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Alexandra Road and the decline of architectural modernism

The 1970s was a key decade in the history of post-war UK architecture. In contrast to elsewhere in Europe, where the project of modernism effectively developed through post-modernism, the UK saw at the close of the 70s its destruction, cemented in the early 1980s by the rise of Thatcherism, the public interventions of Prince Charles and the unequivocal assumption of semantics in architectural design.

This paper will address the decline of post-war architectural modernism in the 1970s, using as a case study the treatment in the media of the innovative public housing project at Alexandra Road in Camden. A high-density but low-rise development, constructed largely from pre-cast and insitu fair-faced concrete, the project was vilified in the national and specialist press for its technical and social failings, and more particularly for going spectacularly over budget. The formal and abstract language of the scheme subsequently became almost entirely unacceptable, with the proviso that the architectural assistants on the project (Benson and Forsyth) went on to design in similar vein such elitist buildings as the National Gallery of Scotland.

The project will be reassessed in the light of more general and ongoing debates about the estate, the nature of intellectual life in the UK, the question of patrician architecture, and questions of social determinism in architectural design.