

News

The housing dream

MANCHESTER'S FORGOTTEN 'STREETS IN THE SKY' WHICH TURNED OUT TO BE A DEAD END



BY CHRIS OSUH

MANCHESTER'S skyline is rising, with a new breed of towers which promise increased council tax revenues and returns to international investors. But in the 20th century, planners built upwards with a different agenda. The goal then was to house working class people, to clear the slums and replace them with 'streets in the sky'.

Back then, there was a resistance to tower blocks dominating the skyline, and deck-access buildings of six to ten storeys represented the compromise. Hulme Crescents, the Coverdale Crescent and Wellington Street estates - which were nicknamed Fort Beswick and Fort Ardwick - and, north of town, the Turkey Lane estate in Monsall and Cheetham Hill's Kennet House, were all seen as the future of housing at one time. But, very quickly, these architectural experiments ended in failure.

Long-erased from the landscape, they are the city's lost estates. But they live on online, revived by memory, myth and striking archive imagery - curated by nostalgic Mancunians, fans of modernist architecture, the city's universities and the council's image archive.

Dr Martin Dodge, from the University of Manchester's geography department, says: "In the early Sixties, it was a big aspect of the work of the town hall's work, sending the health inspector around who could legally declare houses unfit for human habitation."

In comparison to the old 'slum' housing, the new council estates promised to be spacious and light. For many residents, it would be the

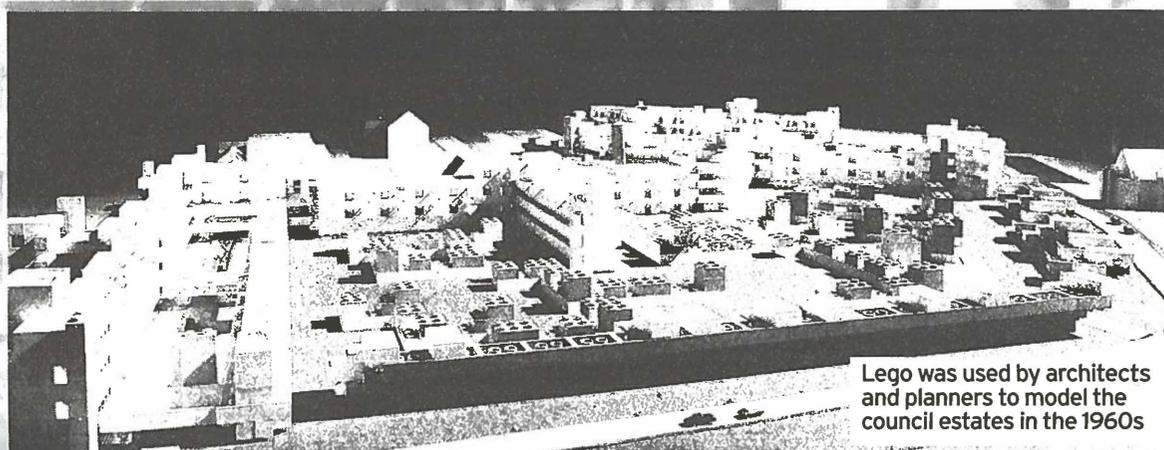
first time they had use of an inside toilet, hot and cold running water, an electric light rather than a gas mantle, a bath that wasn't made of tin, and open space for kids to play that wasn't a grimy ginnel.

"There was a kind of liberal paternalism, that slum housing was a stain on the reputation, we need to improve the poor people's lives, that kind of thing," says Dr Dodge. "And you had a younger generation who came through in the Sixties - a new breed of architect planner who were very interested in new ways of building, using new technology and new solutions."

Manchester's development in the 19th century had been largely unplanned, and improving housing provision preoccupied the council through the first half of the 20th century. By 1945, the issue was urgent - with the need to rehouse returning service personnel and re-house bombed out families.

Many terraces in Hulme had been bombed during the war, and there were waves of slum clearances until the area would be dramatically remodelled into estates of maisonettes and flats, the most imposing of which was Hulme Crescents, which went up in 1972. Building the Crescents alone - four six-storey crescent blocks capable of housing 13,000 people - would cost more than £60 million at today's prices.

But within two years of them going up, it was clear they weren't suitable for families. In 1974, a five-year-old fell from a balcony at the Crescents and died. Homes in the Crescents quickly became damp and mouldy, were vulnerable to



Lego was used by architects and planners to model the council estates in the 1960s

vermin, expensive to heat and maintain and they were difficult to police. Marooned between Princess Parkway and Stretford Road on a concrete monolith riddled with design faults, Crescents residents felt isolated from one another and the outside world. By 1984, the council had stopped charging rent, and squatters and ravers had replaced the families. It was a far cry from what had been planned by architects Wilson and Womersley, who had been inspired by the Georgian crescents of Bath.

Obviously, apart from the crescent shapes used, Hulme ended up looking nothing like Georgian Bath - and as for Manchester's other inner-city 'mega-block', deck access estates, Beswick, Ardwick, and Turkey Lane in north Manchester - the thing they resembled most closely was Lego. Which is perhaps not surprising, as Lego was used in the process.

Dr Martin Dodge has uncovered images of the tabletop Lego models used to illustrate estate designs, which have been rarely seen by the public.

"At the time they wanted to do it quickly and this was a cheap way to do it - but it does seem to symbolise that they were building models for themselves, that they were playing at building, and weren't necessarily thinking about how it would operate, and who would live in it, and how it would be maintained going forward. Now, with hindsight, it really looks odd that you would use Lego models," he said.

While many in the city had high hopes for the new estates, there

were a good number of people in Manchester Town Hall who remained to be convinced that 'system builds' of factory-made concrete panels, shipped to the site and slotted and bolted together without need for bricklayers or plasterers, would make for better housing than bricks and mortar. But they were under pressure from central government to embrace the new. And the belief in high places was that industrialised, modular, system-building approaches were a cheap, fast, efficient way of achieving urban renewal.

In Beswick, the soot-blackened Wellington Street area - between Ashton Old Road and Grey Mare Lane - was levelled, 34 acres including 1,200 houses, more than a hundred shops, and ten pubs. In its place, came a new estate of more than 1,000 homes, 14 shops and eight laundries in the form of 24 multi-storey rectangular blocks of different lengths and heights, laid out at right angles to form square and spurs. The contract was for £4.4m - at least £70m today. The same company that built the estate that came to be known as Fort Beswick - Bison Concrete Northern Ltd - built the distinctive Coverdale Crescent estate in Ardwick according to a Scandinavian building model. The Turkey Lane estate in Monsall, also known as the White Flats, and Alcatraz was also built to a Continental scheme. But Manchester is not known for its continental weather, and damp afflicted all the deck-access designs, which were doomed not just by design fault, but a poor

standard of construction. Far from fulfilling utopian dreams of streets in the sky, the networks of walkways, dead-end roads and courts that comprised these estates seemed to fester anti-social behaviour and isolation. Budget cuts affected maintenance, and the estates came to symbolise the social and economic problems of the seventies and eighties.

Despite the millions spent putting them up, the mega-block estates would have to come down. Fort Beswick's demolition began in 1982 - ten years after it was completed. Fort Ardwick, which also went up in 1972, was gone by the mid-eighties. Hulme was gone in 1994, having been up 22 years, and Turkey Lane on the Monsall/Harpurhey border, also completed in 1972, did not last 15 years.

Of Manchester's failed, lost estates, Kennet House, Cheetham Hill, was the most striking. It was built in 1934 - way before Hulme Crescents, Fort Beswick and Fort Ardwick - but had been pulled down by 1979. The flats at Kennet House were sometimes known as the Queen Mary flats - because their shape resembled the ship.

Dr Dodge says: "Part of the criticism, looking back at the slum clearance, was the scale and level of clearing - it was very aggressive and neighbours were broken up and split.

"But housing built today has other problems, often far too small, dependent on cars, not necessarily built to last. Lots of the high-rise apartment complexes going up around Manchester, you do wonder will we, in twenty or thirty years, be pulling them down?"



Family life at Hulme Crescents in 1973

that turned sour



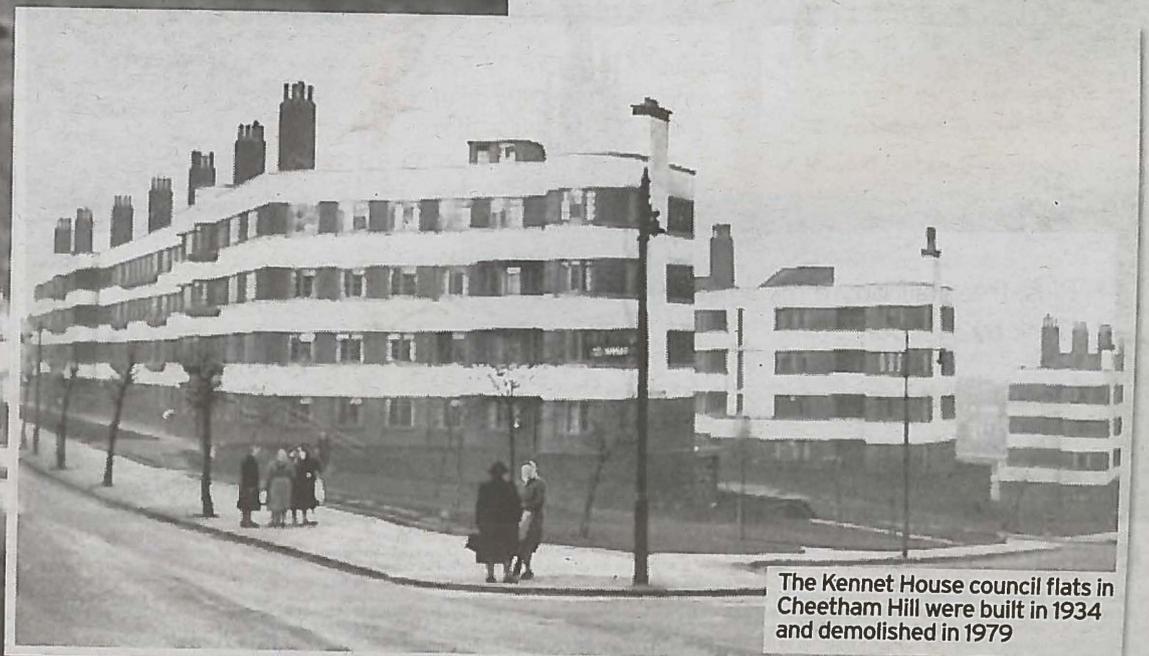
Children run and play at The Crescents in Hulme



Hulme Walk was demolished in 1994 having barely lasted 22 years

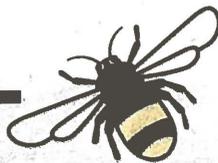


The Coverdale Crescent Estate which became known as Fort Ardwick. Built in 1972, it had been pulled down by the mid-1980s



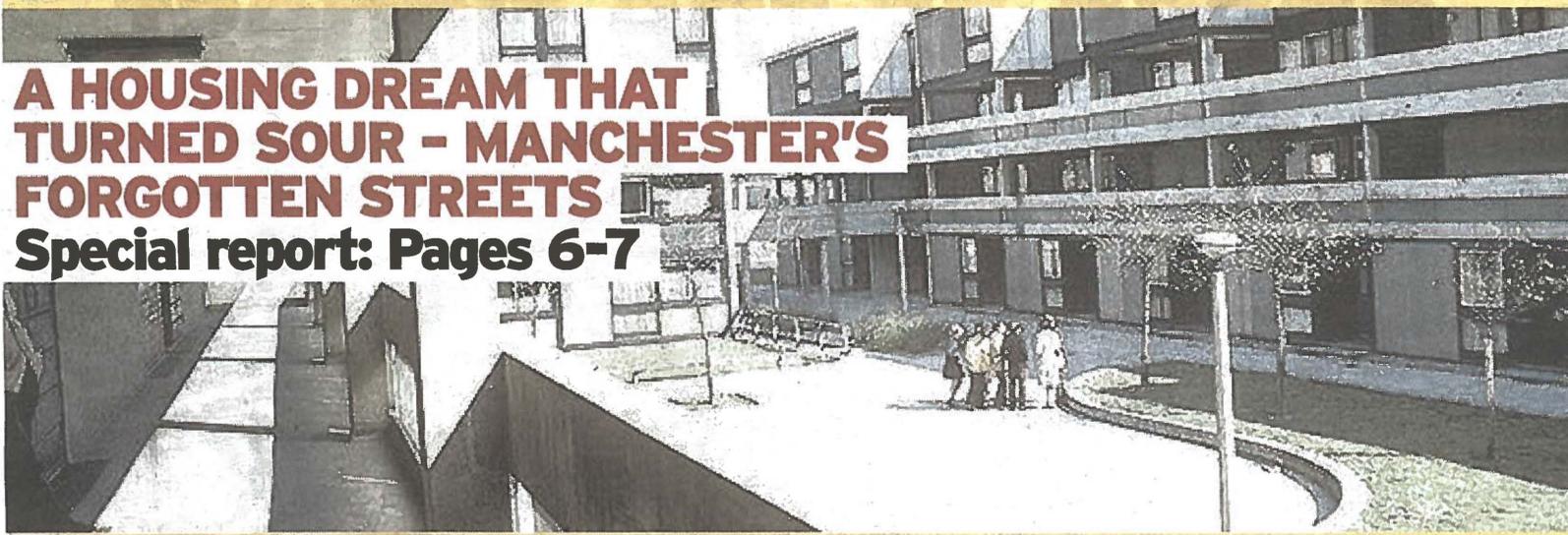
The Kennet House council flats in Cheetham Hill were built in 1934 and demolished in 1979

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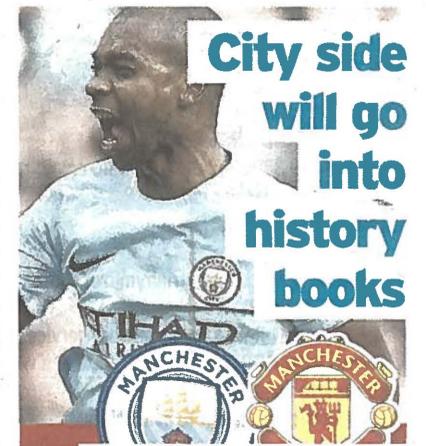


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