

Convenience and Community: The Full-Service Flat Developments of the Mid-1930s

by

GENEVIEVE BOVEE

A distinct type of full-service luxury blocks of flats was constructed in London and the South Coast region in the mid-1930s. This study addresses what made them a distinguishable set of buildings, whom these blocks were designed for, why they were unique to the south-east of England, and how their plans differed from standard designs of the period. Designed for busy professionals, these blocks are distinguished from contemporary developments by the broad range of housekeeping services and recreational and social amenities offered on site. Based on the service flat idea and offering the services of a hotel, these buildings went beyond those models to offer their residents a community atmosphere where residents could find an 'ideal home' but without the worries of household chores or employing their own domestic staff.

Their design took various functions out of the compact space of the flat and redistributed them to communal areas. Early examples often comprised several hundred one- to two-room units, the large number compensating for otherwise lettable space on lower floors being used for communal facilities and service areas. Later the range of flat sizes generally increased. By mid-1937, however, developers were no longer commissioning designs for this type of building.

INTRODUCTION

For a brief period in the mid-1930s, a distinctive type of luxury block of flats was constructed in the capital where busy professionals could find 'life... a comfortable and smooth-going affair'.¹ While London had a 'craze for flats' in the 1930s, these buildings, modelled on the service flat and the American apartment hotel, distinguished themselves from other blocks of flats constructed in London during the same time period by providing their clientele with a variety of specialised services not present in other developments. These included the labour-saving services of restaurants, snack bars, and shared domestic servants, as well as recreational facilities and areas such as lounges, cocktail bars and dance floors set aside for residents to socialise with one another and entertain guests. The provision of these amenities necessitated the sacrifice of rented space for communal areas, while in the flats themselves, the design reflected the lesser importance of cooking and dining spaces and the need for servants' accommodation. However, what set these

Genevieve Bovee is an independent historian and archive researcher. An early version of this essay formed her final thesis for the Postgraduate Certificate in Architectural History at the University of Oxford.

buildings apart from their low-service contemporaries was not just design and plan but also the fostering of a way of life.

At their height, the developers produced buildings that they believed would create a community atmosphere, the antithesis of the hotel on which they were modelled which by its very nature comprised a non-cohesive group of temporary occupants. As noted in the *Estates Gazette* in early 1936, 'Once regarded as a temporary home in which one might "make shift" for a year or so, the flat as it is being erected today is to many discriminating people an "ideal home".'² In a full-service building that ideal home also came with the ready-made community that surrounded a suburban house; it was a village in the city or a town in a single building.

The main sources of material for this study are the contemporary building and architectural journals, which describe in detail the plan, structure and amenities of new blocks of flats. They include detailed plans of blocks and individual flats and provide information about rental value. These journals also include contemporary reviews and criticism of different buildings as well as articles by well-known architects on the planning of flats. They set out the architectural, social and economic drivers behind plans, with architects' own opinions of what is required in flats of different social levels and the relative value of different amenities. The manuscript sources are limited, with few large collections relating to the architects or developers involved in designing these blocks. The main source of this nature is the Jack Pritchard/Isokon Ltd collection at the University of East Anglia, which details the planning of the Lawn Road Flats in north London and failed attempts to expand the idea to other urban centres in England.

PRECEDENTS AND PROBLEMS TO SOLVE

While flats and apartment houses were the norm in many European capitals, in nineteenth-century London they were initially scarce. It had been the general consensus that the English lived in houses, and the idea of communal living was not well established. There were, however, some exceptions that foreshadowed the community-based buildings of the 1930s, namely the chambers at Oxford and Cambridge colleges and the inns of court in London's Temple district. Each resident had a private space, but meals were served communally and servants could be shared. These types of chambers were a compromise between home and hostelry and combined some of the advantages of both.³ Purpose-built flats first appeared in London around 1850, and the second half of the nineteenth century saw a significant increase in the number of flats being constructed in the capital. However, the preference for single houses, continued well into the twentieth century. The availability of affordable houses beyond central London, connected to the heart of the capital by the ever expanding transport network, attracted larger families of all social classes away from central London and farther out into the suburbs and the Home Counties. The same trend was also present in other UK cities.

The middle and higher-income flats constructed during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries tended to reflect the scale of houses with large numbers of bedrooms and accommodation for family servants. This trend produced a 'trail of gigantic sparsely populated mansions through the West End of London'.⁴ Following the First World War, reduced availability of domestic servants and shrinking family sizes encouraged a trend

towards the design of ever-smaller flats, the 'maison minimum'.⁵ These types of dwelling were meant primarily for permanently resident couples and families or for those who divided their time between the capital and a country retreat.

In parallel to this was the availability of so-called service flats, which provided the domestic and cleaning services of a hotel, and perhaps even a small restaurant. Here persons who were unable to establish a household, perhaps having just returned from the colonies or undertaking a lengthy but limited work engagement in a city, could find convenient though non-permanent living accommodation. Many of these advertised weekly or monthly rates while regular flats were let on an annual tariff. These hotel-like domestic services and amenities, however, were becoming an attractive prospect to less transient tenants. London saw the introduction of the 'catering flat', high-quality flats largely aimed at bachelors that offered a more permanent home with food services and public rooms for socialising.⁶ Early examples include Wellington Court in Knightsbridge with the option of full service and meals⁷ and Audley House in Marylebone which offered full catering for its residents and the option of accommodating servants on a separate floor.⁸ These blocks were designed on a relatively modest scale with no more than thirty to forty units. In the 1920s and early 1930s there was a new trend in New York where many affluent residents were taking suites designed for long-term residents in some of the city's large hotels. Hotel staff took care of most of the normal household chores, thus solving the 'servant problem' and 'freeing women from "supervising a thousand and one petty details"'.⁹

Maintaining service staff could be an onerous household duty for married women, while for single men and women accommodating a maid or valet could also be a burden and an intrusion on their privacy. The trend of modern lifestyles was towards greater freedom in the home and greater variety of interests and activities beyond it. In London, developers began slowly to adopt some of these ideas of convenience and liberation from household concerns.

This began at the higher end of the social scale with the opening of the new Devonshire House on Piccadilly in central London in 1924. A seven-floor development of fifty-four flats, the ground floor restaurant was intended mainly for public use, but the extra large kitchen would provide meals for delivery to the residents above.¹⁰ However, the flats were all designed with service quarters as Londoners clung to the need for one's own servants. For the less well-heeled there was Heathcroft, a block of flats at Hampstead Garden Suburb in north London, which opened in the same year and provided a restaurant, along with lounges and smaller rooms for private hire so socialising and entertaining could take place outside the home but without the trouble of going off the premises.¹¹ Despite this nascent trend towards shared services and spaces, the self-contained flat remained the norm and it would be nearly another decade before these ideas of convenience, liberation and communal living would be fully realised in a British building.

FIRST STEPS

The Lawn Road Flats in London's Belsize Park and Mount Royal on the capital's Oxford Street both opened in 1934. These two radical designs would address the need

for convenience and redistribution of household matters in two different styles. While Mount Royal would provide accommodation on the scale of a hotel with a myriad of services one might find in some of the best establishments, Lawn Road was more modest in size but no less ambitious.

Mount Royal was designed for residents 'who enjoy "home" plus all the comforts of hotel life'.¹² The development applied the principles of mass production to flats. There were two one-room plans and one two-room plan, and these 'luxury flatlets' were replicated throughout the building's 650 units (Fig. 1). The ground floor was given over to public shops, while the first floor provided a range of services and shared spaces for residents which included a lounge, restaurant (which also provided meals directly to flats), snack bar, tobacco shop, barber's shop, and delicatessen, what *Architectural Review* said '[wa]s in effect a private town'.¹³ On the top floor there was a garden terrace where residents could mix and enjoy as much fresh air as one could hope for above London's busiest shopping street (Fig. 2). Thus each occupant, the *Review* commented, had a '[private] cell but he shares with his fellows a sort of communal life'.¹⁴

At the Lawn Road Flats, Canadian architect and furniture designer Wells Coates proposed to build 'a block of flats of a new kind called the ready-to-live-in flats. Designed for business men and women who have no time for domestic troubles'. They were to provide 'comfortable living for busy people'.¹⁵ These compact flats would comprise the minimum space and equipment needed for modern, functional living, what Coates

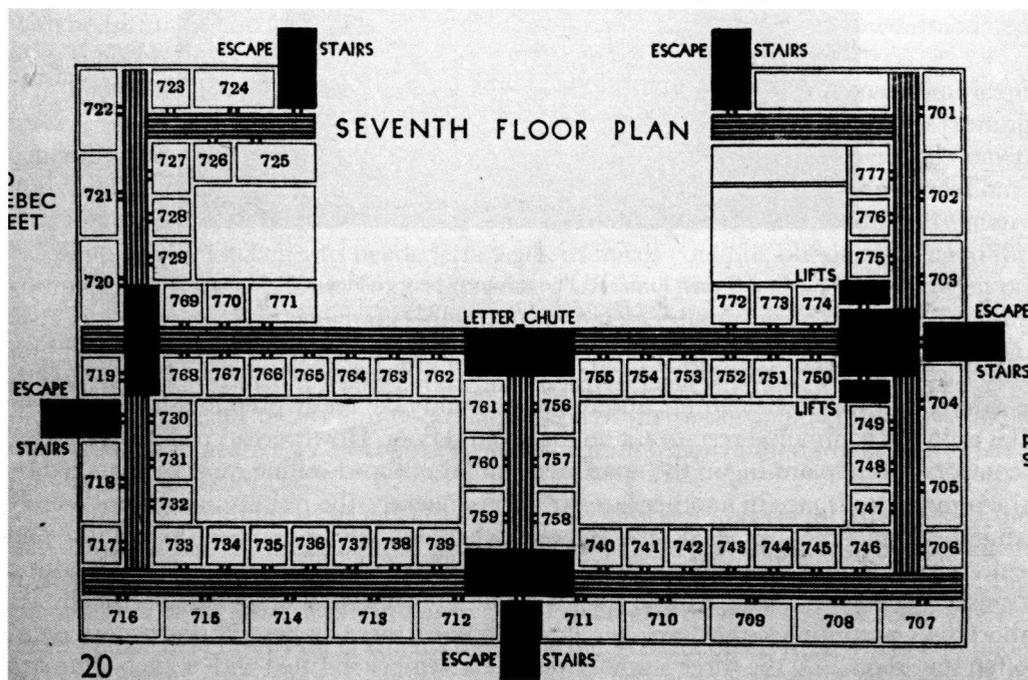


Fig. 1

Mount Royal, Oxford Street, London. Plan of a typical floor where the maximum number of units has been replicated across the plan. *Architectural Review*, 1935.

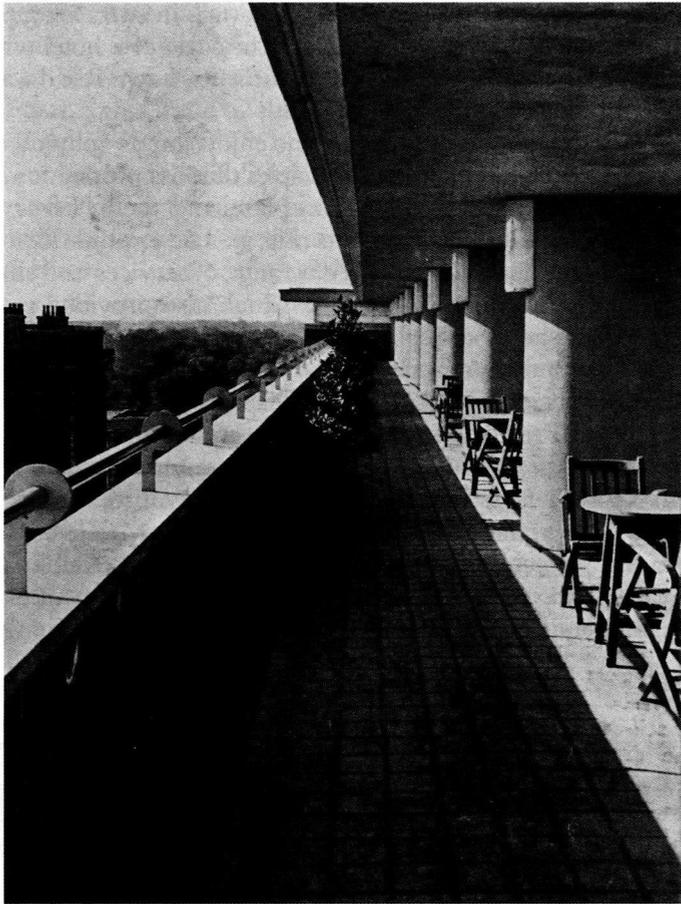


Fig. 2

Mount Royal, Oxford Street, London. The terrace where residents could socialise or relax.
Architectural Review, 1935.

would call the 'minimum-flat'. All flats included full domestic service, including shoe cleaning and window cleaning, and residents could take ready prepared meals in their flat or in the communal restaurant on the ground floor. However, according to Coates, 'compactness of planning in the apartments of [a] group-dwelling must be matched by the provision of space in another [area]'.¹⁶ Consequently, the restaurant was not merely an impersonal hotel-like space, it was a club where tenants were meant to socialise and entertain as well as dine. As a whole, the Lawn Road Flats were never intended for a transient clientele. Though three flats without kitchens were designed specifically for short stays, according to the developer, Jack Pritchard, these supposedly short-stay tenants often stayed on, and the three studios eventually were each fitted with a kitchen unit to accommodate a long-term resident.¹⁷

Isokon Ltd, the company set up by Pritchard and Coates to develop the Lawn Road

Flats, was conscious of the experimental nature of the building, their '*ballon d'essai*'.¹⁸ However, it was a success. Nearly half the flats were let before the building's completion, and only one was handed over to a letting agent to dispose of, while a satisfactory profit was realised before the first year of occupation was completed. Isokon informed its directors in 1935 that the 'specified service' – the hotel-like domestic services and the communal, club-like amenities – had attracted many tenants to the Lawn Road Flats.¹⁹

The service flats that preceded these two new buildings had offered temporary accommodation of a practical and convenient nature. These two new developments, however, were not concerned merely with convenience but offered a community to which their residents could belong, described by one commentator in the case of Mount Royal, as 'a little town'.²⁰

DEVELOPMENT OF THE CONCEPT

Mount Royal and the Lawn Road Flats were designed for tenants drawn from the professional/middle class. Isokon had pointed out to its directors that while there was a huge clamour for better living conditions and the creation of new housing for manual workers – hence the huge building programme of the London County Council between the wars – they felt that the needs of those on middle incomes, who were also subject to overcrowding, were being ignored.²¹ They were not alone. *Architectural Review* had declared in a February 1934 editorial that no town dweller was worse served 'today' than the middle class bachelor men and women living 'on their own'. The furnished 'flatlets' with bedsitting rooms and shared bathroom facilities in which they were accommodated were most unsatisfactory.²²

That same year, *Architect & Building News* noted that there had been a significant increase in demand for small flats in recent years, stating that this demand was coming generally from the more prosperous parts of society and specifically single men and women and childless couples.²³ Their chief needs were a living room, sleeping accommodation – either as part of the living room or a separate unit – and private toilet facilities. In many cases, no proper kitchen was needed, they felt, as meals could be obtained through the communal service of a lower floor restaurant.²⁴ *Building* published a special edition on flats in August 1934, in which they pointed out that speculators were now targeting the middle classes with an ever-increasing 'crescendo' of flat-building activity. They also spotted a trend towards a 'communal collectivism'.²⁵ Developers were finally catching on to the idea that the less family-oriented parts of the professional classes on middle incomes were in need of a new type of accommodation which offered smaller, affordable flats with shared services.

This new demand reflected changes in the lifestyles and social attitudes of the day. In an article for the *Architects' Journal* in 1935, E.A.A. Rowse commented that in modern inter-war urbanite lifestyles the 'home element is giving way to the hotel...life becomes easier with the proximity of a valet or maid and irksome tasks of really sincere cooking fade delightfully away when a first-class meal comes direct from a fully equipped service room on every floor'.²⁶ Single professionals did not have the time to worry about household chores or the time necessary to arrange the employment of someone to take care of these things for them, while married women, who traditionally had dealt with the

'servant problem', also had other things on their mind and other interests or professional employment of their own outside the home. Rowse stated his belief that the Lawn Road Flats were for those who needed a place of their own to sleep and bathe but 'whose whole life and interests must almost certainly be outside their constricted quarters'.²⁷ This, of course, applied to both men and women. For Londoners, Rowse declared, the flat was the 'natural provision for those who ask no more than freedom to follow the wider mode of life which a modern environment has thrown open to them'.²⁸ While there was plenty of affordable housing going up in the suburbs, architect T. P. Bennett recognised that there was a whole market of 'professional people of smallish incomes, who consider their work requires residence in close contact of London, and who like the minimum of housework'. He believed that they would also favour what was then being referred to as the 'hotel type flat', one to two rooms with large main entrances, restaurants and semi-hotel services.²⁹

In 1935 Isokon set about replicating their Lawn Road Flats on an expanded scale at a site in Windsor. While the flats would vary in size from one to four rooms, the concept of 'unusual' services and the community amenities would be replicated.³⁰ The raising of capital stalled, and the scheme fell through, but by this time other architects and developers were working on similar projects. The Lawn Road Flats, thanks to the business instincts of Jack Pritchard, had been well publicised during the design phases in 1933. By 1934–35 a number of similar buildings were under construction.

A development of three blocks of flats known as Pullman Court, for which the first promotional brochure was published in 1935, aimed to 'allow men and women to live...completely liberated from household drudgery and worry'. 'Never before', it was claimed, 'has so much been provided for so little money in such a pleasant site'.³¹ The development offered a restaurant, a 'social lounge' where residents could mix and entertain, a swimming pool where they could exercise and a roof garden where they could relax together. Also coming onto the London rental market in these first two years were luxury, full-service, community-oriented blocks of flats in central London at Nell Gwynn House near Sloane Square and Chatsworth Court in Kensington. While a little further out, there was Pullman Court at Streatham Hill and Taymount Grange at Sydenham, both in south London. Chatsworth Court offered the essential maids' services, a restaurant, an indoor swimming pool, and tennis and squash courts,³² while Nell Gwynn House added to that a ballroom, snack bar and hairdressing salon. Here flat sizes varied from one to three rooms, with rents starting at just £90 per annum.³³ Pullman Court sat on one of the main arteries approaching the capital from the south, while Taymount Grange was constructed on the former site of a large mansion atop a promontory with views across the city. Here the main block included a restaurant and lounge, there were optional domestic services as well as a number of spare chambers where maids and valets could be accommodated separately. The suburban site allowed for an open-air swimming pool for residents and their guests, along with use of a putting green, hard tennis courts and sports pavilion.³⁴

These buildings were not the norm, however. For each of these full-service buildings with compact flat units, there were dozens that provided larger flats, some with purpose built servant's quarters, and which did not provide the same array of communal services.

For example, Ross Court in Putney, which opened in 1936, was comprised entirely of flats for families, with large kitchens and self-contained servants' areas.³⁵ Some buildings provided some of the amenities. Ellington Court near Southgate underground station had a communal lounge for its occupants.³⁶ Chesil Court in Chelsea was in the process of adding a restaurant in its basement when the building opened for tenants in 1937.³⁷ Generally, larger flats meant fewer units, even though the lower floors did not have to be set aside for dining and recreational areas. Nor did architects necessarily specialise in one type or the other. Robert Atkinson, designer of the service-oriented 758-unit White House near Regent's Park also produced Stockleigh Hall, a block of some sixty two-to-four-room flats with no special services at Primrose Hill. T. P. Bennett was responsible for buildings that provided a large range of flat sizes and service provisions.

The appeal, however, of the service-oriented building was still growing. In June 1936, *Architect & Building News* commented that, 'today the "bachelor" or "married couple" type of flat, which offers merely living accommodation, however convenient and comfortable, seems no longer adequate. The demand now appears to be for the full amenities of a social club - squash racket courts, swimming baths, gymnasias and restaurants all combined under one roof with the flats'. They suggested that younger people were not looking for the lonely isolation of a standard block of flats, where 'the general atmosphere is one of hostile toleration, if not suspicion', instead many felt the need for social intercourse.³⁸ In this piece, the journal was reviewing Robert Atkinson's newly opened White House block. Comprised of 758 flats on nine floors, 652 of which were of a single-room type, the building included a restaurant with sprung dance floor, a spacious lounge, writing room, swimming pool, a cocktail lounge with balcony that overlooked the pool and a handful of small shops. 'It would seem, therefore, that a tenant has all the advantages of a luxury hotel with the important addition that his own apartments have all the attributes of an ordinary private flat'.³⁹

6-9 Charterhouse Square (also known as Florin Court) was completed in 1936 and is another example of the progression towards a more sophisticated and community-based building, one that felt even less like a hotel. At Florin Court there was a very deliberate attempt to provide accommodation at economic rentals - the price range was just £70-175 per annum in its first year - but that would feel more like a country home in the city. The owners appealed to potential tenants to 'realise your dreams of having a home in the country but escape the "nightmare" of getting to and from it every day'.⁴⁰ The developers of these community buildings were selling a lifestyle, one of convenience and making the most of the city without the hassle of running a household.

In 1936 *Design for Today* magazine changed its name to *Town Flats and Country Cottages*, signifying that the 'modern craze' for flat dwelling had captured the imagination. However, there were concerns, too. The London County Council, not immune to old-fashioned prejudices, feared that the spread of blocks of single-roomed flats would attract undesirable types of people and lower the general quality of neighbourhoods. So in 1936 they restricted the number of single-room units permitted in any one scheme to a maximum of ten percent.⁴¹ While the provision of small flats for singles and childless couples was filling buildings with tenants, developers must have anticipated that even larger households would want the community amenities they could provide. So the

community building did not disappear just because legislation put a stop to blocks full of one- to two-room units. Instead developers had already begun constructing blocks of flats that provided the same amenities but attached to a greater variety of flat sizes and designs. Some early examples appeared in outer London at Latymer Court (1934) in Hammersmith and Meadowside (1936) at Twickenham in south-west London where flats ranged from two to six rooms in size. There also continued to be new innovations and offerings now that developers were looking to attract a wider clientele that included small families. T. P. Bennett's Marsham Court in Westminster, completed in 1937, included not just a restaurant but also four private dining rooms that could be hired out for family gatherings or other guest occasions.⁴²

The ultimate expression of the community-building ethos was the enormous Dolphin Square complex, which opened near the Thames at Pimlico in 1937. Developers Richard Costain Ltd envisioned a 'great city of flats' - 1,236 of them spread across sixteen conjoined blocks, which enclosed a massive internal garden courtyard (Fig. 3). Dolphin Square offered a range of sizes of flat, from the modest to the 'palatially spacious', as the developers boasted, at rents of £75-455 per annum.⁴³ Top-end flats that could accommodate a live-in maid were also provided so that every option was available.

While Dolphin Square offered the greatest variety of flats, it was also the development that was most clearly selling a lifestyle. The promotional literature for Dolphin Square



Fig. 3

Dolphin Square, Pimlico, London. The inner garden courtyard and dining/recreation block.

Architect & Building News, 1938.

hinted that its new community would be ‘the Heaven of the woman who wants to “live her own life”, and run the Cabinet or a business as well as a husband...No Dolphin wife,’ they assured, ‘will need to cook...darn a sock, make a bed, wash a collar or wind a clock...and she has not to go out into the world and hire the said staff’. If said wife had no desire to go out into the world at all then she might well remain in the Square for ‘all the essential parts of the world are on the premises’.⁴⁴

Dolphin Square’s communal facilities included a restaurant with a dance floor, swimming pool, library, games room, beauty parlour, theatre booking office and travel bureau as well as a variety of shops including a pharmacy, wine shop, and shoe repairer.⁴⁵ There were also laundry and maids’ services. Costain described its design approach for Dolphin Square as the ‘intelligent anticipation of what modern people are aiming at in their mode of life’.⁴⁶ They anticipated that young couples would want childcare without the trouble of having to vet and hire nursemaids themselves, and that modern people wanted better health and fitness. So they provided exercise facilities and a sophisticated crèche.⁴⁷ Like Mount Royal before, it was a self-contained community, and even today the block’s marketing invites prospective occupants to ‘enjoy the village life’.⁴⁸ In fact, the residents at Dolphin Square had more amenities packed into the design of their own building than many actual villagers could access in their entire community.

GEOGRAPHICAL DISTRIBUTION

These blocks of flats were designed and built exclusively for London urbanite renters. Consequently, nearly all the examples are to be found in London with a handful on the Sussex Coast within easy access of the capital for commuters. Though at least one developer, Isokon Ltd, is known to have attempted to replicate this type of building with its services in other English cities, they never got past the planning stage.

The appeal for Londoners has been discussed above. Meanwhile in the 1930s, seaside resorts were looking to maximize their value and appeal, and with new electric train services connecting them to London in 90 minutes or less, they could attract residents away from the capital. Planners on the Sussex coast had also demonstrated a willingness to approve modern schemes, with the Lido at St Leonards-on-Sea and the De La Warr Pavilion at Bexhill getting the go-ahead in the first half of the decade. The two best examples of the full-service building on the South Coast were Embassy Court (1936) in Brighton and Marine Court (1938) in St Leonards-on-Sea. Both relied on a combination of fashionable, modern design and outstanding services to lure tenants away from London.

At Wells Coates’ Embassy Court (Figs 4 and 5) the bands of concrete with light cream rendering on the façade echoed similar developments in the capital including Coates’ own Lawn Road Flats, while at Marine Court architects Kenneth Dalgliesh and Roger Pullen were inspired by its sea-front site. Designed to look like an ocean liner - supposedly inspired by the *Queen Mary* - its ethos was not dissimilar. It provided high-quality accommodation in its 180 flats but with the dining and socialising facilities one would find on a great ship: two restaurants, one with a dance floor, communal lounges, reading and writing rooms, with waiters, valets and maids only a telephone call away. The building’s pride and joy was the large ‘promenade deck’ on the top level.⁴⁹

Despite the obvious appeal of modern accommodation with convenient access to the

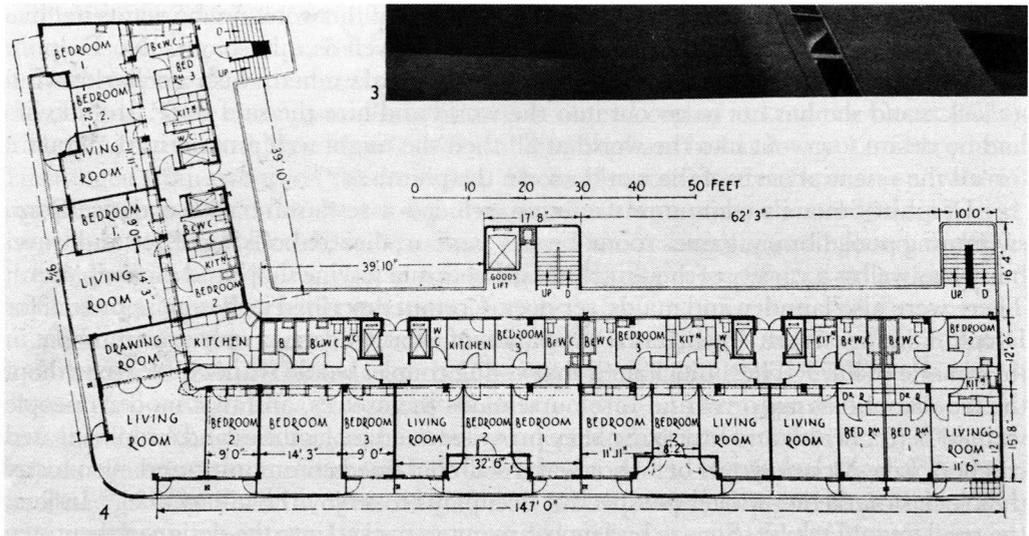


Fig. 4
Embassy Court, Brighton. A typical upper floor plan. *Architectural Review*, 1935.



Fig. 5
Embassy Court, Brighton. The rear service galleries. *Architectural Review*, 1935.

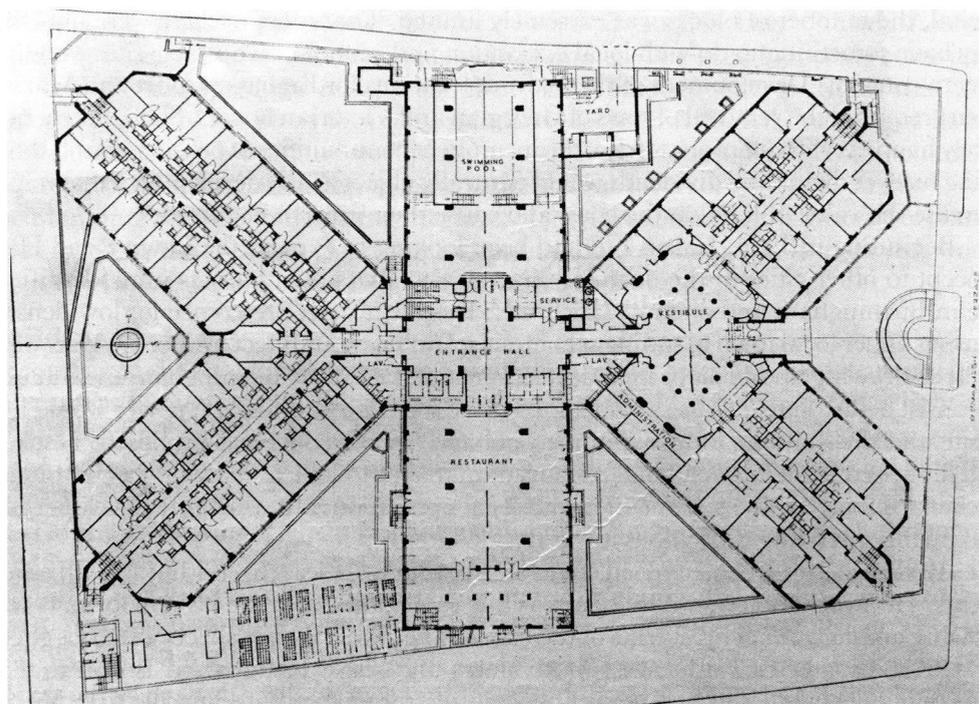


Fig. 6

White House, Regent's Park, London. Plan of the ground floor. *Architect & Building News*, 1936.

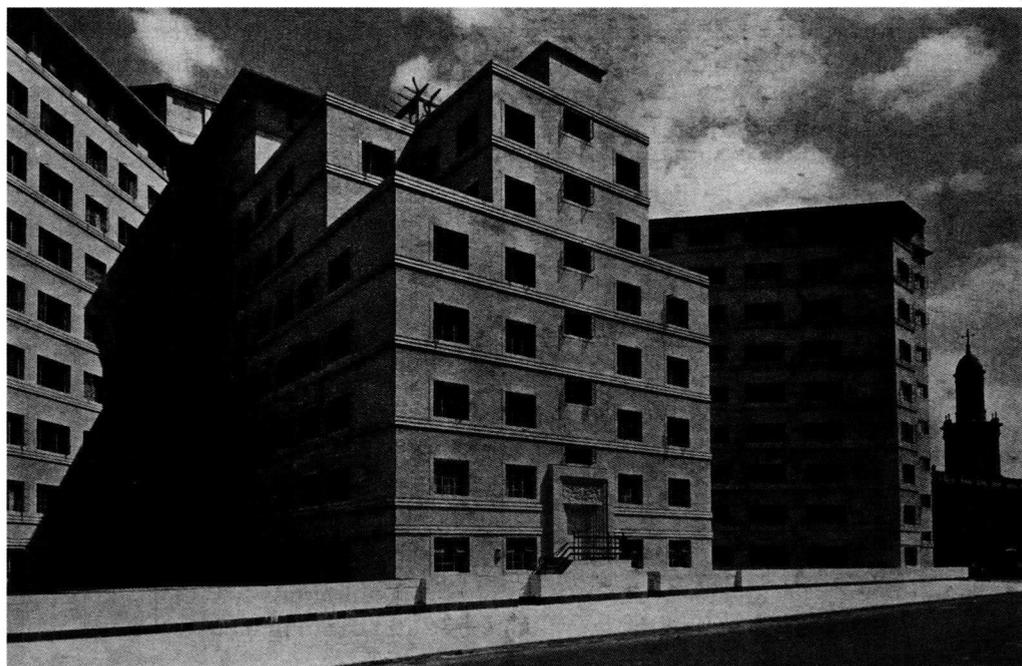


Fig. 7

White House, Regent's Park, London. The east elevation showing the middle/bisecting wing with setback upper floors. *Architect & Building News*, 1936.

capital, the number of blocks was extremely limited. That more of these were not built may have something to do with local opposition and economics. Suitable sites were not easy to come by. Development of the seafront locations for Embassy Court and Marine Court required the removal of rows of Georgian and Victorian houses. Such destruction rarely happens without protest. Also, the incumbent communities of pensioners and those living on ever dwindling dividends would naturally object to any development that might increase the value of land on the coast and cause their rates to be raised.⁵⁰

Beginning in 1934, Isokon Ltd had been looking to expand the Lawn Road Flats concept to other cities in the north of the country. Two potential sites were identified, one in Birmingham and one in Manchester. Despite a strict preference for low density housing under local town planning schemes, Isokon's new architect Walter Gropius went as far as drawing up site plans for a development of flats at the Birmingham site.⁵¹ It was to consist of just sixteen flats spread across three separate buildings. A porter would live onsite and the building of a swimming pool and squash court was proposed.⁵² Isokon also discussed bringing in a hotel restaurant manager to look at installing a communal kitchen.⁵³ However, the scheme met with local opposition, and when the developer ran into further planning difficulties it was decided to drop it.⁵⁴

At Manchester Isokon carried out extensive market research, consulting with estate agents, surveyors and other developers. While some noted that the fashion for flats was growing among younger residents of the city, on the whole the prospects were not good. W.H. Robinson & Co., a local firm of valuers and surveyors, advised Isokon that in their opinion Manchester had not yet become accustomed to flats, and the firm had its doubts that there would be serious demand for the type of accommodation which was being considered.⁵⁵ Isokon's research had found one block of flats in Manchester that offered a high quality restaurant service, which, while well-used on the day a company representative visited, they were told had struggled economically. They were almost universally advised against the provision of such service should they go ahead with plans to develop a site in the city.⁵⁶

Isokon's work in Manchester and Birmingham showed that the taste and demand for flats in general were not there, and certainly not the demand for the services of a large full-service block of the type then springing up in London. Over the next five years, there were few flat schemes outside London that the architectural journals deemed worthy of coverage, and none of those that did make it into print included the variety of services on offer in the capital. In Birmingham the private Viceroy Close (1938) development provided garages and a shared porter, but that was the extent of its communal amenities. The majority of flat building schemes in such cities as Liverpool and Manchester, for example the Kirkmanshulme Lane flats in Manchester, were for rehousing people displaced by slum clearance programmes.⁵⁷ The evidence suggests that after Isokon's failed attempts to bring its concept to the northern cities in the mid-1930s, no similar schemes were carried through.

PLANS

Providing full service and fostering an atmosphere of community within blocks of flats meant variations in the plan of the overall building and the individual residential units

within. Le Corbusier called such blocks a 'Vertical Garden City'.⁵⁸ Multi-function buildings required variety and complexity in planning. The need to include communal service areas disrupted the relative simplicity and uniformity across floors that were a characteristic of the plans for many standard blocks of flats. All flat designs had to meet the basic needs of future occupants, but as T. P. Bennett pointed out, tenants of different social levels had differing expectations of the levels of service available within their building and that anticipating that level of service should govern the type of plan to be adopted by the architect. An accurate appreciation of that point, he believed, would often determine the success or failure of a particular block.⁵⁹

Building designs

According to the *Architects' Journal* the aim of the architect in flat schemes should be to get the maximum number of flats onto the site that would provide adequate light and ventilation and keep a high ratio of lettable area to staircase and corridor space.⁶⁰ All space that was assigned to such communal services as restaurants, recreational facilities, snack bars and hairdressing salons was valuable, profitable space that could also be used for more flat units, which brought in additional income. Where the building was sited in a busy commercial area, (for example Mount Royal and Marine Court), the ground floor would be taken up with shops and the communal facilities moved up to the first floor, even further reducing the space for residential units. Rents, however, were based on flat size and the building's location. A comparison of rents asked for flats of comparable sizes in full-service buildings and those without these extra amenities indicates that no premium was charged in full-service buildings. Instead they were highly competitive.

Initially, developers got around the problem of space being sacrificed to amenities and services by maximising the number of units within a building - Mount Royal had 650, the White House had 758 and Russell Court, which opened in 1937 but received planning consent just before the new caps on single-room units came into force, had over 500 flatlets. After the LCC clamped down on this practice and as developers looked to provide a greater variety in the sizes of flats within a single building, the size of the overall building was increased. So Marine Court climbed to thirteen floors, while Ducane Court in Balham, south London and Dolphin Square, both of which opened in 1937, had enormous footprints, in the latter case occupying an entire city block.

Clever planning could also improve the profitability of full-service buildings. At the White House, architect Robert Atkinson used a St Andrews cross plan which he bisected with two additional wings, the ground floors of which housed the restaurant/dance floor on one side and the swimming pool and cocktail bar on the other (Figs 6 and 7). These wings were not the full height of the main wings of the cross plan so the additional flat units contained within compensated for space lost to communal services and administration on the ground floor, while the reduced height minimised the interference with the flats they faced in terms of light and privacy (Fig. 8). In a development the size of Dolphin Square the dining and recreational amenities required no sacrifice of flat space as they were accommodated in a self-contained building in the courtyard between the sixteen 'houses' of the development.

Providing efficient and satisfactory food services presented another challenge to architects. The placing of restaurant and food-service kitchens had to facilitate the quick conveyance of hot food, not just to the communal dining areas but also to individual flats. At Marsham Court in Westminster the food service provision also included the four private dining rooms for hire on the ground floor. Because of the long, thin site, these dining rooms had to be accommodated in opposite wings of the building, with the restaurant in the centre (Fig. 9). So architect T. P. Bennett had to install two kitchens with accompanying service areas to supply all of the dining areas and flats above. The meals could then be conveyed to flats via two sets of service lifts, cutting down on the waiting time and arriving at flats while still hot. Meanwhile, the lunchroom, maids' areas, a surgery, management offices and the head porter's flat occupied the rest of the ground floor of Marsham Court along with the two public foyers which provided access to the passenger lifts. In blocks where architects could not place flats on the ground floor, they needed to maximize the variety of services that were accommodated there.

The positioning of recreational and leisure facilities was not so crucial. Gymnasiums and squash courts could be accommodated in basement areas alongside, though clearly separated, from garage facilities. Internal parking space was also an important provision of modern blocks of flats, though it was fairly widespread and certainly not unique to full-service buildings. Some buildings, however, chose to make a focal point of their recreational services: at the White House, the swimming pool was deliberately sited in a central position with a viewing balcony and adjoining cocktail lounge. Taymount Grange, owing to its suburban location, had additional grounds where residents could exercise. In central London, however, where everything had to be located under one roof, some designs allocated space for upper floor communal balconies or roof gardens where tenants could exercise and interact.

Entrances and corridor plans were another important consideration in designing this type of building. Architects wanted to avoid long corridors with multiple front doors as they believed this setup would feel too much like a hotel. Many blocks of flats without services solved this by providing multiple entrances, with lifts or stairwells that gave access to the minimum number of flats. However, in a building with communal amenities, the residents needed access to these facilities without having to exit the building onto the street and come back in again. At the 360-unit Latymer Court, Gordon Jeeves' solution was to provide thirty passenger lifts, which served just two flats per floor, while the service lifts were placed cleverly and economically so as to access four flats each. At ground floor level communication between different parts of the block and the communal facilities was via a series of linked private internal courtyards. While the residents were still subject to weather conditions, they at least did not have to exit onto a main road to reach other parts of the development.

At Embassy Court in Brighton, fewer flats automatically meant a much lower ratio of residential units to each passenger lift. Built on a corner site, the L-shaped building had one foyer on the ground floor, which connected with three sets of passenger lifts. The lifts on the shorter wing were positioned just off the foyer, while the two other sets could be accessed only by passing through a long ground floor corridor past the guest rooms and maids' accommodation. However, this was compensated by the fact that each

bank of lifts provided access to just two or three flats per floor so there was maximum privacy on the higher levels. Outside galleries on the rear side of the building provided service access for housekeeping staff, tradesmen and delivery of meals (Fig. 5). This is another example of how architects continued to experiment with different designs that would provide tenants with privacy but also provide convenient access to services.

For most of the larger developments, however, longer corridors were virtually unavoidable. At the White House, the passenger lifts were grouped together in the entrance hall between the restaurant and the pool area. These delivered residents to a central lift hall on each floor where, depending on the floor number, from four to six corridors extended out into the building's various wings.

Flat designs

At individual flat level, the provision of full service and community amenities meant that flat designs varied from non-service buildings in three key ways: the dining, housekeeping and entertaining functions.

Dining

According to T.P. Bennett, in one and two-room flats, the amount of cooking done was much less and simpler in character than in larger units and carried out by the occupant, rather than by servants, so architects should plan smaller kitchen quarters that were easily accessible. Considerations such as soundproofing and preventing smells passing to other rooms through the placement of a pantry between the kitchen and a hall were simply not necessary.⁶¹ While this applied to all types of flats, in full-service buildings the need for kitchen provision was even less and because occupants could rely on the provision of prepared meals residents needed less storage as well as cooking and food preparation space in their kitchen units.

This minimalist 'kitchenette' form was pioneered at the Lawn Road Flats where as little square footage as possible was devoted to this function. At the White House, all flats, even the one-room type, had a separate kitchen, measuring just 5 ft 6 in. by 3 ft 6 in., which was accessed via the entrance hall.⁶² Even at Mount Royal the 'kitchenette' was a separate room with four walls, separated from the living room, though the scale was small, approximately one sixth of the size of the living room. The ultimate in economy, however, was the provision at the Russell Court flats, where the one-room units were fitted with a 'pantry cupboard' off the living room.⁶³ To compensate, the building plan included an extra large dining hall. Even in a building like Latymer Court that had some family-sized apartments of four to six rooms, the kitchens, as one reviewer pointed out in *Building*, were still small and seemingly inadequate.⁶⁴ Perhaps this was to encourage residents to make full use of the restaurant at Latymer Court and ensure its profitability.

Housekeeping

Many of the standard blocks at this time still included flats with dedicated servants' quarters or bedrooms that were intended specifically for live-in maids or valets. In some cases, self-contained servants' quarters, accessed directly from service lobbies on each floor, allowed complete segregation of staff beyond the kitchen/pantry section of the flat. In buildings with full service, architects could do away with this additional and

unnneeded flat space. Some buildings gave tenants the option of keeping their own maids in grouped accommodation for servants. In the case of Embassy Court this was on the ground floor, while in other buildings the maid's rooms were located in the basement or upper floors. For those who chose to make use of communal maids' services - in some cases this was included in the rent while at Dolphin Square, for example, there was an additional hourly charge - economising of living quarters also meant a financial saving for residents who were not paying for additional square footage.

Entertaining

As cooking and dining were less a concern for residents of full-service buildings, by far the most important room in the flat was the living room, which in many units was combined with the bedroom. Some flats featured a recess or alcove for a bed, but in the strict studio versions there was no distinction between living and sleeping space. Such arrangements were not conducive to the hosting of guests. So many of these buildings simply removed the hosting and entertaining function from the flats themselves. Lounges and ballrooms downstairs were designed as places where residents could host their guests. Of course those residents who wanted to entertain in their own flats could have meals catered by the restaurant kitchens, which caused as little mess and disturbance to the flat as possible. Even in the larger flats with one to three bedrooms, there was no specific provision for overnight guest space. So instead many buildings provided spare bedrooms where residents could arrange for their guests to sleep.

Flat design at full-service buildings was uniquely characterized by the taking of various functions out of the compact space of the flat and redistributing them to communal areas and among communal service providers. Other design concerns which applied to larger flats such as the grouping of rooms and careful planning to avoid large internal corridors, positioning of bathrooms away from living and dining rooms, provision of separate dressing rooms, and maximum segregation of maid's quarters simply did not apply to the small one- to three-room flats that made up the majority of units in full-service buildings.

CONCLUSIONS

During a five to six-year period in the 1930s, architects and flat developers produced a distinct type of blocks of flats that they perceived would meet a demand among urbanites in the south-east of England for a compact and convenient home where access to communal housekeeping, recreational and social amenities would simplify their lives and engender a community atmosphere. To make them profitable, developers had to maximise the number of units within each building, so that the rents from these units would compensate for space on the lower floors that was lost to communal areas. However, the provision of these communal areas allowed the size of the flats to be reduced, as functions that normally would have required space in each unit, such as cooking, dining, entertaining and accommodation of servants, were removed to those communal areas.

While the traditional service flats had offered accommodation to less settled persons, these buildings sought to offer the same or better services to a more settled section of society. A limited study of electoral roll data for three very different buildings within

this subset, Florin Court near the City, Marsham Court in the Westminster government district and Taymount Grange in the suburbs, shows across the three buildings that an average of 60% of tenants stayed more than one year. On an individual building level, the figure for Marsham Court was 50%, at Florin Court it was 60% while at Taymount Grange it was 90%.⁶⁵

While some developers, such as Isokon, were able to boast of financial success, this study has not uncovered other information about rates of occupancy and financial viability of other buildings. So with the exception of the Isokon example, there is no evidence to enable us to conclude that these special services and amenities successfully attracted a sufficient demand to keep these buildings profitable. As early as May 1935, architect T.P. Bennett had expressed the opinion that restaurants and sporting facilities such as squash courts were financially and ethically a failure. These types of buildings could not realistically provide sufficiently affordable and efficient catering staff – independent restaurants could offer better rates of pay and better quality staff could not be lured away from them – while the low percentage of tenants – he suggested as few as ten percent – using the swimming pools, reading rooms, lounges, libraries and so on, could not justify the cost of providing them.⁶⁶ Because architects were not making the best use of space in these blocks, Bennett argued, the developers and tenants were not getting good value for money. Yet more of these buildings went up over the next two years, with developers becoming even more ambitious, offering not just a broader range of flat sizes but also the services on offer. Dolphin Square is the prime example of this.

The full-service community buildings, however, were never widespread and accounted for less than ten percent of private flat units built in London in the 1930s. 1934-38 were the key years. The architect of Pullman Court, Frederick Gibberd, writing in 1938, noted that facilities such as squash courts, club rooms, snack bars and nurseries with trained staff were still popular with flat dwellers in London.⁶⁷ However, by the late 1930s these types of blocks were no longer being planned and no significant examples were completed after 1938. Perhaps other developers worried that the Dolphin Square complex, in development from 1935, would saturate the market, and instead they focused on designing less service-oriented luxury blocks. Also, new ideas were coming in, with buildings such as Berthold Lubetkin's Highpoint II, constructed in 1938, which was effectively an attempt to put house units into a high-rise block though with the benefit of communal heating and hot water supply, thus drawing people away from the full-service, communal approach and back towards the idea of individuality.

There may also be a clue to their limited spread in terms of time period and geography in the fact that the existing full-service buildings later proved to be financially unsustainable. At least two blocks, the Lawn Road Flats and Dolphin Square, were taken over by London borough councils in the post-war period – though both were returned to private ownership in more recent decades. While flat dwelling would spread nationwide in the post-war years, the full-service community building had had its day

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