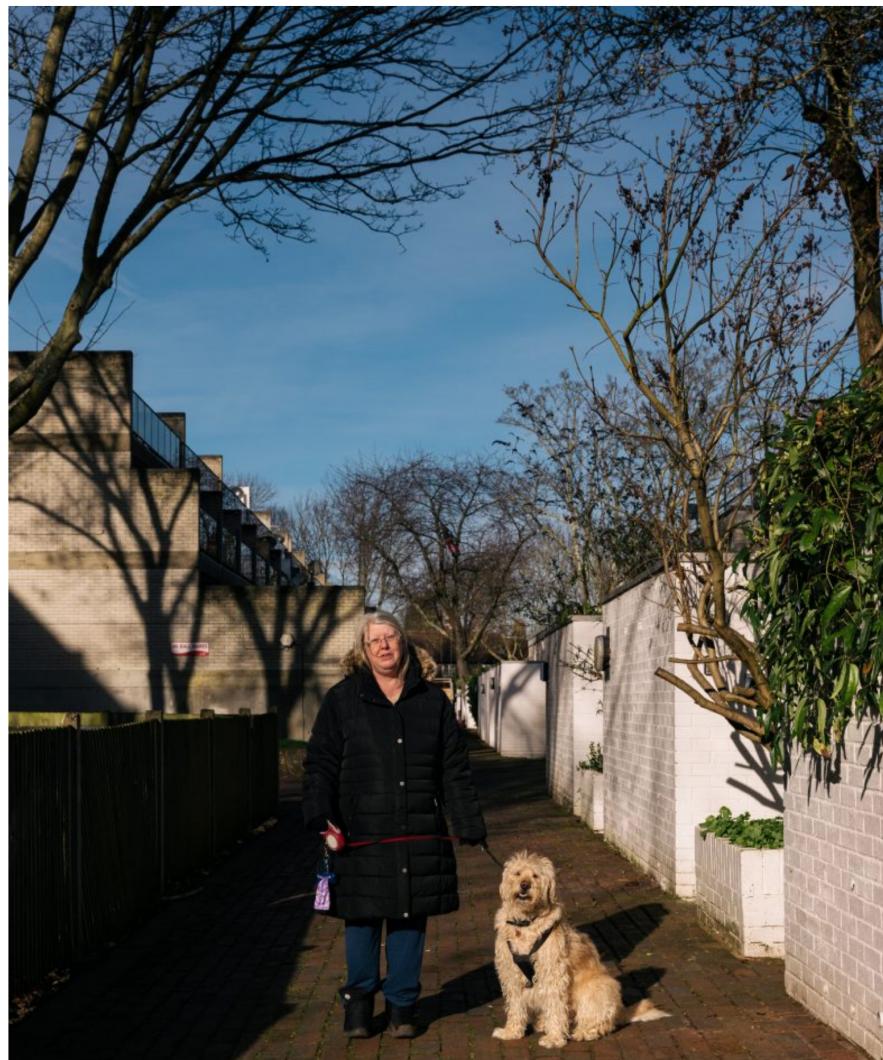
'It was all new and shiny,' remembers Grant, looking out over the estate from his third-floor balcony. 'Everyone points their finger at council estates and says they are all crime-ridden but it's never been like that at all.'



Sue Wolfenden, a council tenant, moved to her flat back in 1983. 'It was quite nice when we moved in because we had community heating,' she says as she walks her dog around the estate. While the system is now defunct, a pair of concrete chimneys still hang over the eastern part of the estate, surrounded by shrubs.

Since then, Wolfenden reflects, Central Hill has 'got quieter' – although she concedes this may just be because she has got older.

Today, the housing blocks themselves appear shabby, in need of a thorough wash but not yet decrepit. Residents argue they are fit for purpose but Lambeth says otherwise and is leaving growing number of flats and maisonettes – currently 75 – sitting empty.



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Sue Wolfenden, a council tenant, has lived on the estate for 39 years

So young

In 2012, just 38 years after Central Hill's completion, it was included in a long list of estates the Labour-run Lambeth Council planned to redevelop. In 2017, the demolition plan was confirmed. Lambeth appointed Mace to oversee development work with architect PPR, although it later dumped the duo having decided to develop the site through its own arms-length housebuilder, Homes for Lambeth.

Residents feel betrayed by the decision to demolish. 'The estate is a lovely place,' says Grant, a leaseholder who has spent years stripping out a wall to create an open-plan living space. The council is offering him a new flat on the redeveloped estate but only on a shared ownership basis, meaning he would no longer fully own his home.

'I'm quite angry at the way they treat people, it's absolutely awful,' he says. '[The experience] has caused me to have a stroke. It has caused a lot of ill health in people.'

Wolfenden complains about being left in limbo. '[In 2012] I didn't know what was going to happen or whether someone would come round one day and say: "You have got to move." There is no timescale. I need carpets downstairs, but I haven't bothered because I don't know how long I have.'

Now Save Central Hill Community, a group of residents and housing campaigners, have said demolition is incompatible with climate commitments made by both the council and the architects. Echoing the AJ's own RetroFirst campaign, they point to the thousands of tonnes of embodied carbon emissions the building of replacement homes will produce.

In 2019, Lambeth became the first London borough to declare a climate emergency, saying that preventing global temperature increase was 'humanity's number-one priority' and vowing to slash its carbon emissions.

Around the same time, Hawkins\Brown, BPTW and PPR – who all declined to comment for this article – declared a climate emergency. They joined Architects Declare and promised to evaluate new work against its 11 pledges.

Save Central Hill Community says it is 'disappointed' that 'all three practices accepted the council's premise that complete demolition and rebuild of the Central Hill estate is the only viable option'.

It has written to each of them, pointing out there is a 'fundamental contradiction' between what the architects believe and agreeing to design 'the comprehensive demolition of Central Hill estate [and] its subsequent and intense market-sale-led densification'.



Housing and heritage campaigners are increasingly highlighting the vast embodied carbon emissions caused by demolition and rebuild. But with more than 100 council estates in London under threat, according to campaign groups Just Space and London Tenants Federation, large-scale 'regeneration' remains a favoured strategy for councils looking to increase their housing stock.

Anna Minton, author of *Big Capital* and an academic at University of East London, says arguments against estate demolition on environmental grounds are 'something we are starting to hear more of because [concern about climate change] is gaining traction'.



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Minton says environmental arguments are a 'really strong and effective campaigning tool' as they appeal to a wider audience. But she adds that, in the case of Central Hill, it is 'impossible' to change Lambeth's approach as they are 'ideologically committed to [estate demolition] for reasons which are very hard to grasp'.

Central Hill campaigners argue that very few intrusive surveys of the estate have been done, and retrofit and infill have not been properly considered. The council, which is still run by Labour, denies this. Deputy leader and cabinet member for new homes Matthew Bennett says the council 'spent two years going through all possible options – from refurbishment, infill and partial rebuilding – to provide more and better homes for the people of Central Hill'.

He told the AJ that 'families on the Central Hill estate are living in poor-quality homes, facing problems with

damp, cold, mould, and poor soundproofing between houses', adding that 'the current design of the overall estate creates significant accessibility problems'.

While residents agree there are problems with the estate, they insist they have more to do with a lack of maintenance than inherent flaws with its design or fabric. Several residents told the AJ that the council acts slowly or not at all on problems they have reported.



'You are always wondering whether the disrepair is incompetence or deliberate,' says Pete Elliott, a housing campaigner and Green Party councillor for the local ward. Earlier this month, the housing ombudsman rebuked Lambeth Council for its record as a landlord after it found 26 cases of service failure and maladministration at unnamed properties.

But like Minton, Elliott believes the disrepair at Central Hill is 'more ideological', with the council allowing the estate to drift into 'managed decline' to incentivise long-term residents to leave. This reduces opposition to demolition and will help the council win a ballot on the regeneration in coming years, he believes. A spokesperson for Lambeth said that maintenance at the estate happens 'to the same standard and schedules' as at other council properties.

Despite complaints about maintenance, residents say the estate could be fixed up. Another leaseholder, Sabine Mairey, says she used to support demolition as she believed the council about most of the flats in the estate having problems – despite

considering her own flat to be in good nick.

But, she says, as she chatted to more of her neighbours, and looked around the estate during Open House, the annual London-based festival of architecture, 'it suddenly dawned on me that the estate was alright'. She argues that the council would save money and grief by retrofitting the existing buildings.

Bennett, however, says that funding is a 'key reason' for the demolition and rebuild approach. 'Over the past 12 years we have seen significant cuts in government funding, the withdrawal of Decent Homes grant funding, and enforced rent reductions which have reduced the amount the council is able to borrow to fund refurbishment or retrofit,' he says.

'In Lambeth there are over 30,000 people on our housing waiting list and almost 3,000 homeless families living in temporary accommodation. The only solution to homelessness is to build more homes,' he adds.

Sceptics say that the Central Hill redevelopment, as currently proposed, will not do much to reduce homelessness in the borough. While the exact tenure split on new homes is yet to be decided, campaigners argue that the joint delivery plan by Lambeth Council and Homes for Lambeth show its estates programme will only provide a 3 per cent increase in homes with council-level rent.



Minton is sympathetic to campaigners. 'Lambeth behave as a developer and their argument is that this is the only way they can provide services and provide affordable homes,' she says. 'But I don't agree with that. There are many arguments about the numbers, but the trajectory of the rents tells a different story.'

Campaigners also point out that leaseholder flats bought by Homes for Lambeth are being rented out on the private market. 'That is not housing the homeless at all,' says Wolfenden. According to Elliott, the council also declines to inspect the many empty properties or invest in making them habitable – even though they could be housing people.

Residents mourn the loss of community that demolition would cause. Clive lives on Hawke Road, in a house

directly opposite the estate. 'I have been walking through Central Hill for 31 years now and the community has always been so important,' he says. 'The estate is still clean, but they are going to knock it down and build some tower blocks, and the community will be gone.'

Save Central Hill Community insists demolition is not inevitable. The group points out that deputy council leader Bennett, the driving force behind the estates regeneration programme, is not standing for re-election to the council in May. And they point out that Lambeth's own recent risk assessment deemed the failure of the estate regeneration programme 'likely' – with Homes for Lambeth having made an £8.5 million loss in its last financial year.

But they are frustrated that architects are willing to get involved and have urged those involved to challenge the 'business as usual' mentality on projects like Central Hill, writing: 'We ask that you use your position, your expertise, your resource and your voices to effect positive change with action and not limit yourselves to rhetoric.'



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Mairead Cooney

23 February 2022 at 10:40 am

Reminds me of this <https://www.architectsjournal.co.uk/news/opinion/why-we-must-resist-the-urge-to-demolish-housing-estates>

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Robert Wakeham

23 February 2022 at 8:52 pm

How, in London in 2022, can seventy five – and counting (presumably affordable) local authority homes be lying empty on an estate where many residents deny that their homes deserve demolition?

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