

Becontree: Housing A History Course Outline

The Becontree Estate is celebrating its 100th year since it was constructed as the largest public housing estate in the world, the home to more than 100,000 people in four square miles.

In collaboration with the Society of Architectural Historians of Great Britain, contributors will examine different aspects of how Becontree came into being, the changes that have occurred, life on the estate and how recent history has changed its architecture.

This 4-week online course explores the social and design history of the estate, and of council housing in Britain more widely, in the 100 years since 1921.

The course is inspired by the RIBA's current exhibitions celebrating the Becontree Centenary and is aimed at adults who have a general interest in architecture. A reading list will accompany the course, advanced reading will not be required before the sessions.

Tuesday, 8th Feb 2022

The Beginnings: Becontree and Beyond

Mark Swenarton – “Background to Becontree: the bigger picture”

The London County Council's Becontree estate was the largest of the municipal garden suburbs built in Britain under the nationwide 'Homes fit for Heroes' campaign of 1918-19. This talk will set out the background by looking at three main areas. First, the design innovations developed by the garden city movement in the early 1900s, particularly by Raymond Unwin at Hampstead Garden Suburb and elsewhere. Second, the adoption of this new form of housing by the government as the solution to the political crisis created by the ending of hostilities. Finally, it will look briefly at the earlier housing schemes built by the London County Council in the 1890s and 1900s before it embarked on Becontree.

Mark Swenarton is an architectural historian, critic and educator, known particularly for his writings on twentieth-century housing. Mark co-founded and edited the monthly review *Architecture Today* (1989- 2005) and then took up the headship of the architecture school at Oxford Brookes University. He was subsequently appointed inaugural James Stirling Chair of Architecture at Liverpool University, where he is now emeritus professor. His books include *Homes fit for Heroes* (1981/2018), *Artisans and Architects* (1989), *Building the New Jerusalem* (2008), *Architecture and the Welfare State* (2014) and *Cook's Camden* (2017). Mark is the editor of the SAHGB's journal *Architectural History*.

Karen Ruston – “Building Becontree: Aspirations and Realities”

This talk will showcase the range of archive material held by Barking and Dagenham Archive Service documenting the early years of the Becontree Estate, much of which has been catalogued over the past year as part of a Wellcome Trust funded project, 'Building Becontree'. The archive includes architectural drawings and plans of the estate created by the London County Council as well as reports of residents' experiences of life on the estate and medical and educational records kept by the local authorities of Barking and Dagenham. A comparison between the ambitions of Becontree's designers and the experiences of its earliest residents will be an important focus.

Karen Rushton is the Borough Archivist for the London Borough of Barking and Dagenham. The archive collections are all based at Valence House Museum and document the history of the local area and its residents.

Tuesday, 15th Feb 2022:
Landscapes, Housing, and Community

Rebecca Preston – “Clean Streets, neat houses and bright gardens, with parks and sports fields between’: the landscape of Becontree and other London County Council cottage estates”

‘With their clean streets, lined with neat houses and bright gardens, with parks and sports fields between, they make a very pleasant impression’ – a journalist noted of Becontree and other municipal cottage estates in 1938. New ideas about town planning, drawn from Garden City responses to overcrowding and disease and fired by the need for homes ‘fit for heroes’ following the First World War, placed gardens and open space at the heart of housing policy from 1919. While many people were rehoused in urban block dwellings, the garden ideal came to the fore in low-density cottage estates on the city fringes, where their greens, parks and other open spaces created an aesthetically pleasing and healthy landscape of light and air. At the same time, the new cottage gardens were intended to encourage thrift, self-sufficiency and family centred activity, while it was hoped that the parks and recreation grounds would foster community life, outdoor leisure and play.

But what did the settlers make of this new landscape and how did they make themselves at home in what could be challenging circumstances? Considering Becontree from its early days, this presentation will look at the design of the landscape and its relationship to the built environment, and then focus a little closer on how tenants used their gardens up to the Second World War. We will also look at how gardening was encouraged by the London County Council and other agencies as a form of social work – and whether the men, women and children who settled the new estates might have welcomed this advice, ignored it, or participated on their own terms.

Rebecca Preston is a Historian with the English Heritage London blue plaques scheme and also works freelance on landscape and building history projects. Her research interests and publications span the relationship of people to place, of landscape to the built environment and of gardens and outside spaces to the home in nineteenth- and twentieth-century Britain.

nimtim Architects – “Squaring the Corners”

Squaring the Corners by nimtim architects with artist Katie Schwab was the selected proposal for the corner plot commission. As part of the commission, proposals were sought from selected architectural practices to redesign neglected corner plots on the Becontree estate to mark its centenary. A junction of four corner plots creates one civic square. Each square suggests new activities and performs new functions by inviting residents to take ownership of them. Their designs borrow generously from geometries, colours, and materials within the estate – both in their original and current customised manifestations. With a strong focus on biodiversity, the ambition is to encourage the re-establishment of the original ecosystem of the heath, thus creating a part wild, part intimate public space: much smaller in scale than the large municipal parks, and much more social than the adjacent front gardens.

nimtim are a practice who want to make and talk about architecture in a different way. Our work is about people and the stories and ideas they bring to the projects we make together. We create buildings that reflect the personalities and values of the people and communities that will live, work or play in them. We want to tell stories that resonate with everyone. To bring people inside the extraordinary process of making and reimagining buildings and landscapes.

Tuesday, 22nd Feb 2022
Council Housing Beyond Becontree

Andrew Turnbull – “Desirable Homes and Communities - Goldsmith Street, Norwich”

An overview of how we commissioned and delivered the Stirling Prize winning development at Goldsmith Street, the largest 100% Passivhaus, 100% social housing scheme in the country.

Andrew Turnbull has over 20 years’ experience in the housing field and has worked for Norwich City Council since 2008 as a senior housing development officer and more recently as manager of the development team. Andrew was the council lead for the Stirling Prize winning Goldsmith Street development and has led this project from inception through to completion.

Mary Milton – “Sea Mills (Bristol): Council Estate to Conservation Area”

This talk will focus on the development of Sea Mills council estate in Bristol from the early visions of Christopher Addison, who visited two sites and planted a tree that still bears his name to the development of the estate 100 years after: What has worked and what has not worked, and the effect of right to buy on the look of the estate. It will also discuss the Garden Suburb Movement in shaping the estate’s layout and other influences behind the key designs of the houses on the estate, their building materials, and the major alterations that followed, as well as the importance of public buildings on the layout of the estate, shaping a community that contributed to what was eventually built.

Mary Milton is the Project Co-ordinator of Sea Mills 100, a National Lottery Heritage funded project celebrating the centenary of the Sea Mills Garden Suburb in Bristol. The project's legacy is the Sea Mills Museum, based in a formerly derelict K6 phone box in the centre of the area.

Mary has a Post Graduate Diploma in Building Surveying from the University of the West of England and currently works at Bristol Archives.

Miles Glendinning – “Mass Housing, Modern Architecture, State Power: the international context of British ‘council housing’”

This talk will set the British system of ‘council housing’ into its international context. In the case of Britain, council housing was built and rented out directly by local government, by ‘councils’ – a national system not found anywhere else in the world. Its central decision-makers were elected local politicians, and it consequently became bound up with local political and civic micro-cultures to an extreme degree. But it also featured distinctive national characteristics as well, notably the way in which the organisational reliance on direct municipal building and ownership was bound up spatially with a preoccupation with extensive inner city ‘slum clearance’ – very different from most other countries, where the mass-housing norm was vast arrays of slab blocks on the city periphery, exemplified by the grands ensembles of France. This focus on the inner urban helped generate a very distinctive architectural outcome – an idiosyncratic vernacular of modern housing, with multi-storey public housing blocks in Britain tending to be concentrated in quite individualistic inner-urban clumps of tall towers, usually not ‘system built’ – very unlike the arrays of prefabricated slab blocks typical of many countries.

Miles Glendinning is Director of the Scottish Centre for Conservation Studies and Professor of Architectural Conservation at the University of Edinburgh. He has published extensively on modernist and contemporary architecture and housing, and on Scottish historic architecture in general: his books include the award-winning *Tower Block* (with Stefan Muthesius), *The Conservation Movement*. His current research is focused on the international history of mass housing, and he has just published the first comprehensive global overview of this topic: *Mass Housing – Modern Architecture and State Power – a Global History* (Bloomsbury Academic Press, February 2021). Other planned books include a history of public housing in Hong Kong (Routledge; likely publication 2023) and a history of postwar housing in London.

Tuesday, 1st Mar 2022

Postwar Period and the Fall and Rise of Council Housing

Nicholas Bullock – “Reconstruction and Renewal in Newham and Barking, 1945-1979”

With the formation in 1965 of the GLC, Becontree, along with the rest of Barking and Dagenham, became part of Greater London, formal recognition of a long process of assimilation. However, though now part of East London its development and housing had long differed from its western neighbours. Comparing these with the policies pursued by its western ‘neighbour’, Newham, the presentation will seek to draw out the contrasting approaches adopted by the two boroughs between 1945-79 to the challenges of reconstruction and renewal.

Nick Bullock has long taught at Cambridge and the AA and has written on European architecture and urbanism of the 20th century, particularly in Britain, France and Germany. His research has ranged from social/housing policy and regional planning to the architectural

debates of the moment and is currently completing a book on architecture, urbanism and the modernization of post-war France.

John Boughton – “Council Housing under Attack: Politics and Design since 1979”

John will discuss the politics and changing nature of social housing since 1979, examining the impact of Right to Buy, new ideas around planning and design, and controversies surrounding regeneration.

John Boughton is a social historian, the author of *Municipal Dreams: The Rise and Fall of Council Housing*, published by Verso in April 2018, and a forthcoming book, *A History of Council Housing in 100 Estates*. He is an Honorary Senior Research Fellow at the School of Architecture of the University of Liverpool. John has published in the *Historian* and *Labor History* and gives talks on housing to a range of audiences. He blogs at municipaldreams.wordpress.com.