

CORRINGHAM, 13-16 CRAVEN HILL GARDENS, BAYSWATER, CITY OF WESTMINSTER

Matter for Decision

Corringham is a block of flats and maisonettes designed in 1960-1 and built in 1962-4 to the designs of the architect and critic Kenneth Frampton, then working for the rising firm of Douglas Stephen and Partners.

In 1991 and 1992 English Heritage received letters from residents asking that the block be considered for listing because of its unique planning and architectural quality. It was accordingly considered for listing as part of our thematic study of private housing, and a recommendation to list made by the Historic Buildings and Areas Advisory Committee in April 1995 was endorsed by Commissioners in September that year.

The City of Westminster have now learned of plans to reglaze the block to save the cost of repainting the window frames. As the frames appear to be of aluminium, there seems to have been no good reason to have painted them in the first place. The building is generally in good order and the windows would benefit from cleaning and maintenance, rather than replacement. Nevertheless, English Heritage has been asked to bring Corringham forward from our list of nineteen recommendations for private housing, so that the freeholders and leaseholders can be properly advised and an acceptable repair and/or replacement programme agreed.

Recommendation

English Heritage recommends that Corringham, of 1962-4 by Kenneth Frampton of Douglas Stephen and Partners, be listed in grade II.

Background

Corringham is the best of a group of London flats by an interesting young architectural practice, who included several architects who went on to become theorists and writers as well as designers of buildings. It is of exceptional interest for the complex and adventurous planning of the 48 flats and maisonettes within the block, and for the boldness of the external envelope, rare in private flats.

Douglas Stephen and Partners were regarded in the early 1960s as a particularly promising young practice and their work was much published, notably in *Architectural Design* and in a book entitled *British Buildings 1960-1964*. A memoir of the firm by Robert Maxwell in 1980 shows that a number of architects connected with the firm went on to gain considerable reputations, including Stephen and Maxwell themselves, and Kenneth Frampton, the job architect for Corringham. Frampton was with the firm between 1959 and 1965. He moved to the United States in 1966 and has since become a respected historian and critic on modern architecture. He designed one housing scheme in Brooklyn; otherwise, Corringham is his only work. In 1991 he wrote in support of the building's listing, and supplied some interesting unpublished material.

The plan of the building is of interest because it is unusual, perhaps unique among private blocks of flats, in employing the then briefly fashionable 'scissors section'. This was a device used to give maisonettes an aspect in two directions, by accessing them from a central corridor placed only on every alternating floor. Previous architects, such as Norman Shaw, Berthold Lubetkin and Wells Coates, had since the late nineteenth century experimented with planning flats to give higher ceilings to the principal rooms, for example by placing three floors on one side of the building against two on the other. The scissors plan extended this idea a good deal further in terms of ingenuity and complexity by using a stepped section through the whole depth of the block to produce compact but well-lit and cross-ventilated maisonettes of roughly even height throughout. Most of the maisonettes have four half-levels and jump over or under the central corridor.

The scissors section was not devised by Frampton and Stephen, but by the London County Council's Architect's Department, where Margaret Dent (Mrs Douglas Stephen) had previously worked. It is not clear how closely she was involved with David Gregory-Jones's small team in the Housing Branch who first experimented with the idea in about 1955-6. One modest built example was in Tidey Street, Poplar, and it may have been used in the controversial Pepys Estate scheme of the early 1960s. A technical article on the scissors plan was published in the *Architects' Journal* for 28 February 1962, but by that time Corringham had been entirely designed, and building work just beginning. No other distinguished blocks of flats were built in this manner, and it remains the best and clearest example of the genre.

In style, the building poses contrasts. The body of the block, particularly the elevation to Leinster Gardens, is a slick curtain-walled composition, in a regular eight-by-six grid. The rear elevation, overlooking the central square of Craven Hill Gardens, is relieved by balconies, and a projection on the upper five floors that denotes the larger, two-bedroomed units. But, rather as Ernő Goldfinger was later to do, Frampton grouped the entrance, lifts, staircase, heating and waste-disposal shutters into a distinct unit that, while not entirely detached like that at Balfron Tower, was given a very different architectural treatment. The powerful, vertical emphasis of the lift shaft and boiler flue gave Corringham a reputation as one of the first major buildings in the sculptural, so-called 'brutalist' style to be erected in central London.

Robert Maxwell and other commentators on the practice's work usually hold close to Douglas Stephen's readily acknowledged love of the work of the first Italian rationalists. That influence is less clearly seen here than in their other work of the period. Stylistically, Frampton admits a debt to the work of Lyons, Israel and Ellis, a practice that fostered many of the leading architects of his generation and the birthplace of true brutalism in Britain, and to one of their former pupils, James Stirling. He says, however, that the mass of the building owes more to the work of Atelier 5 in Switzerland, contemporaries whose work is well respected for its logical proportions and humane planning. Few private blocks tried to be so radical.

Though it is radically different from the big stuccoed terraces all around it, Corringham now seems to fit in with its neighbours by virtue of its scale and discipline. It offers the opportunity to live in very light, bright surroundings in the heart of a historic area. Above all, Corringham is interesting because it took an idea devised for public housing

and showed that, with a little more careful design, and by using simple materials well, it could be adapted to a successful and luxurious private scheme in a sought-after location.

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