

THE GREENE KING OF FINSBURY and HIS SUCCESSORS

James Dunnett, June 2022

City Road has of late been transformed, as any Islingtonian will know. Hi-rises have appeared on both sides of it, such as the 36-storey twin residential towers by Foster & Partners for Berkeley Homes on the south side ('250 City Road') and the 'Canaletto Tower' by UNstudio on the north, with its curious bulging forms, and a varied tangle of hi-rises further east on the north side in Hackney that rise sheer from the pavement line. The prospect exists of a similar development on the present Moorfields Hospital site on the south side near Old Street In Islington, when the hospital moves to Camden. Though Islington's planners, unlike Hackney's, may disapprove, they were over-ruled by Boris Johnson as Mayor of London in respect of the Berkeley Homes towers, and the precedent is set. Politically the pressure will be on to allow the maximum development value on the hospital site for the financial benefit of the NHS.



Peregrine House, Hall St, CL Franck

The precedent for high-rise development on this straight and quite broad street had, however, been set nearly sixty years earlier by Finsbury Metropolitan Borough Council, which built 26-storey Peregrine House on the south side, to the designs of Carl Ludwig Franck (1904-1985), about whom I wrote in *Islington News*, Autumn 2021. But there was a big difference. Franck, who might be dubbed 'the Greene King of Finsbury' and who had worked for Lubetkin and Tecton, was heir to the Modern Movement ideals of the Green City. So, Peregrine House does not rise from the pavement line but is set well back in a substantial green space and at an angle to City Road – an angle seemingly dictated by a desire of Franck's to align it with his 21-storey Turnpike House in Goswell Road where it backs onto the fine King Square gardens, recognizing that they would be seen together. His nearby 17-storey Rahere and Kestrel Houses are also aligned with those two, making a composition of four across space. Less than 12% of the site area of Peregrine House is built over whereas over 50% of the site area is built over in the case of the Berkeley Homes' much denser City Road development, despite the claims on the sales website that it is a 'soft green oasis in the heart of the city'.

Originating perhaps exactly one hundred years ago this year with the first showing of Le Corbusier's drawings for a *Contemporary City for Three Million* in 1922, the Modern Movement believed, in reaction to the dark slums of the nineteenth century, that every home had a right (in his words) to 'Light, Space, Greenery' – as a means to physical and mental well-being. It was willing in varying degrees to build taller in order to furnish the home with those attributes – not, primarily, in order to make more intensive use of sites, indeed often making less intensive use of them. Building taller freed up ground surface, for any given density. How best to use and look after that surface was not always fully addressed and neglect was the result, leading gradually to a rejection of the concept.

What has happened in this century, with the apparent returning acceptability of taller buildings, is that those ideals have not returned with them, and so the result is that we are getting the tall buildings but not the open space. This also reflects the persisting mistrust, even dislike, of such space, which is having another consequence: even where it survives from the earlier enthusiasm it is open to seizure by Councils and others under pressure to build ever more housing without the funds to acquire new sites for it. They are aided by the classification of existing housing estates as 'brownfield land' and therefore especially a target for such action.

This is happening in Boroughs all over London, but Southwark has an especially active programme in this field with the controversial demolition of postwar estates such as the Heygate and the Aylesbury and their rebuilding at much higher densities. The same is also happening on Islington's borders with Hackney's Woodberry Down Estate. Islington largely refurbished its Six Acres Estate which was built with the same precast system as the Heygate and Aylesbury, but total demolition and rebuilding is now in prospect for Newlon Housing Association's postwar Barnsbury Estate (originally LCC), at triple the original density. This is a modest low key pleasantly-relaxed estate of well-spaced largely 4-storey blocks and without the social problems, as far as is known, that are reported to have bedevilled Southwark's. From the published plans it seems there will be a reduction per head in open space of about 75%, with thirteen-storey blocks lining the Regents Canal. The nearby Bemerton Estate South is not to lose actual open space but with the raising in height by 50% of most blocks and the doubling in length of eleven-storey Orkney House the 'feel' will certainly become more intense than at present.

Densification schemes of this kind are planned or are being carried out widely in the Borough. The contentious building over of the grounds of fifteen-storey Dixon Clark Court at Highbury Corner, resulting in a loss of trees and a 68% reduction in open space, is now well under way. Spaces have been filled in at the Andover Estate and consent has been granted for building more housing over pleasant green spaces at the Park View Estate near Clissold Park. Most strikingly consent was granted last summer to the City of London to build four new blocks on the pleasant grassed lawns of the York Way Estate, which will drastically close off the views from many of the existing dwellings.

A requirement of the GLA is that residents of such estates are consulted but it must be doubted whether the impact that the redevelopment or 'regeneration' schemes will have is sufficiently apparent – nor the consequence that, where the scheme is approved and demolition is involved, any existing leaseholders will be compulsorily bought out.

The nine inner London Boroughs and the City together comprise no more than 11% of the surface area of London, and they are of course already the most densely populated, and most limited in open space. It may be doubted whether the housing targets allotted to each Borough by the London Plan show adequate recognition of the negative consequences of trying to meet them in already dense areas by schemes for further densification such as these. This blindness is in part due to a continuing failure to recognize adequately the benefits to human life of 'Sun, Space, Greenery'. To me there is no more graphic demonstration of this than is to be found in Hall Street leading off the City Road, from which Peregrine House is approached. On the east side stands Peregrine House well back from the street in its green setting, and soaring upwards in a way that gives a sense of scale and release and space. On the west side of the street, and right on the pavement line, is three- and four-storey development dating from perhaps 25 years later rising straight from the back of the pavement and apparently without any greenery or space, and not much sun or light - apart from what they will be getting from the space round Peregrine House opposite.



Angel Gate, Hall Street, City Road, c.1990, above, with site plan showing Peregrine House c. 1965 on the right