

# [I’m up bow tie. i sit back down](https://assignbuster.com/im-up-bow-tie-i-sit-back-down/)

I’m sitting inthe lobby of a small and very quaint – 19th century is my guess – hotelin London, with a cold glass of lemonade that a waitress has just made me. I’vebeen told Denys Lasdun prefers to meet here, he doesn’t like large hotels withtoo many people as it makes him feel uneasy. As I’m waiting patiently on a wellsat upon but attractive sofa, for Denys Lasdun to arrive. Denys Lasdun is aboutto be interviewed by me, a 23-year-old shy, architecture student, about to meetand interview one of the most highly regarded architects of our time about postwar housing, of which he had a considerable involvement. I study theinterior. It’s a small hotel…perhaps more like a guest house, with grandfeatures such as columns in the doorways, three-metre-high ceilings andtraditional bay windows that look out onto a small and overgrown garden.

Themid afternoon sun is streaming through the bay windows, lighting up the wholefront waiting room; it catches the bottom of the chandelier which cause a burstof multi-coloured lights to light up the ceiling. The peaceful andvery quiet stillness is suddenly disturbed as I hear clunking footsteps comingdown the 19th century staircase. I turn around to face the door justas Denys Lasdun is walking through the doorway and takes a seat to my left on alarge dishevelled but also attractive armchair.

I notice he he’sdressed very smartly, a brown tweed jacket and trousers, white shirt and asmall and messily done up bow tie. I sit back downon the sofa and nervously introduces myself and how much I admire his work andhim.’Thank you’ – he says in asoft, well spoken English accent. I clear mythroat and decide to get straight into the questions, I don’t want to take uptoo much of his time. ‘ So…I’d like to ask you about your involvement withpost second world war housing- specifically Keeling House…your thoughts andexperience in it – what you wanted to achieve with it and if you felt you achievedit?’ There’s a pausebefore Lasdun starts speaking. I can see him thinking.

‘ Hm…Lets rewind; pre World War II, Bethnal Green – theheart of the working class East End of London. This area was heavily targeted andbombed by the Germans as it contained some of the cities most importantdockland areas and was a hub for the transport of vital goods to London and therest of the UK. After a lot of Londoners homes were flattened, I wanted tobecome involved with redesigning and redeveloping homes for these people…therewere a lot of people to rehome, but the opportunity to move forward in terms ofhousing design in the UK was something I wanted and had to be involved in.’ He pauses for asecond as he looks over and sees me scribbling, trying to take note of everyword he says. ‘ You also need to remember that before WWII was the height of the greatdepression, 23% of the boroughs men were without jobs as well as being aseverely overcrowded borough. London County Council did what they could to improve thequality of living by increasing the number of properties to be built but thiswas difficult as the council did not have the money it needed to do so.’  He pauses again, this time for about a minute; until he hears me stop writing. I thought thiswas considerate of him – allowing me time to write what needed to be written.

Just then the waitress brings over another drink; this time a Bloody Mary. ‘ Ah, smashing!’ Lasdunsaid as a huge grin appear on his face.’Just what I need on a hot day like this!’ He takes a sipand then places it on a small coffee table beside his chair. ‘ Shall I continue?’ ‘ Please!’ I said, whilst Idecide to take a swig of my lemonade.

” After the war, during the years of reconstruction inBritain, rebuilding public housing was a priority within the Welfare State. Theresolution of the housing problem required standardization in interior planningand technology, which could too easily lead to solutions that were boring, anonymous and uninteresting and that was something I just did not want! I was cautiousof the box-diagram approach and keen to evolve new ideas that were bettersuited to pre-existing social and urban patterns. My experience working withother architects such as Coates and Lubetkin, introduced me to a lot of genericaspects of housing for the masses and the dangers of high rise planning.” (1) ‘ In 1952, I was commissioned by London City Council andBethnal Green Borough Council to redevelop a site off Usk Street, which hadbeen flattened during the war. This was Sulkin House, an eight storey block offlats with 24 maisonettes in total. I incorporated an idea called the ‘ cluster-block’design that would pave the way for a larger project I was involved in, not farfrom this project called Keeling House.’ (2)WhereKeeling House lies on Claredale Street. Again, he pausedto sip his Bloody Mary.

‘ So, in terms of the idea behind the social programmeof the building; how it affected the former residents of Bethnal Green and whatthey thought of it; could you tell me more about that?’ I asked.  ” The dispositionof the plan is such as to illuminate the necessity of escape stairs and alsoisolate the noise of public stairs, lifts and refuse disposal from thedwellings.” ‘ My main goal was to provide something for peoplewho’d lost everything. Privacy was certainly a driving force as I designed itso that each balcony served only two flats. Somehow looking for a balance of privacy and seclusion, thatcomes with tenement housing, but with an opportunity for neighbourliness aswell. I feel I did achieve this as most of the tenants could reach their frontdoor without passing one another.

” He paused and glared out of the window…” These were people who came from little terracedhouses or something with backyards.  I used to lunch with them and try andunderstand a bit more about what mattered to them, and they were proudpeople.  They kept pigeons and rabbits in their back yard and hung theirwashing there…And as a result of these contacts I didn’t have flats.  Isaid no, they must have maisonettes, two up and two down, or whatever it was, because this would give them the sense of home.  And from theseconversations, they wanted a degree of privacy.

They said: you know, we’re not used to being in a great sort of huge block of one ofthousands.  So the thing was radically broken up, this building, into fourdiscrete connected towers, each semi-detached on a floor, each a maisonette.”(3) ‘ Oh, so you actually spoke to residenceswho were going to live there?’ I asked, perhaps a little too surprised. This gave me the impressionthat he actually cared about how his architecture would have an affect on thoseliving in it and living around it.’Most definitely! You can’t design worthy housingwithout proper research into who and what you’re designing for.” And what was the inspiration behind theplan? Its shape and form?’ I asked, whilst quickly jotting down what Lasdun had just said. ‘ Keeling House copies the same cluster block concept but on a muchlarger scale.

Resembling the unfurling form of a plant with stem, leaves andpetals this time 16 storeys, rather than eight, the four blocks circle thecentral service core and contains 64 homes in total. It is a clever design, ifI may say so myself, that breaks away from the usual appearance of your typicaltower block. It’s designed so that all living spaces are south facing, gainingthe most amount of sun light as possible whilst facing away from the core… thisalso provides greater privacy to each flat.’ (4) He pauses againfor a minute, quietly sipping on his drink whilst still gazing out of thewindow. I’m glad of this as it gives me a chance to take a 30 second break fromwriting. Does Keeling House hold any resemblance to buildings you’vedesigned before?’ ‘ Yes, much of the inspiration for Keeling House camefrom Hallfeild School, a small commission.

The infants wing is arranged in acellular arrangement and it anticipates the Bethnal Green cluster blocks. Myinterest in biological analogies and double curves may also be found in theRoyal College of Physicians, a commission that came about for me a decadelater.’ (5)’The building was not to most locals taste at first.’ He continues. ‘ They found itstark and intrusive, out of keeping with the surrounding Victorian terraces. Some even went as far as saying It was the ugliest building they’d ever seen –’ugly and bleak’.

But to me, Keeling house was a vision into the future. Aglimpse into what housing could be like for many people and a glimpse into whathousing should be like.'(6) I look over andask; ‘ Was it always your intention todesign housing in a brutalist style? Is that how you’d best describe it?’ ‘ It is unquestionably brutalist and well designed butcertainly hasn’t got away with being the best. One of the key features of this buildwas the central free-standing tower which contained the amenities, with theseparate towers clustered around it. The services area of each floor where acommon space – an area for residents to meet and socialise; also a space usedwhere residents could hang their clothes out to dry but because of the shape ofthe building, the wind surged here, making it a disagreeable socialising area. Which really did disappoint me. Not long after completion, some difficultieswith the flats appeared and it was costing the council an increasing amount ofmoney to repair, money that they didn’t have.

The council decided they neededto get rid of the flats and were prepared to sell the block for £1 to thePeabody Trust – but the trust were not willing to take on the task of repairwithout the promise of government or lottery funding. This lead to the council’sdecision to have the flats destroyed.’ (7) ‘ How did you feel about that?’ I said. ‘ I was devastated! These homes that I saw as a visionfor the future were to be demolished unless somebody bought them privately.

Butthe city was in such disrepair…That’s when the local residents of Bethnal Greenprotested against the demolition and wrote that poem. A Protesters Poem, iswhat I call it. I’ve kept a copy on me since I first heard it, would you likeme to read it to you?’ ‘ Yes, please do.

‘ He pulled out a wellfolded but slightly crumpled piece of paper from his tweed blazer pocket andread out the following…   ” Whenthe councillors are tucked up in bed so cosy and meek, Willthey think of our families they are throwing on the street. Furniturein storage, bed and breakfast for our home. You know about the crumbling block but now the time has comeWhereall the neighbours will unite and try to make a stand. Wehave feelings too but you just don’t understand. Whatcan we tell our children when they come knocking at the door? Isthis the sort of people our ancestors fought for? HELP US STAND TOGETHER” I sat in silencefor a moment as Lasdun folded away the piece of paper.

It amazed me that thesepeople felt so strongly about this building that they had written these words. But then, it wasn’t just a building to them. It was their home. As ugly as somethought it was, it was still their home. I could tell the poem meant a lot toLasdun, as he sat and looked deeper in thought than he had before, with analmost sad look in his eyes. ‘ That’s quite something’ Isaid.

‘ A meaningful message from peoplewho are thankful for what you gave them…