

I'm up bow tie. i sit
back down



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

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

The mid-afternoon sun is streaming through the bay windows, lighting up the whole front waiting room; it catches the bottom of the chandelier which causes a burst of multi-coloured lights to light up the ceiling. The peaceful and very quiet stillness is suddenly disturbed as I hear clunking footsteps coming down the 19th century staircase. I turn around to face the door just as Denys Lasdun is walking through the doorway and takes a seat to my left on a large dishevelled but also attractive armchair.

I notice he's dressed very smartly, a brown tweed jacket and trousers, white shirt and a small and messily done up bow tie. I sit back down on the sofa and nervously introduce myself and how much I admire his work and him. 'Thank you' - he says in a soft, well-spoken English accent. I clear my throat and decide to get straight into the questions, I don't want to take too much of his time. 'So...I'd like to ask you about your involvement

withpost second world war housing- specifically Keeling House...your thoughts and experience in it - what you wanted to achieve with it and if you felt you achieved it?' There's a pause before Lasdun starts speaking. I can see him thinking.

' Hm...Lets rewind; pre World War II, Bethnal Green - the heart of the working class East End of London. This area was heavily targeted and bombed by the Germans as it contained some of the cities most important dockland areas and was a hub for the transport of vital goods to London and the rest of the UK. After a lot of Londoners homes were flattened, I wanted to become involved with redesigning and redeveloping homes for these people... there were a lot of people to rehome, but the opportunity to move forward in terms of housing design in the UK was something I wanted and had to be involved in.' He pauses for a second as he looks over and sees me scribbling, trying to take note of every word he says. ' You also need to remember that before WWII was the height of the great depression, 23% of the boroughs men were without jobs as well as being a severely overcrowded borough. London County Council did what they could to improve the quality of living by increasing the number of properties to be built but this was 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 this was 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!' Lasdun said as a huge grin appears on his face. 'Just what I need on a hot day like this!' He takes a sip and then places it on a small

coffee table beside his chair. ' Shall I continue?' ' Please!' I said, whilst I decide to take a swig of my lemonade.

" After the war, during the years of reconstruction in Britain, rebuilding public housing was a priority within the Welfare State. The resolution of the housing problem required standardization in interior planning and 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 cautious of the box-diagram approach and keen to evolve new ideas that were better suited to pre-existing social and urban patterns. My experience working with other architects such as Coates and Lubetkin, introduced me to a lot of generic aspects of housing for the masses and the dangers of high rise planning." (1) ' In 1952, I was commissioned by London City Council and Bethnal Green Borough Council to redevelop a site off Usk Street, which had been flattened during the war. This was Sulkin House, an eight storey block of flats 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 far from this project called Keeling House.' (2) Where Keeling House lies on Clerdale Street. Again, he paused to sip his Bloody Mary.

' So, in terms of the idea behind the social programme of the building; how it affected the former residents of Bethnal Green and what they thought of it; could you tell me more about that?' I asked. " The disposition of the plan is such as to illuminate the necessity of escape stairs and also isolate the noise of public stairs, lifts and refuse disposal from the dwellings." ' My main goal was to provide something for people who'd lost everything. Privacy was certainly a driving force as I designed it so that each balcony served only two

flats. Somehow looking for a balance of privacy and seclusion, that comes with tenement housing, but with an opportunity for neighbourliness as well. I feel I did achieve this as most of the tenants could reach their front door without passing one another.

" He paused and glared out of the window..." These were people who came from little terraced houses or something with backyards. I used to lunch with them and try and understand a bit more about what mattered to them, and they were proud people. They kept pigeons and rabbits in their back yard and hung their washing there... And as a result of these contacts I didn't have flats. I said 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 these conversations, 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 of thousands. So the thing was radically broken up, this building, into four discrete connected towers, each semi-detached on a floor, each a maisonette." (3) ' Oh, so you actually spoke to residences who were going to live there?' I asked, perhaps a little too surprised. This gave me the impression that he actually cared about how his architecture would have an affect on those living in it and living around it. 'Most definitely! You can't design worthy housing without proper research into who and what you're designing for.' And what was the inspiration behind the plan? 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 much larger scale.

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

The infants wing is arranged in a cellular arrangement and it anticipates the Bethnal Green cluster blocks. My interest in biological analogies and double curves may also be found in the Royal College of Physicians, a commission that came about for me a decade later.' (5) 'The building was not to most locals taste at first.' He continues. ' They found it stark 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. A glimpse into what housing could be like for many people and a glimpse into what housing should be like.' (6) I look over and ask; ' Was it always your intention to design housing in a brutalist style? Is that how you'd best describe it?' ' It is unquestionably brutalist and well designed but certainly hasn't got away with being the best. One of the key features of this build was the central free-

standing tower which contained the amenities, with these separate towers clustered around it. The services area of each floor where a common space - an area for residents to meet and socialise; also a space used where residents could hang their clothes out to dry but because of the shape of the building, the wind surged here, making it a disagreeable socialising area. Which really did disappoint me. Not long after completion, some difficulties with the flats appeared and it was costing the council an increasing amount of money to repair, money that they didn't have.

The council decided they needed to get rid of the flats and were prepared to sell the block for £1 to the Peabody Trust - but the trust were not willing to take on the task of repair without the promise of government or lottery funding. This led to the council's decision to have the flats destroyed.' (7) 'How did you feel about that?' I said. 'I was devastated! These homes that I saw as a vision for the future were to be demolished unless somebody bought them privately.

But the city was in such disrepair... That's when the local residents of Bethnal Green protested against the demolition and wrote that poem. A Protesters Poem, is what I call it. I've kept a copy on me since I first heard it, would you like me to read it to you?' 'Yes, please do.

'He pulled out a wellfolded but slightly crumpled piece of paper from his tweed blazer pocket and read out the following... "When the councillors are tucked up in bed so cosy and meek, Will they think of our families they are throwing on the street. Furniture in storage, bed and breakfast for our home. You know about the crumbling block but now the time has come Where all the

neighbours will unite and try to make a stand. We have feelings too but you just don't understand. What can we tell our children when they come knocking at the door? Is this the sort of people our ancestors fought for? HELP US STAND TOGETHER" I sat in silence for a moment as Lasdun folded away the piece of paper.

It amazed me that these people 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 some thought it was, it was still their home. I could tell the poem meant a lot to Lasdun, as he sat and looked deeper in thought than he had before, with a almost sad look in his eyes. ' That's quite something' I said.

' A meaningful message from people who are thankful for what you gave them...