

About London and the Housing Issue

A Conversation with Kate Macintosh

Aurora Pizziolo



Kate Macintosh speaking at a RIBA Council meeting. London, 1979.
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In 1975, at the end of the *Trente Glorieuses* of the Welfare State (1945–1975),¹ the architect and sociologist Jane Darke carried out a series of interviews with six architects who had designed public estates in London.² Among them, Darke interviewed Alison Smithson and Kate Macintosh.³ Both Smithson and Macintosh worked briefly in the London County Council Architects Department—Smithson in 1949, and Macintosh in 1960. While Smithson was experienced in the public sector before establishing her practice with her partner Peter in 1950, Macintosh belongs to the group of British women architects whose careers developed primarily in public architecture offices, including Rosemary Stjernstedt and Magda Borowiecka.⁴ Macintosh worked in the London boroughs of Southwark (1965–1969) and Lambeth (1969–1972), and in the county councils of East Sussex (1974–1986) and Hampshire (1986–1995). She opened her firm in 1995, with her partner George Finch.⁵

Macintosh studied Architecture at the Edinburgh College of Art, and during her studies she included experiences as a trainee at Robert Matthew’s firm and the LCC Architects Department. After graduation in 1961, Macintosh applied for postgraduate scholarships outside the United Kingdom, and she received placement offers from Columbia University and Warsaw Polytechnic. Discouraged by the repressive policies of McCarthyism in the United States, and at the same time fascinated by the lively Polish cultural panorama of the end of the Fifties, she chose to attend the latter, granted by a British Council Scholarship.⁶ In the following years

01 Mark Swenarton, “Introduction,” in *Architecture and the Welfare State*, ed. Mark Swenarton, Tom Avermaete, and Dirk van den Heuvel (London: Routledge, 2014), 8.

02 Jane Darke played an active role in the Matrix Feminist Design Co-operative, as she’s among the authors of *Making Space. Women and the man-made environment* (London: Pluto Press, 1984).

03 Jane Darke, “The Primary Generator and the Design Process,” *Design Studies* 1, 1 (July 1979): 36–44.

04 Kate Jordan, “Unfair Dismissal: The Legacy of Women Architects Working for London Councils,” *The Architectural Review* 1449, 243 (March 2018): 34–41.

05 Kate Macintosh’s Curriculum Vitae, Kate Macintosh Archive.

06 Herresthal Kristina, and Ariane Wiegner, “Kate Macintosh im Gespräch mit Kristina Herresthal und Ariane Wiegner,” *Arch+* 246, (2022): 3.

she worked at architectural offices in the Scandinavian capitals: Stockholm, Copenhagen, and Helsinki.⁷

Macintosh moved to London in 1964, during the transition of the municipal government from the London County Council to the Greater London Council. Firstly, Macintosh worked in the office of Denys Lasdun, as the most junior member of the National Theatre design team. However, a few months later she decided to apply to the public architecture offices of the newly empowered London boroughs of Camden, Lambeth, and Southwark, and she chose to work for the latter.

Macintosh sought to gain site experience, but having been brought up in a family with a socialist background, she achieved above all the realization of her vocation for architecture as a social and political commitment, designing the Dawson's Heights public housing scheme. Dawson's Heights was completed in 1972, although in 1969 Macintosh had already moved to work in the London Borough of Lambeth, and she had begun designing 77 sheltered flats for the elderly in Leigham Court Road.

After almost fifty years since the conversation with Darke, in speaking again with Kate Macintosh about the architectural generators that drove the design of Dawson's Heights, one must consider that the project is the first important realization of her political commitment to improve people's daily lives. This is why her voice is widely listened to today on issues like good practices, problems, and possible solutions to the housing issue.⁸

In this interview, Kate Macintosh retraces the roots of her political attitude and the architectural genesis of her housing projects, especially Dawson's Heights. She draws a personal portrait of the London architectural context during the shift from LCC to GLC and talks about the contemporary housing situation from her activist point of view.

Interviewers: Aurora Pizziolo (AP).

Interviewees: Kate Macintosh (KM).

AP: Where did your vocation for practicing architecture as a political activity come from?

KM: I was fortunate to have had a father who was quite ahead of his time. Though my grandfather had been an architect, my father was an engineer, and he could see no reason why architecture was not an equally suitable career for women as for men. His younger brother, who took over the grandfather's practice, had four daughters. Differently from my father, he never encouraged them to fulfill their potential. I'm sure that at least one of them would have been a very good architect. At the time I joined the profession, women architects were only about four percent of the total.

After my third year of university, I was fortunate also to have spent a year out during my studies working in the office of Robert Matthew, who had been the Chief Architect in the London County Council, the largest architects department office in the whole world.⁹ I found out that he held the opinion that architecture was equally a suitable career for women as for men, and he had demonstrated it by promoting Rosemary Stjernstedt as the first woman to reach a management grade in the LCC.

As to social commitments, my father and mother were both socialists. After the Second World War, my father got a job with a government concern called the "Scottish Special Housing Association," and we moved to Edinburgh. It was set up to solve the very poor housing conditions in Scotland, covering the entirety of the geographic spread of the country, right up to the islands in the north and down to the borders in the south. He was truly passionate about raising the living standards of people. For instance,

07 Kate Macintosh's Curriculum Vitae, Kate Macintosh Archive

08 For example, together with Neave Brown, George Finch, and others, in 2010 Macintosh was interviewed during the filming of "Utopia London," which focuses on many examples of public architecture built in London just after the Second World War and the following decades, including Dawson's Heights. Among the many occasions in which researchers spoke publicly with her, in November 2020 Macintosh discussed the book *Red Metropolis. Socialism and the government of London* (London: Repeater Books, 2020) with author Owen Hatherley.

09 Robert Hogg Matthew (1906–1975) was the Chief Architect and Planning Officer at the London County Council from 1946 to 1953.

Glasgow at that time had the worst housing conditions in Europe, with all sorts of consequent social and health problems.

AP: So, since your youth and the very beginning of your career, you've known people who were committed to architecture as a social art. I wonder if, after studying in Edinburgh and gaining educational and work experience in Poland, Finland, Norway, and Denmark, your move to London sharpened your political vocation in architecture. If so, what was the London that you knew like?

KM: Actually, we should go back to the period that I spent in London at the end of the fourth year of university. This happened during a time when almost half of the profession in the UK worked in the public sector. I worked for a few weeks in the London County Council Architects Department, which at that time was building at a phenomenal rate: not only housing, but also schools, fire stations, and the full range of public services. I was working in the Housing Department. In the main, the staff there was highly politicized. The architects weren't just concerned about the speed and output of projects, but also about the quality of the architecture as an objective. They were not focused, for instance, only on making sure everybody had a bathroom, or on satisfying the physical needs of the body, but also on raising people's aspirations.

It was a good experience also because there were quite a few women in that department, and a lot of them were Polish. When I finished university in 1961, I chose to go to Scandinavia, where women were much more numerous in the profession of architecture than they were in the UK. It would be a relief from constantly having to explain why I should do this peculiar thing of becoming a woman architect—it was just the norm. You could forget about it!

I was also very inclined to admire architecture which had a more organic approach and was more concerned with landscape, sensitive to the nature of the materials that were being used, and concerned about how people would feel if the building was warm, approachable, and humane.

My greatest admiration was for Finnish architecture, and particularly, of course, for Alvar Aalto, who was beginning to be published in the UK. There was one single book in the School of Architecture Library in Edinburgh on Alvar Aalto, and I immediately felt empathy for that.

AP: Do you think that the architecture designed by Alvar Aalto influenced your entire oeuvre?

KM: Yes, I do. I certainly hope I'm a worthy follower of his philosophy. He didn't write a lot, so it is necessary to look at the buildings to study and understand his architecture.

AP: After your experience in Scandinavia, you returned to the UK, and you moved to London. You applied to work in a few practices, among them those of James Stirling and of Denys Lasdun.¹⁰ Between 1964 and 1965 you worked in the latter, on the project team of the National Theatre. I'd like to ask you what it was like to work in his practice.

KM: It was a sort of culture shock coming from Scandinavia. There, all the officers were running in a very open and democratic way, and everybody would just gather around for coffee. If somebody wanted to ask something to the chief, it was possible in that daily gathering.

Denys Lasdun started his career within Tecton, the practice founded by Berthold Lubetkin. This practice had almost single-handedly introduced modern architecture into Britain. On many occasions, he demonstrated a very generous and compassionate streak, but he was a difficult

person to work with or for, especially for someone a bit rebellious like me. He was very obsessive and a bit paranoid about controlling the publicity that came out from the office. He didn't want people wandering around and finding out what other teams were doing. As my team, the one focused on the National Theatre, was working in the basement, one day I was going up to try to find out what the team that had been working on East Anglia University was doing. I met him on the stairs, and he said, "Where are you going?" I tried to explain my wish to find out what other teams were working on, but he replied, "No, no, no, get down!"

At the same time, he had a masterly command of the client. Though I didn't participate in the high-level meetings as I was the most junior member of the team, I learned that he kept an enormously detailed record of all the meetings, writing who said what. He had it tabulated, so he could refer to the name, the date, and the subject. He was able to refer to all these notes and say, "Oh, but on such and such a day, you said so and so, and this was agreed, and this is now the basis of the design. So, this is simply the product of what you've all agreed."



Dawson's Heights, the south ziggurat as seen from the central open space.
London. Photo by the author, August 2024.

The complex, designed and built between 1965 and 1972, consists of two residential buildings which host 296 dwellings. They embrace a wide-gardened space and slope down into steps at their edges. Open paths run every third floor to accommodate access to every dwelling.

AP: As you mentioned on several occasions, after the experience at the Lasdun's firm, you decided to move into the public sector. You applied to the London boroughs of Camden, Lambeth, and Southwark, beginning at the latter in 1965. About your housing project for Dawson's Hill: what do you remember as significant concerning the brief? Who was to be the user-client?

KM: In 1964, the London County Council was abolished and succeeded by the Greater London Council. LCC was obliged to hand over its housing portfolio to the boroughs, which became responsible for the housing sector. All these housing authorities had a list of applicants—people who were unsatisfactorily housed—and they organized a sort of point system for eligibility. Firstly, they would be trying to house the most vulnerable, the neediest. As to whom it was meant for, I didn't know in any detail who was going to occupy the housing I was designing. All I had was the schedule of accommodation, which was the number of bedrooms in each dwelling.

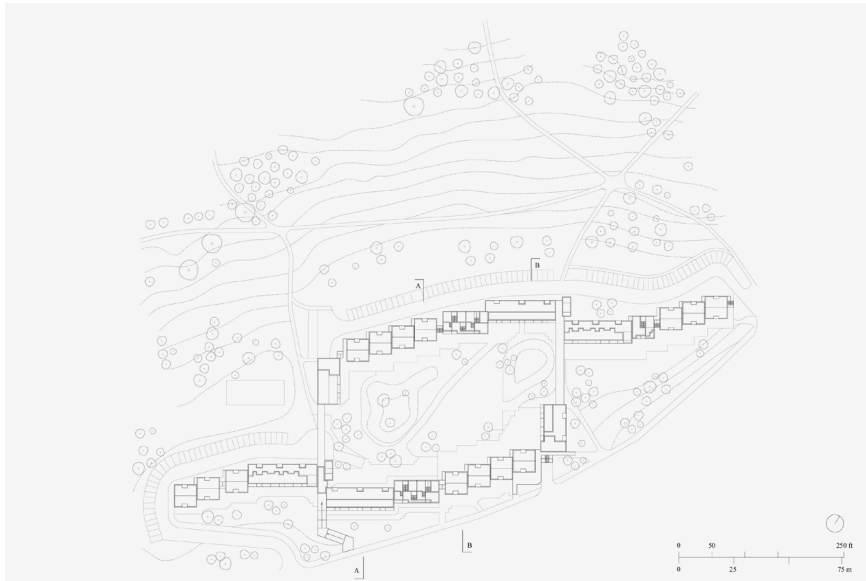
There had already been published a revised guide on housing standard called the Parker Morris Report, *Homes for Today and Tomorrow*.¹¹ These standards don't stipulate room sizes, but they indicate what activities need to be accommodated in those rooms, and the amount of storage that is required both within and outside the dwelling. This document was a great liberation for architects because previously LCC had type plans, set in stone, ready to be played around with like a set of dominoes and arranged in different ways. Suddenly, public architects could design the dwelling itself and the way one room related to another.

In the case of Dawson's Heights, the main design generators were the fabulous views that people could get from the height of the hill, both to the north and south. To the north, you could see the cranes of the Port of London—the ships were still coming in at that time—and Hampstead Heath. To the south, you could see the Weald of Sussex and the North Downs. This was a very rare experience in South London, as it was mainly a great mesh of low suburban housing. So, I wanted to give the maximum number of dwellings the enjoyment of these views. Two-thirds of them have a view in both directions, and the remaining third has a view in at least one direction.

As the ground conditions were extremely unstable, being London clay, the foundations were quite expensive, driven piles to a very great depth, and that seemed to argue for a concentration on a small footprint for the building. However, the two ziggurats are staggered, so each one looks past the tail point of the other, and they don't seem to be confronting each other. I like to think they're like partners holding hands across a dance about turn.

Besides, I was determined to suppress the dominance of the car. The parking and the access are tucked away on the north side and half a level down from the lowest habitable floor. The two ziggurats enclose and lock around a car-free space, which is well-overlooked by the dwellings. Consequently, families can allow their children to go out and play with confidence, and no harm can come to them. Children can also shout for help if anything is wrong. That seems to have worked out. While some local authority estates, built around the same time, were regarded as ghettos as the maintenance began to fall and bad things tended to happen, in the case of Dawson's Heights children of families from the surrounding pre-existing suburbia went inside it to play. Nowadays, the inhabitants lay on events during the summer, two of which at least I've attended—with a bouncy castle, music, and all sorts of fun things going on. The surrounding community can come and join in.

11 *Homes for Today and Tomorrow*, known also as the Parker Morris Report, is a government document published in 1961 by the Ministry of Housing and Local Government of the United Kingdom. The document doesn't contain standardized schemes ready to be applied, but it is divided into four thematic chapters, which contain reflections on a society in full change and the consequent indications for architects. See Savia Palate, "Homes for Today and Tomorrow: Britain's Parker Morris Standards and the West Ham Experimental Scheme," *Architecture and Culture* 3, 10 (September 2022).



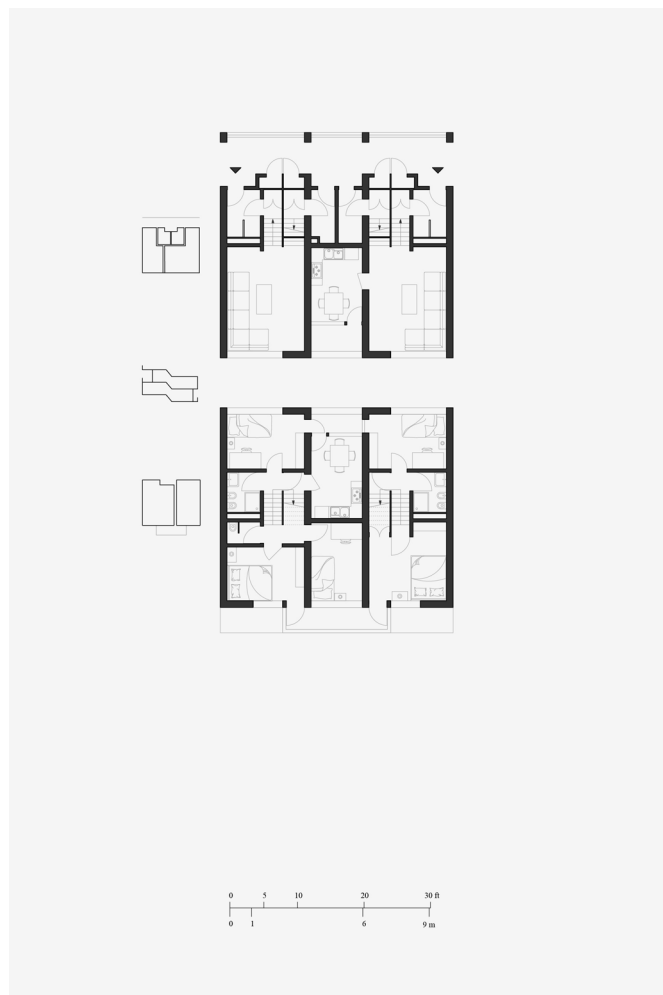
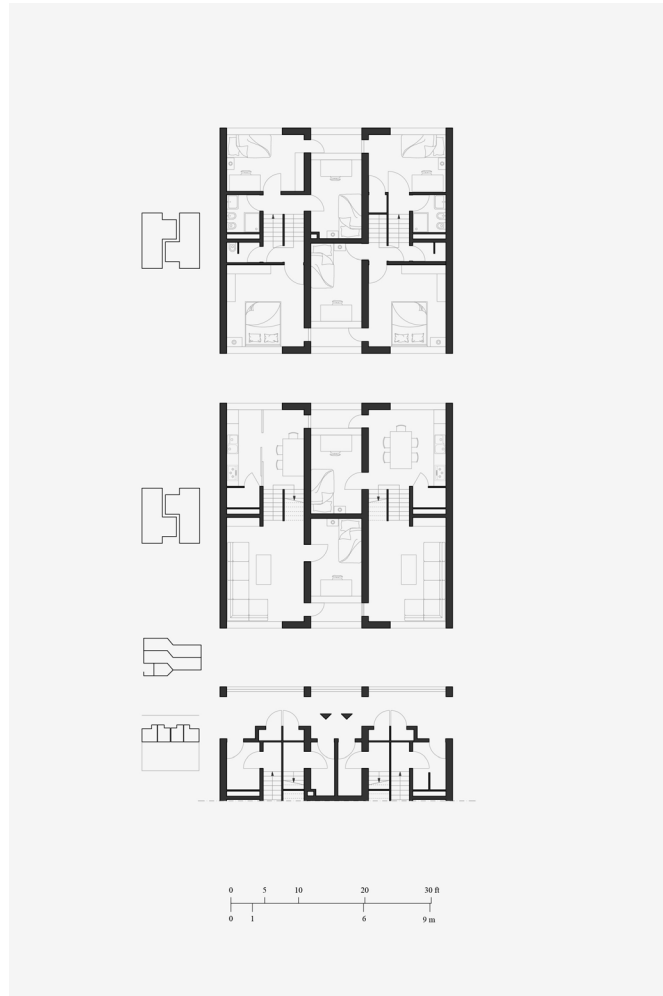
Plan of the ziggurats in its context.

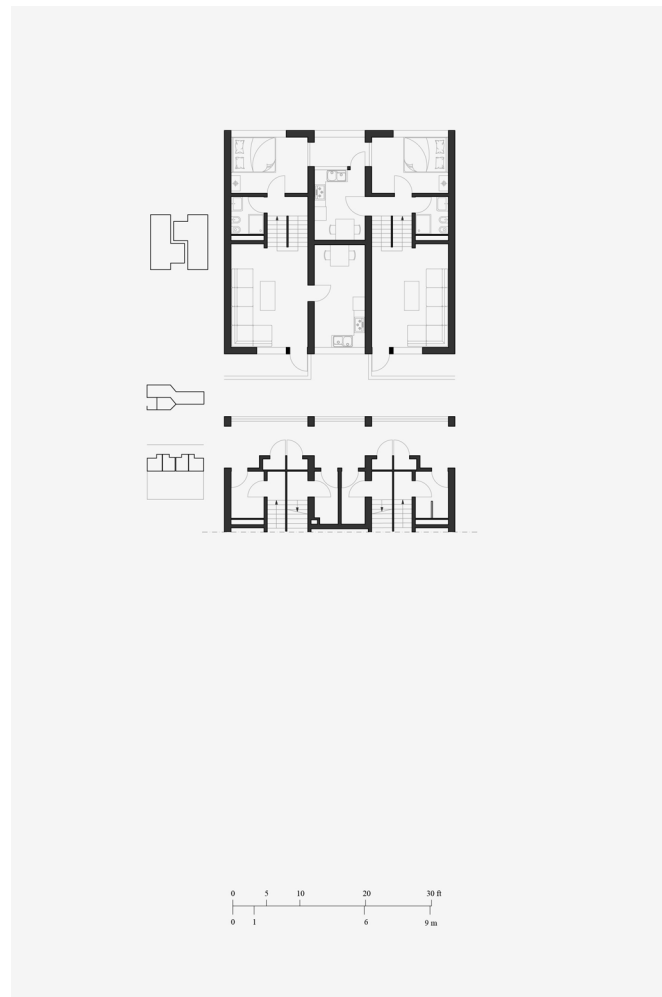
Drawn by the author, adapted from Richard Padovan, "Building Study. Housing in Southwark." *The Architects' Journal* 17, 157 (April 25, 1973): 975–95.

AP: I experienced what you describe. The last time I visited Dawson's Heights was during this summer. It was a Sunday afternoon and there were lots of kids playing all together in the central space, between the ziggurats. But let me go back to the influence of the Parker Morris Report. The first chapter of the document introduces the necessity of new standards as, since the end of the war, the country underwent a social and economic revolution, and at the beginning of the sixties the pattern of living was still changing fast. During the preliminary concept of Dawson's Heights, were you aware that you were designing for a cultural revolution in full swing?

KM: When I returned from Scandinavia, London was called "Swinging London." People I met were convinced the class barriers were being broken down, and social mobility was high. As regards education, after the eleven-plus exam, children had to go to different schools. The bright ones would go to the grammar school, and the ones that were more inclined to practical skills would go to the secondary modern school. However, the secondary modern was regarded as second class—it didn't get the same funding or the same quality of teaching. So, in part because of agitation from the middle classes, comprehensive education was introduced.

There was a sense of optimism that things were improving, all those rigid divisions were disappearing, and everybody could enjoy the best fruits civilization was producing, though racism was still very strong. However, before Margaret Thatcher took over, we were not particularly aware of the social changes taking place. The sixties and seventies were an exciting time, and there were certainly a lot of changes going on. 1973 was the year of the greatest equality of income and opportunity Britain has ever achieved. After Thatcher's election in 1979, inequality has steadily increased with all its attendant ills of resentment and conflict; sadly, that includes the Blair years.





Plans of the four-bedroom dwellings. Drawn by the author, adapted from Richard Padovan, "Building Study. Housing in Southwark." *The Architects' Journal* 17, 157 (April 25, 1973): 975–95.

The Dawson's Heights complex comprises a total of 296 dwellings, distributed as 112 one-bedroom, 75 two-bedrooms, 81 three-bedrooms, and 28 four-bedroom units. The maisonettes are designed to fit together in a complex split-level system. For the four-bedroom and one-bedroom dwellings, the staircase leads up from the entrance, while for the others, the staircase leads down from the entrance. Almost every room is developed independently on its level and is separated from the other rooms by a staircase block or a load-bearing wall.

AP: And in this context, designing the different typologies that comprise Dawson's Heights, how did you envision the daily life of the different families who were meant to be accommodated in these dwellings?

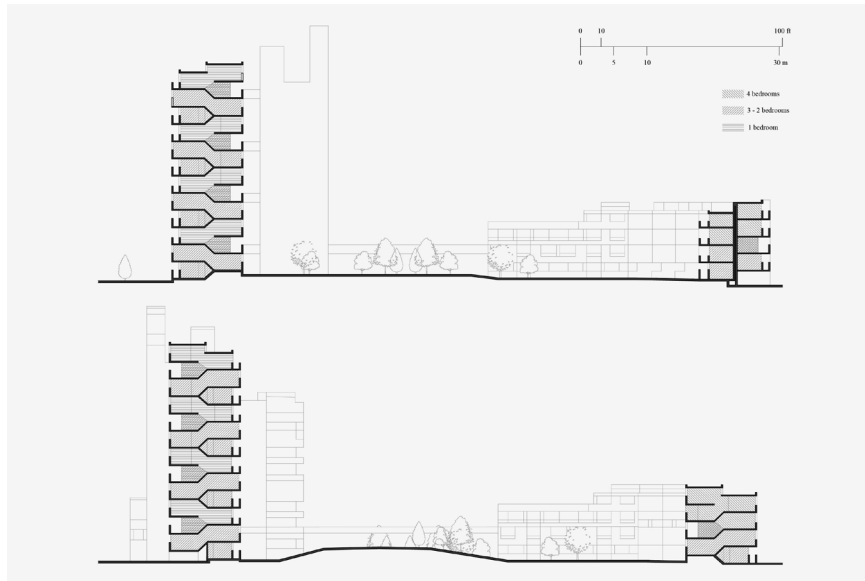
KM: Back in the early post-war era, Aneurin Bevan, who had come from a Welsh mining family, was the Minister for Housing and Health. Bevan said what he wanted to achieve was like the Welsh village, where people would get the doctor, the vicar, the butcher, and the builder all living in the same street, where it wasn't possible to tell from the outside the type of occupation of the inhabitants. At that time, housing and health were regarded as completely indivisible, and people could not achieve better health unless they had better housing.

A lot of architects shared that type of attitude. I was aiming to get a natural mix of family size by adjacency. My objective was that if I could get large families, smaller families, couples, and single people coming off the same access ways, they would get to know each other, and they would complement each other as to their needs and capacities.

I don't know for sure whether that has worked out. Maintaining communication with some people on the estate, what I can say is that of course now a third of the maisonettes are held under leasehold, and the other

two-thirds remain in the control of the housing association, Southern Housing Group, which took over many years ago. So, two-thirds are tenants and pay rent, but there doesn't seem to be a division between these two groups, which harmoniously mix.

Another of my objectives in the design of Dawson's Heights was to express architecturally the individual dwellings within the total complex, so that there's a balance between a sense of belonging to this larger community, but still the identity of the individual family. As regards the entrances, the accessways occur on every third floor, both to intensify their use, so people are more likely to meet, and to reduce the number of stops for the lifts and make them work more efficiently.



Above, section A. Below, section B. Drawn by the author, adapted from Richard Padovan, "Building Study. Housing in Southwark."

The Architects' Journal 17, 157 (April 25, 1973): 975-95.

The two schemes aim to show how the system works and how the different dwellings fit together, sharing an access gallery every three levels. It allows residents to go up or to go down into the rooms of their dwelling.

AP: Did you have in mind any other housing project, maybe from the past, when you developed these housing concepts?

KM: One of the two schemes that I admired and imitated was Park Hill in Sheffield, which has recently been the center feature for the musical "Standing at the Sky Edge." I think it's the only example of a building history being the central character in a dramatic performance. It follows the different types of occupations that have taken place. The second scheme that I admired was Darbourne & Darke's Lillington Gardens in Westminster, which is very richly landscaped and very heavily articulated visually.

AP: Did you visit any other emblematic work or worksite during these last years of the Trente Glorieuses of the Welfare State of London and Britain? For instance, Robin Hood Gardens or the Brunswick Center come to mind.

KM: I was living very close to the Brunswick Centre in a little rented flat at the time I designed Dawson's Heights. If I'd stayed there, I might have been eligible to get a flat in the Brunswick Centre. I admired the work of Patrick Hodgkinson a lot. I went to a lecture he gave to the local community, explaining his ideas, and I was completely on board with them.

In that period, also, Robin Hood Gardens were being built. I think it was such a problematic site, and it really should never have been used for

housing at all. At the same time, certain aspects of it were very good, like the very wide access ways. However, I think that the idea that the traffic noise is somehow deflected by having these fins on the outside is a bit too optimistic. Moreover, for anyone passing that site, it has a very prison-like alienating feel; there's no way they could integrate it or give any relationship to the previous urban grain.

I just participated in a conference at the 20th Century Society, where I was co-presenting with Jane Darke.¹² At the end of the 1970s, she published a detailed study of six different housing schemes in London—one of which is Dawson's Heights, another which is Robin Hood Gardens.¹³ Among these six schemes, the one that got the lowest rating from tenants was Robin Hood Gardens. Darke was looking at what she called the design generators and what were the major ideas that the architects regarded as the most important in coming up with a proposal. Her work was only published when the budget for local authority housing was shrunk to zero. So, it didn't get a lot of attention at that time.



Left: Dawson's Heights: the north ziggurat as seen from the central open space
Right: the north ziggurat as viewed from an access gallery of the south ziggurat.
Photos by the author, London, August 2024.

AP: Did you experience any obstacles during the implementation of the Dawson's Heights project or its design?

KM: Not really. Firstly, I prepared a presentation for the planning committee. Though I think that the brochure was sparse and amateurish, with the cover composed of photos of my concept model, I can't remember anyone asking a single question. Probably the reason was that it was regarded as something rather unimportant: while Dawson's Heights was supposed to provide just under 300 dwellings, more enormous schemes were being produced at that time.

In the case of the sheltered housing scheme in Leigham Court Road, in Lambeth, I didn't present to a committee, but the graphic section produced an excellent and polished brochure. I never heard that there was any issue in getting the approval for the scheme. The problems came much later, because many housing schemes, which were carefully designed under the supervision of Ted Hollamby's directorship, are now on a list for

¹² "Social Housing in Britain: a courageous project interrupted and abandoned," *British Housing Crisis Lecture Series 2* (The Gallery, 70 Cowcross Street, London, October 31, 2024).

¹³ Darke, "The Primary Generator and the Design Process."

demolition.¹⁴ But even now, they could be still rescued and so, hopefully, be redeemed.



Leigham Court Road, part of a block. London

Image from Kate Macintosh Archive.

Each block accommodates four two-person flats at ground level, and one two-person flat and two one-person flats at the first-floor level.

AP: As a female architect in a predominantly male working context, did you have any kind of difficulties to overcome in realizing a large-scale project like Dawson's Heights?

KM: Not particularly, but in a long career I've experienced some sort of sexism. It largely came from rather insecure fellow professionals, not from contractors at all. In the beginning, men expected women putting their foot on site to show impracticality and ignorance. So being a woman on site carried a sort of surprise bonus: if she passed that test, then they became very considerate.

AP: In a recent article written for The Architectural Review, Kate Jordan analyzes your work and role as an architect for the London public sector, together with Rosemary Stjernstedt and Magda Borowieka.¹⁵ In the January 1967 issue, both Dawson's Heights and Stjernstedt's scheme for Central Hill Estate are presented.¹⁶ Borowieka has Polish origins, while during the Second World War Stjernstedt moved to Sweden, as you did just over twenty years later. Moreover, after the dissolution of the LCC, they both worked for the Lambeth Borough Council, as did you from 1969. How did you meet them?

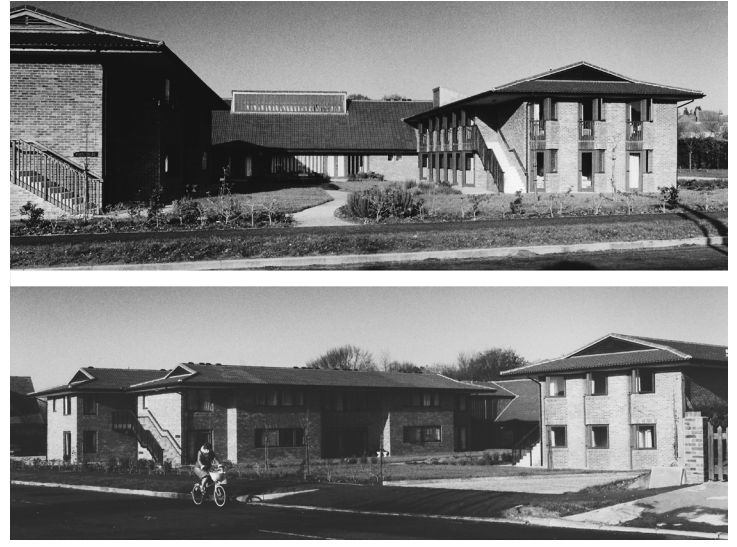
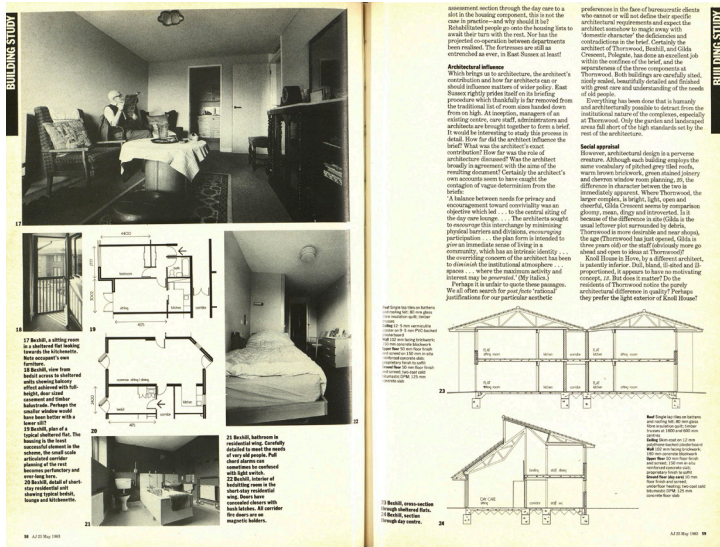
KM: Regarding meeting Rose Stjernstedt, she had already left Lambeth to work at the Department of Environment in Whitehall when I joined. I met her only much later when I was chair of the Women Architects' Group

14 After having worked as a senior architect at the Architects Department of the LCC from 1949 to 1962, at the beginning of 1963 Edward Hollamby became Lambeth's first borough architect. After the passage from the LCC to the GLC, he became responsible for housing of the borough, and later head of architecture and planning. See Geraint Franklin, Elaine Harwood, *Housing in Lambeth 1965–80 and Its National Context: A Thematic Study* (Portsmouth: English Heritage, 2014), 3–5.

15 Jordan, "Unfair Dismissal."

16 "Housing," *The Architectural Review* 839, 141 (January 1967): 23.

at the RIBA.¹⁷ Regarding Magda Borowieka, I knew her as she came to see me when I was still working in Southwark. She was designing the Barrier Block on Cold Harbour Lane, near Brixton.



Left: Thornwood Elderly Care, in Bexhill-on-Sea. From Louis Hellman, “Building Study: Age Old Problems, Homes for Elderly People,” *The Architects’ Journal* 21, 177 (May 25, 1983): 58–59. Right: Thornwood Elderly Care, seen from Turkey Road, Bexhill-on-Sea. Images from Kate Macintosh Archive.

AP: A few moments ago, you cited your experience in designing the complex of Leigham Court Road—nowadays known also as Macintosh Court—which you designed as you entered the architects’ team of the London Borough of Lambeth in 1969. Could you talk about your experience in designing homes for the elderly?

KM: Among the homes for old people, the last one I designed is the Thornwood Elderly Care, in Bexhill-on-Sea.¹⁸ The client committee was the social service department, and they intended that it was going to set a new standard for the accommodation for the elderly. On the same site, they had a small old persons’ care home and a larger sheltered housing scheme. Between the two, linking them, there was a daycare center, where activities could take place and the residents from both sites could join in these activities. Plus, they could invite people from the surrounding community, so it would be reaching out to the population at large.

However, the structure suffered some of the worst economic hits since its completion and the years of economic austerity, during which local and county authorities have been encouraged and indeed forced to sell off their assets to avoid bankruptcy. So, from what I’ve seen on the web, the sheltered housing has been sold off and probably the care home, too, because nowadays running care homes privately allows investment companies to make a profit. And goodness knows what happened to the daycare! I’m sure this fragmentation is a disaster. They also had an on-site fully functional kitchen so that they could serve meals for the people in the sheltered housing and the daycare; they had communal dining for the ones who were in the residential home. Interlinking and connecting have been broken down and fragmented.

17 Regarding her commitment within the RIBA, Kate Macintosh was the first chairperson of the Women Architects Group. She was elected to the RIBA Council in 1972. She chaired the RIBA Conference Working Group for the 1974 Conference in Durham on Cities and Transport. She was a Vice President for Public Affairs in 1996. Kate Macintosh’s Curriculum Vitae, Kate Macintosh Archive.

18 Louis Hellman, “Building Study: Age Old Problems, Homes for Elderly People,” *The Architects’ Journal* 21, 177 (May 25, 1983): 51–62.



Guests meeting at the daycare of Thornwood Elderly Care. Bexhill-on-Sea.
Image from Kate Macintosh Archive.

AP: I'd like to go back to our conversation asking if you believe that architecture is still political. How do you imagine the future of the profession and the future of domestic space?

KM: There are architectural practices engaged in the improvement of housing conditions of people, but the blind spot comes with the politicians. It seems that the government doesn't appreciate the value of architects and the added value that the profession has to offer. Of course, they're being bombarded with contributions to their funding by the ten big-volume house-builders, who regard architects as only an obstacle to maximizing their profit, because the professionals are there to uphold standards and make sure that the future inhabitants get the best deal possible. How do we get any sort of glimmer of light into this darkness? We need the institution of the RIBA to run campaigns and try to influence the government. I think that every architect in the country should write to their member of Parliament and set out the reasons why architects offer good investment in ensuring quality control.

Firstly, there's not enough money going in the direction of retrofit and upgrading. This does not fit the template which the volume house builders seek, which is a cleared site. To activate retrofit at scale we need to revive the medium-sized local contractor, who takes pride in their work. They've largely been gobbled up by these bandits, sharks, pirates!

Moreover, as I repeat on many different occasions, it is urgent to scrub the right to buy — as it happened in Scotland in 2015 and just a little bit later in Wales. Otherwise, it's never going to break this cycle that the local authority struggles in every way to provide social housing to a good standard, only to have it handed over with subsidy from the public purse to the occupant, who then within a few years will sell it on to a buy-to-let landlord. Over fifty percent of the land that was in public ownership when Thatcher came to power has now been privatized.

So, keeping the right to buy, not only the property is lost, but also the land—an irreplaceable finite resource—and the endeavor that local administrators, architects, and all the other professionals involved in social housing expended in creating what should be a public asset.

AP: Would you like to share a memory about the conversations you had on these topics, or about your career in general, together with your partner, the architect George Finch?

KM: Before I met George in person, I had seen his sketch for Lambeth Towers on the cover of the RIBA Journal.¹⁹ I immediately thought, “There’s an architect who thinks very much along the lines that I think. I’d like to meet this person.” A few months later I was invited to a party with a friend who was studying at the Central School of Art. He said to me, “You must come and meet this architect. He’s a ‘swinging’ group leader. He’s up with the latest ideas.” However, I thought, “I know what group leaders are like: they’re boring people. They never touch the drawing board at all.” So, I was really surprised to find that he was indeed a “swinging” group leader.

Another characteristic that impressed me was that he was the one cooking and serving spaghetti to the guests. Anyway, we exchanged telephone numbers and a little bit later I was trying to find a job for another friend. So, I phoned him and asked if he could give this guy an interview. He said, “What are you up to now?” And I said, “I’ve got this rather interesting housing scheme to do, but the brief includes the provision of an adventure playground”—this was the latest idea about children’s play at that time. He said, “We’ve got a seminar coming on that very subject. Why don’t you come along?” It’s strange and wonderful that our very last project together was for an adventure playground. The theme was the beginning of the relationship, and it was also there at the conclusion of our careers.

AUTHOR(s)

Kate Macintosh (Rotherham, 1937) is an architect and activist based in Winchester. After graduating from Edinburgh College of Art, she worked as an architect and designer mainly in the public sector, for the London boroughs of Southwark and Lambeth, and for the counties of East Sussex and Hampshire. In 1995, she established her own architectural practice with her partner, architect George Finch (London, 1930–Winchester, 2013). In 2021, Macintosh was awarded the Jane Drew Prize for Architecture.

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