

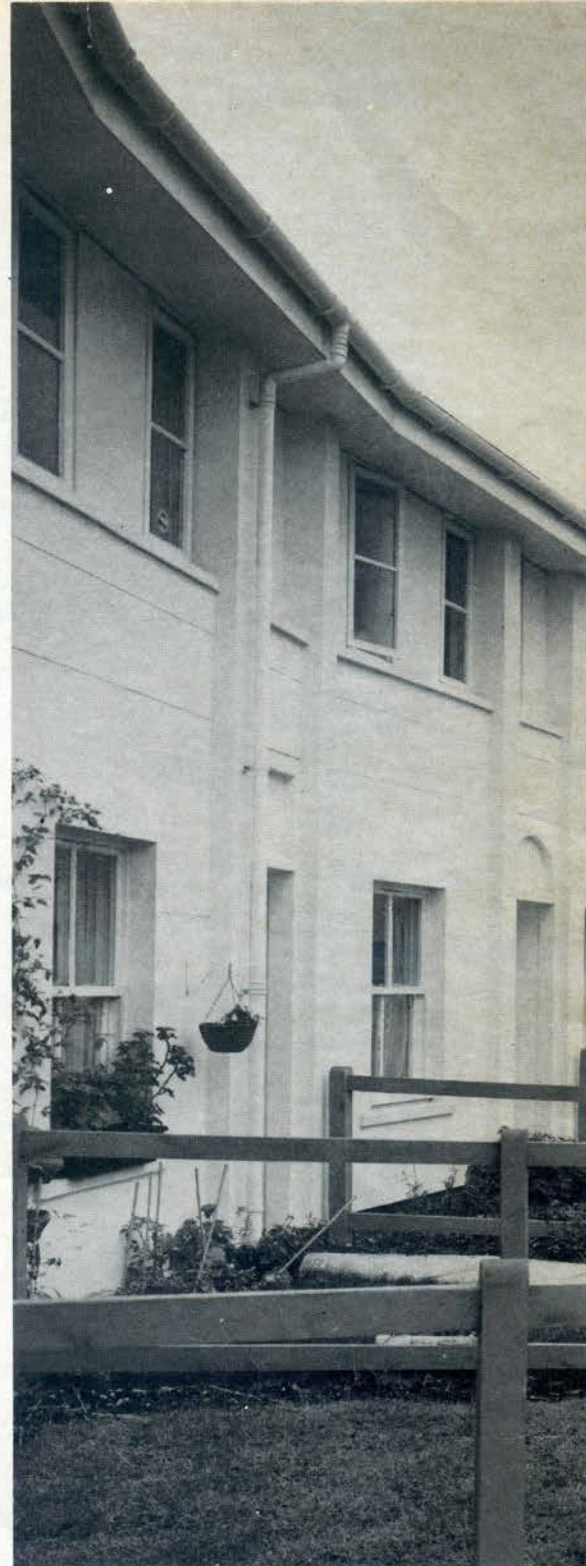


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A housing scheme now being completed in north London seems to epitomise housing in the 1980s. It is financed by both public and private sector and contains a mix of accommodation designed in a variety of styles, all attempting to invoke the pre-modern housing tradition. Patrick Hannay reports. Photographs by Peter Cook.



There was a time, not so long ago, when there was simply public or private housing, the former for rent, the latter for sale; the former Parker Morris, the latter NHBC. There was also a time when the architecture of public housing in the London Borough of Camden was all white, flat-roofed and of complex section.

The Camden housing of 1984, as portrayed in Peter Mishcon & Associates' Elm Village scheme for the United Kingdom Housing Trust, the Halifax Building Society and the Nationwide Building Society, is almost unrecognisable when considered in the light of that straightforward context.

There are no more housing schemes simply for sale or for rent. On a 4 acre

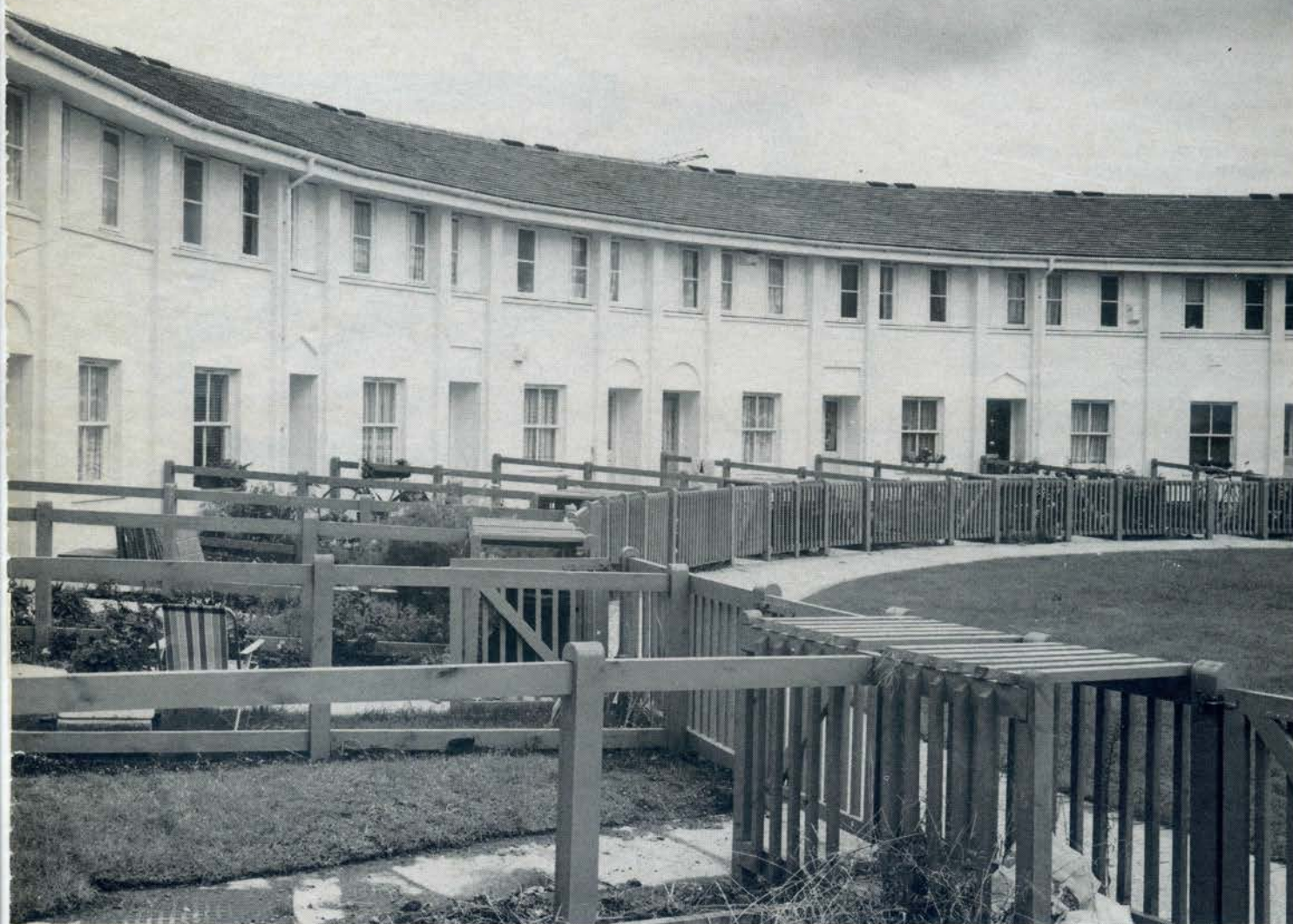
# PRIVATE GAIN, PUBLIC LOSS

→ 55

This is a gem!



1 Stairs and doors to the flats in block A: the memory of early LCC housing meets post-modern architecture.  
2 Houses in block E—the late Victorian artisan look.  
3 The Crescent (block D), an evocation of the classical past with implied pedimented doors and pilasters.



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site on the industrial hinterland just north of King's Cross station, the architects have created 162 homes, set on a semi-urban/suburban layout, comprising 50 'cost sale', 85 'shared ownership' and 27 'fair rent' houses. This mix, say the architects, has been 'achieved through an unprecedented partnership of different public and private sector agencies'.

#### Warped images

There is no more white architecture. In its place we have an astonishing variety of familiar and not quite familiar elevations run up in front of a standard timber-frame structure. There is the white rendered crescent, with its faceted facade made to look

curved by the cunning use of pilaster strips, and terraces with banded brick facades and chamfered lintels invoking late nineteenth century artisan cottages. Another terrace changes its detailing in mid-run—metal porches give way to large scale subclassical surrounds, while yet other terraces have rendered first floors in memory of early LCC housing or rough granite courses set in the brickwork in memory of some influential turn-of-the-century building or other. And, sprinkled over all, are familiar post-modern fun details—curvaceous stairs, implied pediments on balls over doors and trellis verandas.

The natural conclusion to draw from all this is that the architecture is an

exact mirror image of the complex funding and management strategy. It isn't. Rather, it reflects the fact that architects are still carrying on their own internalised debate. In the closed world of white architecture; no lay person was invited into the debate, there was no room for objectors.

#### Recognisable language

Now at least at Elm Village there is a popularly recognisable housing language of crescents, terraces and mews courts. But architects have picked up all those desires for historical continuity subliminally. They are still in as much control as before. Don't be taken in by the new Elm Village architecture, even though



Mishcon hopes you might be; this is not the work of, as it might seem, five different architects designing five different schemes at different times.

Of course, whether the housing is of the period of white architecture and Parker Morris, or eclectic architecture and 'value for money', there are many regulations and administrative fixes which, quite understandably, generate a great deal of the solution. But they are not enough to explain the extraordinary eclecticism carried out by one practice in such a small area.

#### A question of motivation

There is not space here, nor do I wish, to comment on the quality of the individual elements or even the composition of the whole. What I do want to question is the motivation for such deliberate variety. It is difficult to give any rational answer that holds water. I would suggest it is more the hidden consequence of an internal paranoia in the profession, exaggerated by a misconceived over-reaction to some earlier atrocities in public housing.

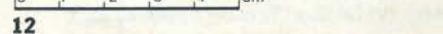
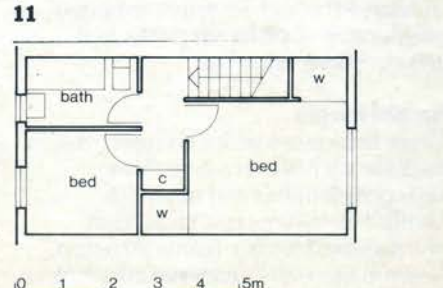
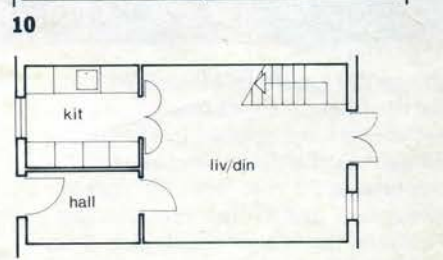
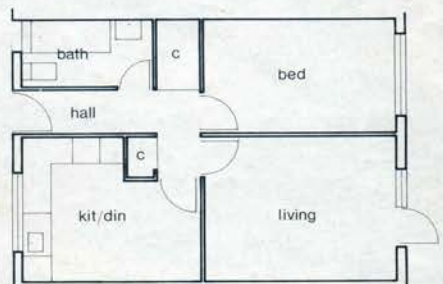
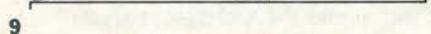
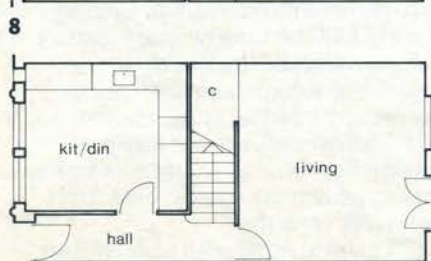
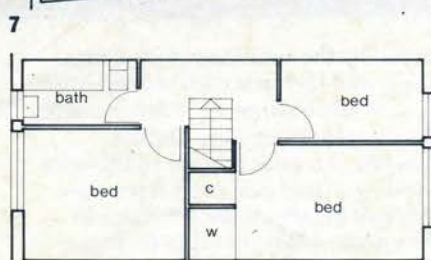
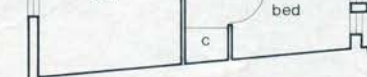
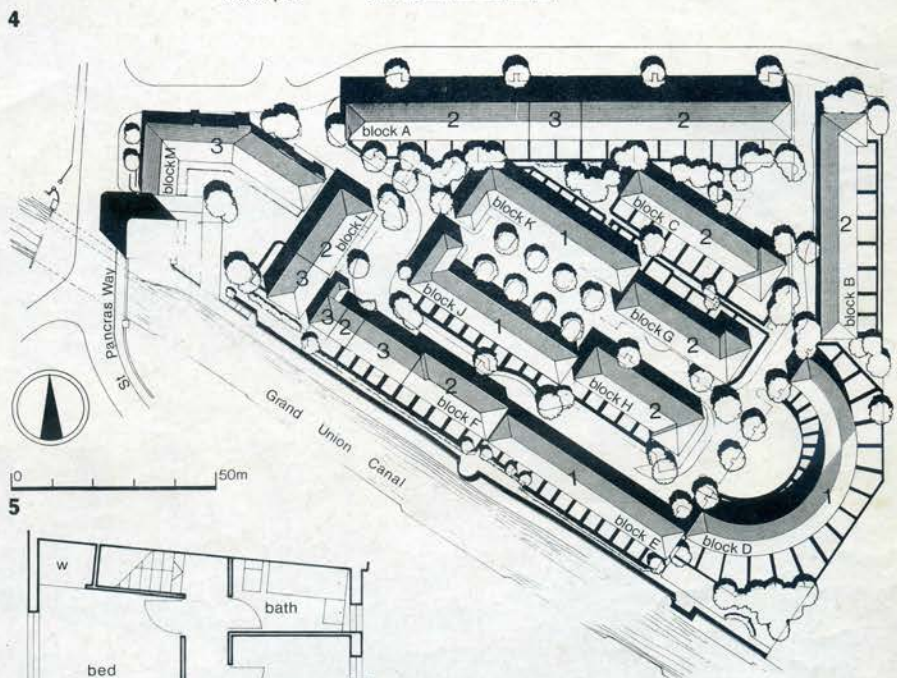
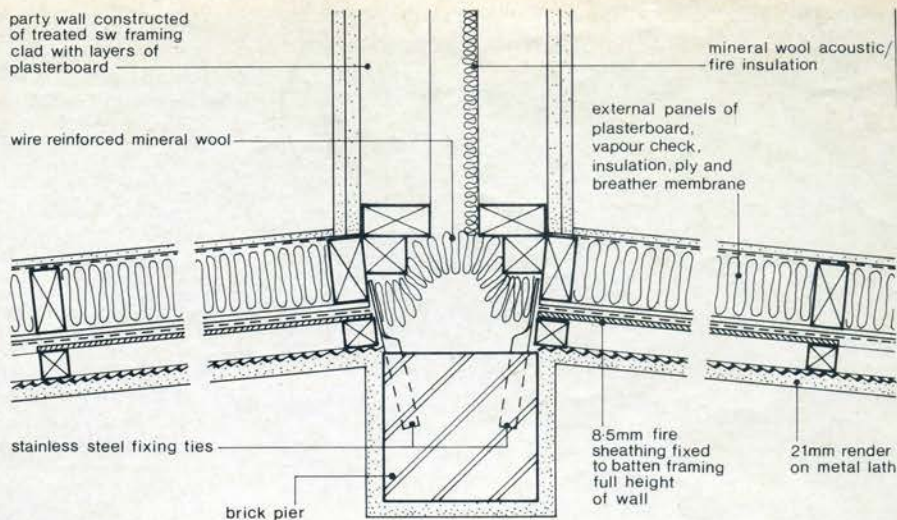
There is a yearning for contact with the users in this preplanned design process, which of course does not include users. This is not co-operative housing. Elm Village is not a project where each individual house is designed and built by its tenant or buyer. The eclectic architecture is a misplaced form of social engineering, something everyone hoped had at last been cleared from the profession's attic—an idea that somehow the class division, which seems (some say naturally) to arise through the competitive diverse routes by which people have access to a home, can be bridged through the architecture. The paradox is that it simply exaggerates the divisions.

#### Stimulus to tension

What such eclecticism does is simply reinforce the idea that everyone has publically to stamp their status on the public front of their house to let you know that they are different from their neighbours. Mishcon talks sensitively of wanting to avoid an 'estate' feel. But such a feel does not have to be negative. The model estates that sported to the rear of the house the organic expression of the individual through endless extensions and additions, while maintaining a unified sense of public composure on the fronts, were a far subtler resolution of the perennial conflict between private and public interest. This artificial creation of variety by architects only acts as a stimulus to the social tensions that already exist. The diversity on the public fronts emphasises the individual at the expense of the community.

#### Credits

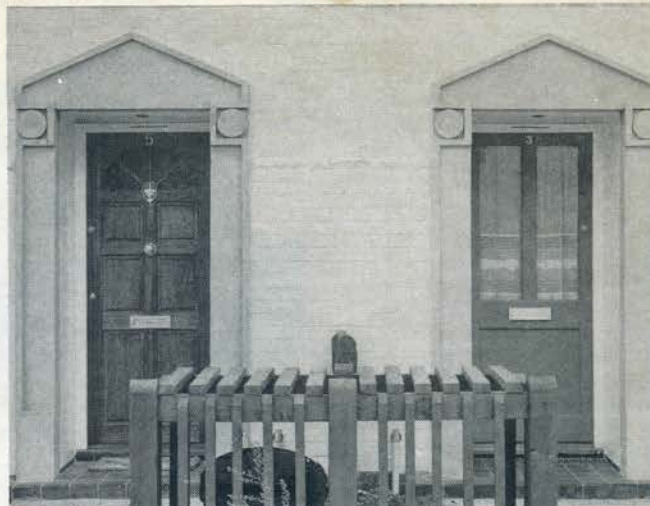
architects Peter Mishcon & Associates  
quantity surveyors Seadens  
consulting engineers Michael Barclay Partnership; HSD Building Consultants Ltd  
contractors Walter Llewellyn & Sons Ltd



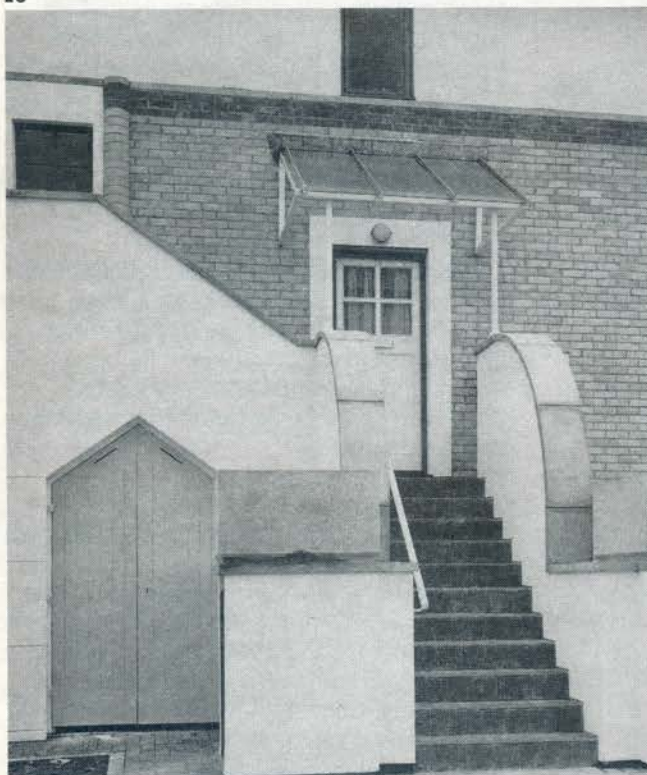




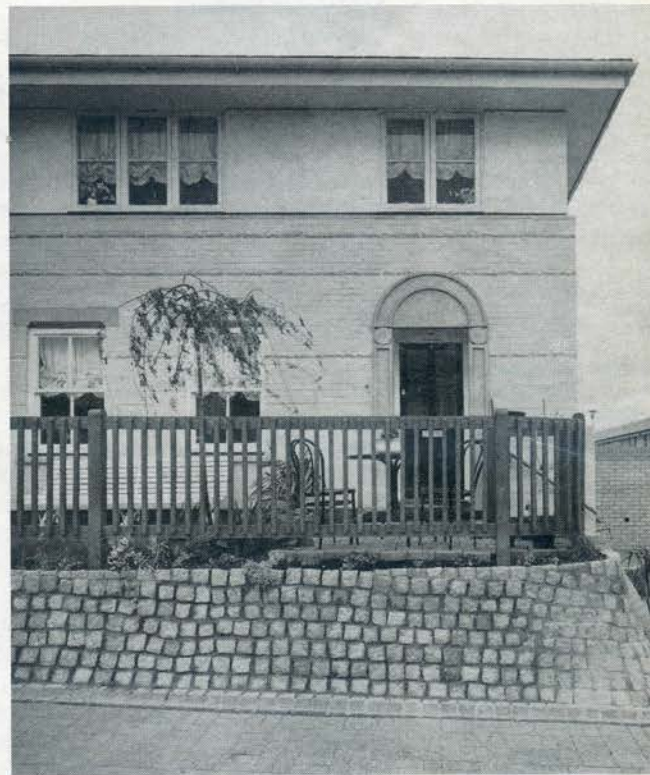
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4 Section through facade and party walls at first floor level of houses in The Crescent.

5 Site plan showing type of housing. 1 is cost sale, 2 shared ownership, 3 fair rent.

6, 7 Three-person house sold on cost sale basis. 6 First floor; 7 ground floor. 8, 9 Five-person house; shared ownership. 8 First floor; 9 ground floor.

10 Two-person flat; shared ownership.

11, 12 Three-person house sold on cost sale basis or fair rent. 11 First floor; 12 ground floor.

13, 16 The artificial variety created by the architect—details change in the same terrace, 13—and variety created by occupiers, 16, where the standard door is replaced. 14 Corner stair on block A. 15 View along block A. 17 Post-modern classical doors, LCC rendered first floor—a strange mix.