The French Connection: The Sceaux Gardens Estate and the promise and peril of bringing L’Esprit Nouveau to south London

*[Presentation transcript]*

*Author: Stephen Lovejoy*

*Presented at the ‘Urban Modernisation And Representations Of The Working Class’**conference at the University of Salford. 2pm, Thursday 25th of May, Chapman Lecture Theatre 4.*

I am a Senior Lecturer at London South Bank University and an architect and urban designer at the London Borough of Southwark. Through both of my roles I am focused on researching how we can understand architecture and urban design as a reflection of the values and priorities of the society that created them. Or as Henri Lefebvre iconically stated in his 1974 book ‘The Production of Space’, “(Social) space is a (social) product”.

In today’s presentation, I will be focusing on one estate in particular. The estate of Sceaux Gardens, in Camberwell, about 2 miles south of central London. The estate was constructed between 1957 and 1959. It contains 403 homes built across 2 x 15 storey blocks, 4 x 6 storey blocks and a collection of bungalows and was designed as a mix of housing for families, childless couples and the elderly.

The estate was carried out by Camberwell Borough Council, which would later be merged in 1964/65 with the Metropolitan boroughs of Southwark and Bermondsey to form the present day of London Borough of Southwark. Camberwell had their own architect’s department, led at the time of Sceaux Gardens by the architect Francis Oswald Hayes. It was unusual for a London borough at the time, most of the architectural experience in London was contained within the London County Council, which held significant sway and had established itself nationwide as a leading authority for housing design.

Tellingly in its review of Sceaux Gardens, the Architects Journal (1960) praised it as:

*"The most interesting housing scheme to have come from a Metropolitan Borough Architect's Department and compares very favourably with the best of recent LCC work".*

For me that’s part of the interest in Sceaux Gardens. We can recognise the scheme as capturing the politics, priorities, and pressures of a borough council, in case this Camberwell Borough Council, and how this impacted the design and delivery of housing for its working class.

# Homes for Camberwell

Now it’s worth highlighting that there was a vast variety across the boroughs in their approach to housing delivery, but the one thing that was common was the pressure they were under to build.

By the early 1950s the post-war housing delivery had not been meeting targets and housing, and the deterioration of housing conditions (particularly in places like London) had been a key issue in the 1951 election. This led in part to the creation of the Ministry of Housing and Local Government, with Harold Macmillan appointed to the head, and the announcement of the target of 300,000 new homes to be annually (Boughton, 2018).

The London Boroughs had first responsibility for hitting these figures, and some historians have suggested that this shielded the LCC and allowed more creative freedom (Bullock, 2002). Some boroughs treated the proposed densities and house-building targets with resistance, while others wholeheartedly embraced them. Camberwell Borough Council fell into the latter.

Camberwell had been badly hit during the bombing attacks during the war, with local historian Mary Boast (2000) estimating that 5,650 homes in Camberwell were completely destroyed and many more were damaged. As well as that, while some of the houses in the area were handsome tree-lined Georgian terraces, many of the residents were living in poor quality tenements or terraces, which were overcrowded with a lack of light, sanitation, and green space. Studies that looked at the impact of working-class housing design on health and wellbeing were seen as particularly relevant here, such as the Dudley Committee report of 1944, or Margery Spring-Rice’s 1939 book *Working-Class Wives.* The post-war rebuilding was seen as an opportunity to replace poor-quality slum housing with better quality homes for the working classes.

When Hayes joined Camberwell in 1952, initially as Director of Housing and later Borough Architect, he was strongly committed to delivering this housing. In a 1959 interview in the South London Observer, he revealed how his aspiration was to bring the borough from 11th in list of metropolitan boroughs for housing progress “to its rightful place of fourth on a population basis – and if possible into second place”. As highlighted by Nikolaus Pevsner (2002) he would go on to surpass this with Camberwell going on to have the highest housing construction figures of all London boroughs between 1945 and 1962.

This was all part of a wider drive in Camberwell to build as many homes for the people as possible. While the initial focus was on bombed sites, Hayes was frustrated with the lack of sites of a sufficient size to design at a high density. He was constantly looking for sites to develop. When Camberwell Borough Council had a Compulsory Purchase Order approved for the Camberwell House Mental Health Hospital Site in 1954 Hayes referred to as a “gift from heaven” (South London Observer, 1959).

## Camberwell House Mental Health Hospital, Peckham Road

The site straddled north and south of Peckham Road, just down the road from the council offices. Initially built as the Alfred House School, the complex of buildings had been converted into the Camberwell House private mental health hospital in 1846. Common with many of these hospitals of the time, the buildings were set in extensive grounds, with plentiful mature trees and paved areas.

The buildings were retained for Council offices, including the registry office, and the site to the south was made into Lucas Gardens. While the rest were allocated for housing, providing an opportunity for Hayes and his team to provide a high-density estate. The only question that remained was how to go about designing them?

Certain element of the design was driven very much by pragmatic economic considerations. The 136 persons/acre density for North Camberwell set out in the 1943 County of London Plan already suggested an element of flatted development. But with the desire to retain the extensive gardens, it was clear that these flatted blocks would need to be of significant height to hit the numbers desires while preserving the verdant gardens.

Initially 360 homes as a combination of flats and maisonettes were proposed across blocks ranging from 3 to 13 storeys. When it became clear that the 1956 Housing Subsidies Act was detrimental to buildings 3-storeys or less and providing greater subsidies for greater heights this was altered. Furthermore, soil assessments for the site suggested that the foundations would need to be piled with deep, slender concrete foundations, a more expensive form of foundations. These changes both incentivised fewer, higher blocks. As a result, the design was altered to single-storey flats, four 6-storey blocks and two 21-storey blocks. These higher blocks were reduced to 15 storeys when the Ministry of Housing took issue with exceeded the 136 persons/acre zoning for the site.

# Corbusien Influences

High-rises were still relatively rare in Britain and most council housing in the interwar or early-post World War 2 period had either taken the form of outer-city cottage-style homes, like Beacontree, or mid-rise neo-Georgian gallery-access flat blocks, such as the Glebe Estate built before the war by the London County Council (LCC) on Peckham Road adjacent to the Camberwell House hospital site.

Greater experimentation was being done on the continent. Like many architects of his generation, those who had trained in the 1920s and early 1930s, Hayes appeared to champion the ideas derived from the continental avant-garde. There was a split between those who preferred the Scandinavian ‘human’ modernism and those ‘modern purists’ who taking clear inspiration in particular from the French-Swiss architect Le Corbusier (Bullock, 2002).

## Le Corbusier’s ‘L’Esprit Nouveau’ and ‘Villa Radieuse’

Le Corbusier promoted the idea of ‘L’Esprit Nouveau’ or the ‘new spirit’. Using emerging widely available technologies such as concrete and glass to create light, spacious homes. He utilised reinforced concrete columns to support the structural load which allowed for flexible placement of internal walls and windows, thereby increasing the amount of daylight and space.

Other significant ideas including the Villa Radieuse principle that captured the potential of the high-rise to allow even those living in dense cities to enjoy the benefit of green space and nature, an idea we can see matching effectively with the gardens of Camberwell House.

A scheme that particular caught the imagination of architects both young and old was the Unite d’Habitation in Marseille, particularly its ability to combine a variety of house types and other uses in a single slab block.

While there was great fascination amongst British architects about these new modernist ideas, there was hesitation amongst politicians and the public. And only a few schemes following these Corbusien modernist principles were approved initially, such as the initial slab blocks developed by the LCC, such as Bentham Road, Hackney, Alton West and Loughborough Road.

# Friendship Link with Ville de Sceaux

In Camberwell however, we can see the architectural department benefitting from an increase in cross-channel relationships and ideas. In October of 1954, the same year that the compulsory purchase order for the Camberwell House site was approved, a friendship link between the London Borough of Camberwell and the Paris ville de Sceaux was formed. This was part of the wider town-twinning movement intended to promote inter-national friendships, encourage cross cultural exchange and friendly links between the two towns and help affordable travel – with residents from either town encourages to provide homes for each other.

## Ville de Sceaux Urban Design

While the Ville de Sceaux is a similar distance south of central Paris as Camberwell is from central London they were not particularly comparable locations. Something highlighted by the Deputy Mayor of Sceaux in their response to the initial interest, of a far smaller size and density, numbering just over 10,000 inhabitants at the time, in contrast to Camberwell’s over 170,000 inhabitants (Depreux, 1954).

Nor is the architecture of Sceaux particularly modern, being more typical of a French village. However, we can see how prominent formally laid out high-quality green spaces play within the town, particularly the central green space of Parc de Sceaux,where citizens can spend their time. The South London Film Society visited Sceaux in 1954 as part of the prospective twinning and overlaid shots of residents fishing and sitting on park benches with a recommendation of visiting the town to “anyone contemplating a continental holiday” as it was a place “free of the battle of city life, with its trees, flowers and delightful countryside”.

## Camberwell House site renamed as Sceaux Gardens

In honour of the friendship link, it was decided to name the new estate on the Camberwell House gardens the ‘Sceaux Estate’, and to name the various blocks after prominent French figures associated with Sceaux, such as the scientist Marie Curie and Joseph Lakanal, founder of the modern French education system (Camberwell Borough Council, 1957).

While there is no resemblance between the design of Sceaux Estate and the buildings of the Ville de Sceaux, we can see within this wider context of greater openness to foreign ideas the opportunity to construct much-needed housing in a new style, particular if it was done in a way that would allow for urban residents to also benefit from greenery, while providing high density. Sceaux Estates was shortly renamed again to Sceaux Gardens, emphasising the significance of the green space in the design (Camberwell Borough Council, 1958).

# Sceaux Gardens Estate Design

The blocks were formally laid out, defining the central gardens, with the highest blocks on the east and west end of the blocks. A mix of uses were included, as well as laundries, tenants’ stores, garages and shops, in order to create a community.

The design was explicitly modern, and economical. The scheme uses central heating across the estate, with a communal boiler house. The lower blocks were built of load-bearing brick construction. The more unconventional construction was reserved for the tall blocks, with a façade clad using semi-glazed composite timber infill panels.

There was a rhythm of primary and secondary structural elements and the interplay of balconies and fenestration. The solid blank end walls are more severe. The framework was built of insitu reinforced concrete frame and floors, with load bearing brickwork cross walls. This is exceptionally strong, though the crosswalls continuing down the ground floor, imposed due to cost constraints, ended up hampering potential uses. Structural reinforced concrete slab separates each individual maisonette and provides a structural roof to block.

There is only one central escape stair in the tall blocks. This is alson likely due to economic limitations and the desire for an ordered façade. The maisonettes are arranged in a cross-over or “scissor” arrangement to maximise the amount of daylight available to the deep flat layouts. Bedrooms and bathrooms are located on the entry level, and then the floor above has living and dining areas that extends across the block with windows on both the east and west façade, and a glazed partition separating the dining and kitchen area from the living room. The flats are mirrored, again likely for efficiency. The one downside of this arrangement is that some of the windows have kitchen cabinets against them and is likely the reason windows on both sides are at hip-height, when the living area could have larger windows and as a result, someone sitting down can’t enjoy the view (Architects’ Journal, 1960).

Narrow escape balconies are included on the upper floor, though there are not deep enough to be used. An article in the Architect Journal (1960) praised the efficiency of the proposal, saying that "there is little doubt that the Sceaux Gardens scheme is really economic when considering the high standard achieved."

## Attitudes of the public

‘The Changing Face of Camberwell’ is a documentary released in 1963, just a few years after the construction of the flats, and captures public attitudes towards these new homes. For many of the new residents the design was a welcome change from many of the shortcomings of working-class homes. They praised the views of treetops, the daylight and the modern facilities and the ease of the central heating, especially the lack of coals and ashes.

A lot of the celebration placed on the flats is due to the way they work with the gardens, preserving the mature trees and creating a pleasant pedestrian only environment. And again, we can recognise in this the strong focus on high quality green space, reflecting the desire to have a relaxing slice of nature. This is not dissimilar to the admired green spaces being enjoyed by the residents of Sceaux highlighted in the 1954 travelogue by the London Film Society.

Concerns however were raised about the institutional and anonymous design. We see this reflected in the Changing Face of Camberwell (1963), with concerns about the anonymity of the flats. The film uses the example of children playing outside, but then not being able to find their home, because all the corridors look the same colour (ibid).

The difficulty of getting to know their neighbours was also raised as an issue. The flats are contrasted with the homes on the street one of the families left, Lugard Road in nearby Peckham. Highlighting the contrast between windows looking out onto the sky allowing daylight versus windows looking out on the street allowing sociability and neighbourliness (ibid). This is the same concern of ‘eyes on the street’ that the writer Jane Jacobs (1961) was expressing at the same time across the Atlantic in Greenwich Village, New York.

## Concerns of a lack of ‘neighbourliness’

It became clear that the inclusion of communal facilities of laundries, tenants stores, garages and shops, wasn’t enough to get over the difficulties of sociability and forming community. Just a few years after construction, H.P. Trenton, the architect-in-charge of Sceaux Gardens, who would go on to take over from Hayes as Borough Architect, attended a discussion at the Architectural Association. He cited the failures of Sceaux Gardens as a reason for a change in Camberwell’s approach to high-density housing (Architects Journal, 1964). The lack of private external space was criticised, and the ground floor layout was believed to be compromised due to the concrete walls (ibid). Despite all the effort on retaining the mature gardens, they were considered to be a failure by the council (ibid). Due to draughts from the high blocks and the lack of play areas, which had been removed due to budgetary constraints, they were not well used.

To try and combine the neighbourliness of a terraced street with the economies and density of high rise, as well as greater parking provision, the council would go on to experiment with the ‘streets in the sky’ approach, used on later ambitious proposals such as the Heygate and Aylesbury Estates. The latter of these was designed by Trenton himself. Though this approach, combined with the Brutalist aesthetic, would later be blamed for crime and antisocial behaviour (Boughton, 2019).

## Concerns of Fire Safety

The other concern regarding high-rise being raised at the time of Sceaux Garden was that of fire protection, given that the larger blocks were higher than the height that could be reached by a fire engine’s ladder.

Sadly, we see these concerns ringing true later in the life of the scheme. In 2009 a fire started in one of the flats, spreading through the façade leading to the death of 3 adults and 3 young children (Webb, 2009). Though it is worth noting that while the report on the fire did place some blame on the single timber stair and vertical ducts located within the original design, it was the recladding of the external panels two years earlier with aluminium composite panels as well as internal alterations that were considering as the main reason that the fire was able to spread, mirroring similar findings of the more recent Grenfell disaster (Webb, 2009)(Moore-Bick, 2019).

# Conclusion

The estate captures the question of the extent to which the dismissal of the housing of old paved the way for a new future or replaced one set of a problems with another.

While Sceaux Gardens didn’t prove as sociable, or safe, as intended, the estate has proved to have more enduring appeal than some of the later works by Camberwell Borough Council or the London Borough of Southwark. It remains one of the more popular modern estates in Southwark amongst residents and has been held up as, while not outstanding or particularly innovative, a well-designed example of high rise living. Quite unusually for a modernist estate, the buildings was included in a Conservation Area in 1968 less than 10 years after construction, extended in 1977.This was largely due to the preserved garden and the retained buildings of the Camberwell House Hospital, but we can also see in the designation some of the pride of the borough’s role of providing housing, with it described as the first and the “showpiece” of the “ambitious programme of public housing” (Southwark Council, 2010).

It is also worth contrasting it with what came before. For the residents these homes marked a very distinct improvement on the poor-quality Victorian homes that they had been living in before.

As the Changing Face of Camberwell sums it up quite poetically:

*“The first industrial revolution covered the ground with asphalt and bricks. The second is uncovering the ground and discovering the sky.”*

*-       ‘The Changing Face of Camberwell’, 1963*

**References**

1. Architects Journal, (1959) *14-Storey Flats at Sceaux Gardens, Camberwell* Architects Journal; May 21, 1959; 129, 3351; p767
2. Architects Journal, (1960) *Housing at Sceaux Gardens,* Architects Journal; Jan 7, 1960; 131,3377; p23-34
3. Architects Journal, (1964) *AA; Camberwell’s housing schemes,* Architects Journal; Aug 26, 1964; 140, 9; p476
4. Boast, M. (2000) *The Story of Camberwell.* London: The London Borough of Southwark
5. Boughton, J. (2019) *Municipal Dreams: The Rise and Fall of Council Housing*. London: Verso.
6. Bullock, N. (2002) *Building the Post-War World.* London: Routledge
7. Camberwell Borough Council (1957) ‘Item 95. Camberwell House Site’*, Minutes of Camberwell Borough Council Meeting 17 April 1957*, Camberwell Borough Council, Camberwell
8. Camberwell Borough Council (1958) ‘Item 62. Sceaux Estate. Naming of Blocks of Flats’*, Minutes of Camberwell Borough Council Meeting 26 November 1958*, Camberwell Borough Council, Camberwell
9. *The Changing Face of Camberwell* (1963) Directed by: Winifred Crum Ewing, Place of distribution: Mandsom Films.
10. Le Corbusier (1927) *Towards a New Architecture.* Translated by Frederick Etchells. London: J. Rodker, 1931.
11. Depreux, E. (1954) *Edouard Depreux, Depute, Maire de Sceaux (Seine) to the Mayor, Mr. James W. Lucas, Town Hall, Camberwell, S.E.5.,* 18 June [Letter] Southwark: Southwark Archives.
12. Lefebvre, H. (1991) *The Production of Space.* Translated by D. Nicholson-Smith Ox­ford: Blackwell
13. Moore-Bick, M. (2019) *Grenfell Tower Inquiry: Phase 1 Report: Report Of The Public Inquiry Into The Fire At Grenfell Tower On 14 June 2017.* Available from: <https://www.grenfelltowerinquiry.org.uk/phase-1-report> [Accessed:
14. Pevsner, N., Cherry, B. (2002). London 2: South. United Kingdom: Yale University Press.
15. Jacobs, J. (1961) *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* S.L.: The Bodley Head Ltd
16. Southwark Council (2010) *Sceaux Gardens Conservation Area Appraisal.* Available from: <https://www.southwark.gov.uk/planning-and-building-control/design-and-conservation/conservation-areas?chapter=33> [Accessed:
17. South London Observer (1959) *Observer Portrait Gallery; No. 58 - Mr. F. O. Hayes*, South London Observer, Feb 26, 1959
18. *Ville de Sceaux* (1954) Directed by: Michael Essex-Lopresti, Place of distribution: South London Film Society
19. Webb, S. (2009) *Interim Report: Fire at Lakanal, Sceaux Garden Estate, Camberwell*