

# Tower blocks have been a poor replacement for picturesque homes

It was the sixties and I was chief reporter on what was then called the Brentford and Chiswick Times when demolition started to make way for the tower blocks which now cast a gloomy shadow over Green Dragon Lane in Brentford.

A warren of picturesque back to back terraces with names like Dead Donkey Lane and Mafeking Avenue, served by an attractive Georgian high street, were laid waste so that work could start on the Metropolitan Water Board monolith. It seemed to many of us a tragedy that compact cottages that if gentrified would have fetched huge prices in Fulham or Chelsea were being sacrificed for an ostentatious high rise development - forcing most of the indigenous population to move out to Kern.

The existing stock could have been gutted and refurbished for a fraction of the price the boxes in the sky were costing and would have been ideal for the kind of people who were on the huge housing list.

But Hounslow Council, which had just come into existence and was under Labour control, was very proud of the venue that promised ultra modern spaciousness with balconies offering a dramatic view of Kew Gardens and extensive facilities on lower floors including laundries, shops, banks and community centres.

History proved us doubters right as, although the new accommodation might have provided better plumbing and chic chrome fittings, it proved totally inappropriate for the families who needed new housing. Bringing up young children so far from the ground had all kinds of nuances, crime and poverty.

The rent office on the ground floor was the target for criminal gangs and hand-bitter and communal rooms were wrecked by vandals.

Lessons were learned and the flats were reallocated to the single and retired. The second stage of Brentford redevelopment recognised that fact, that four stories needed to be the limit on the the Haverfield Estate and a new policy was adopted.

But it was still the case that the Edwardian and Victorian homes that went under the demolition had were far superior to the shoddy replacements.

The existing housing stock simply needed relatively inexpensive tender loving care and imaginative conservation.

It was a few years later when Ivybridge opened a couple of miles down the road in Isleworth and a mish-mash of point block townhouse and lower rise apartments were created.

Ivybridge was built to a much lower standard than the Water Board towers and created bigger social and environmental problems.

It is only in the last five years that dramatic improvements have come about and its sick estate reputation has been wiped out.

Typical of today's residents is 83-year-old Merrilo Morgan who arrived in England from Grenada on the SS Arcadia in 1961. She has been in Summerwood Road since 1974 with her husband Dennis and admits: "I would not live here if I had a choice but there have been enormous improvements during the past five years."

When she arrived in Isleworth 13 years ago Merrilo had had three traumatic years without a home, having given up a beautiful home in Slough with her four children to escape a violent partner. She found herself in halfway homes and bed and breakfast accommodation.

"The place was in a terrible state when I arrived. There were many really rough people living here. The smell from Maggie's was abominable. There was graffiti on the walls and it was full of stray dogs.

Merrilo, a worshipper at the Chiswick Seventh Day Adventist Church since the sixties, set about cleaning the place up, redeco-rating and venting in. And things started to get better.

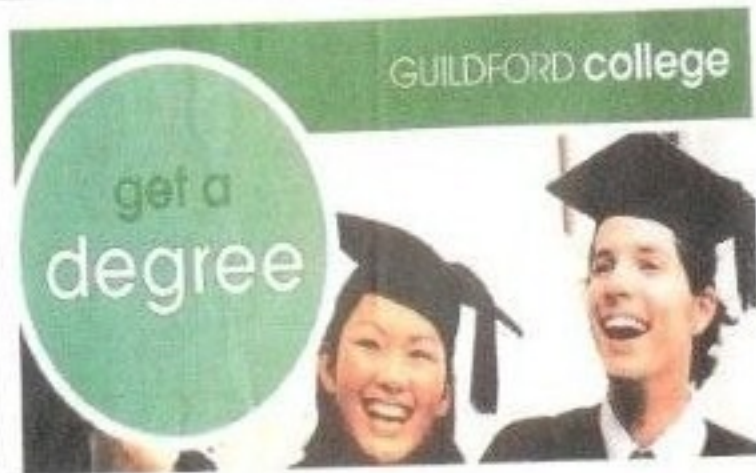
New kitchens and bathrooms were fitted, some of the most antisocial tenants were evicted, trees were planted, more facilities were introduced for children

and a push button door system was installed. "It did not happen overnight but gradually improvements were made."

Merrilo has been assisted through good times and bad by her faith and her church. She is grateful that she has a roof over her head in a convenient location close to her family and friends. Yet I cannot help thinking that although the kind of accommodation in which she now lives may have provided marginally more rooms per acre at a higher density than that which was bulldozed, Merrilo and her fellow tenants would be happier if they had been offered one of the modernised houses with a front door onto a street and a small garden.

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