Blocked due to copyright.
See full page image or
microfilm.

Martin Charles

London's megastructure —"infinite flexibility and extensibility"

ARCHITECTURE VIEW

ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE

Provocative Public Housing

The world of the future, or at least the housing of the future, has been taking shape in London since 1968, and is nearing completion now on Alexandra Road in South Hampstead. Although the 520-unit project for approximately 1,660 people is still not finished, families have been moving in since spring. But the most frequent visitors are probably architects, who can be seen singly and in clusters, leaning over the balconies and crawling around the structure, curious to find out what the London Borough of Camden has wrought.

What the Camden Borough Council has produced, under the design leadership of architect Neave Brown, is a megastructure — a radical architectural concept that has intrigued practitioners and theorists for the past two decades. The theory has been translated into Council Housing, the British version of public housing, which has had as checkered and controversial a history there as in the United States.

Essentially, a megastructure is what it sounds like: a big building of many parts. In the case of Alexandra Road, it is 1,000 continuous feet of a low-rise, high-density, terraced housing, built on a slight curve, which creates its own pedestrian street and "village" atmosphere.

What makes megastructure different from conventional big building, or from the row houses of the past, and what made it so attractive to the radicals of the 1960's, is an idea of infinite flexibility and extensibility; it was to be a free, liberated architecture capable of open-ended change and adjustment to match the popular and permissive ideas of those who were "restructuring" society at that time.

But it also fitted the architect's eternal, utopian search

Continued on Page 36

ARCHITECTURE VIEW

Provocative Housing

Continued from Page 35

for a kind of physical order that could be imposed by design on the chaos of living.

Embraced by the architectural avant-garde in the 1960's and adopted by the establishment in the 1970's, the concept was declared officially dead in 1976 by the critic and historian, Reyner Banham, in his succinctly titled book, "Megastructure — Urban Futures of the Recent Past." Obviously, this was an idea whose time came and went with astonishing rapidity.

Which makes it all the more remarkable that the Alexandra Road housing, far from being stillborn, is very much alive and attracting international attention. It is both handsome as architecture and promising as urban design, and like many handsome and promising housing solutions before it, has no guarantees of success. But allowing for those sociological imponderables that turn some housing efforts into cosy homes and others into nightmares, it shows signs of settling in as part of the London scene. The design is thoughtfully related to earlier housing on the site and to the scale of its surroundings. Since the price tag for this unconventional kind of design and construction is conspicuously high, that too will have to be figured into any final assessment or more general application of the result.

The project follows the megastructure formula that calls for a large, continuous stuctural framework that can accommodate smaller units, such as rooms, apartments or houses. It can also include commercial units, administrative and other facilities and public space, as it does here. The idea is as expandable as the kind of building it envisions, and one British firm, somewhat carried away at the height of its popularity, proposed an urban megastructure across the entire United States.

The best known executed example of the genre is probably Moshe Safdie's Habitat at Montreal's Expo '67, a housing megastructure that demonstrated both the strength and the weaknesses of the concept in terms of design, production and costs.

•

In the field of public housing, Alexandra Road may be the beginning, and the end, of the line. Quite aside from its theoretical aspects, however, it strikes the visitor primarily as a sensible and attractive solution to accommodating a lot of people on a difficult site; it is smack against a railyard, on one of those leftover bits of problem land invariably given to Council housing in English cities.

The scheme is organized as terrace housing on a pedestrian street. A continuous row of five six-story blocks, joined by glass-enclosed elevator shafts, lines one side of the street, with three five-story blocks on the other side. The larger row forms a wall against the railyard at the northern edge, acting as a baffle for the noise.

Between this street and a three-block row of townhouses there is a park and recreation area. The site also contains community buildings. Garages and access roads on a level below the terraced housing keep pedestrian and vehicular traffic separate.

> 'The design is thoughtfully related to the scale of its surroundings.'

Within this unusual street and structural framework is some well-planned housing. The apartments are very small, compact duplexes, with balconied living rooms above the bedrooms. Interiors have clean, simple finishes and attractive, superior design details, such as ceramic tile countertops and natural wood cabinets in the kitchens.

Construction is poured-in-place concrete, with a few pre-cast parts. This is a custom-made megastructure — it was actually cheaper to "hand make" it on the site — rather than the industrialized product that the theoreticians envisioned. The massive structure is less forbidding than would be expected for something so overbuilt; this much heavy concrete can be intimidating. The great length is ameliorated by the curve of the street and the buildings, a deflection from the straight line that manages to suggest intimacy rather than infinity.

•

The architect has also accepted the challenge to provide high-density housing in low structures — an approach currently favored among housing experts. Towers, or point blocks, as they are called in Britain, have been as notorious breeders of social problems as high-rise projects in the United States.

But the feature that succeeds most dramatically in breaking this housing mass down to an acceptable scale is the stepped balconies of the street facade. These balconies, softened by greens and flowers in the planting troughs that are part of the design, are set back on each floor as they rise from street level.

This feature guarantees some light and privacy and a human dimension. If anything, that human dimension may prove to be a little close and crowded as the entire, curving structure is occupied; the prospect could be either for jolly Neapolitan street life or local gang wars. But this will never be an impersonal environment.

A heroic effort has been made to create a distinctive community instead of just packaging a specified number of dwelling units in no particular context. To do it this well has required a decade of perserverance on the part of the architect, amounting almost to obsession. If megastructure has failed to deliver the city of the future, it has produced some dramatic and provocative housing on Alexandra Road. ■