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CRESSET ROAD  
(North side)  
1-35 Lennox House

II

Flats. 1936-7 to the designs of U E M MacGregor for Bethnal Green and East London Housing Association. Reinforced concrete frame with yellow-brown stock brick cladding and facing, concrete bands and planters to balcony fronts, small-panel metal windows, hipped pantiled roofs. Five-storey ziggurat or 'A'-frame section, with large central space originally intended to accommodate a local market, but generally used for storage. The stepped section of the block enabled the flats to be planned as 'stacked bungalows', with generous open balconies. A more conventional block terminates the north end of the site giving a 'T'-shaped plan overall. Interiors not inspected. The use of a 'cosy' stove in each living room, which also incorporated a vent through to heat the bedroom, was an important and popular addition. The chimneys for these stoves slope inwards as they travel up the building, they meet on the top floor and emerge vertically through the roof. There are 35 flats arranged with three-bedroom flats on the first floor, one-bedroom flats on the top floor and two-bedroom flats on the intervening levels.

Built in the 1930s, the block's concept of the stepped section, use of concrete behind traditional materials and its combination of functions anticipated the much larger and monumental Brunswick Centre, LB Camden, built in 1967-72. The concept was unique in pre-war social housing, and the significance and innovative concept deserve recognition. The original idea was that the central portion of the building beneath the stepped flats should be used as a covered market, the income from which would be used to subsidise the rents of the flats above. However, during the building period, land in the area was designated for residential use only, so this interesting economic project was still-born. In the Second World War the space was rented by Hackney Council and used as a store for air raid precaution equipment, and as a decontamination centre.

The ziggurat design with private balconies was an unusual solution to flatted housing. The Housing Association was committed to providing a garden for each flat (apart from those on the ground floor). Each balcony is accessed from the living room of the flat. The flats are mostly arranged in pairs, and are reached by three sets of external stairways. The recesses for these stairs separate the balconies from each other, providing privacy. Generous window space and the step-back section resulted in light interiors. The inspiration for the step-back can be traced to a 1925 apartment block for working-class tenants in the Rue des Amiraux in Paris by Henri Sauvage. The Brunswick Centre in Bloomsbury repeated the model in the 1960s.

John Eric Miers MacGregor (1891-1984) was the son of an artist. After wartime service in the Artists' Rifles, he joined A R Powys in 1920 on the technical panels of the Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings, and it is for his role in repairing and preserving many historic buildings that he is largely remembered today. But MacGregor was also fascinated by engineering and its application to architecture. In his own buildings he regularly combined the use of traditional claddings with innovative concrete frame constructions, such as in working-class cottages in Ongar, as well as here. This interest was fired by a desire to build low-cost housing prototypes, in the development of which he worked extensively with the British Cast Concrete Federation. Lennox House is thought to be his most successful building.

Sources

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