

# Born again: the high-rise slum

Keeling House was a disastrous social experiment. Now it is being put right, says **Jane Hughes**

It was built in 1956 in a spirit of postwar optimism when tower blocks represented all that was bold and radical in urban design.

Keeling House, in Bethnal Green, East London, was designed by the modernist architect Sir Denys Lasdun — creator of the National Theatre — who envisaged it as a community in the sky that soared away from the stale air and the dark, densely packed terraces below.

Yet by the early 1990s, the 15-storey block was being described by its local authority owner as "a running sore". The flats were overrun with fungus, there were cracks in the staircases and safety nets had been erected to catch falling masonry.

The structure was declared unsafe in 1993 and the tenants were forced to move to other estates. As Tower Hamlets Council considered its options, Keeling escaped the immediate threat of demolition by becoming the first tower block to be listed. But for the next six years the building lay derelict, its flats reduced to burnt-out shells with bricked-up doors and windows.

Then there was a sudden turnaround. The developers Lincoln Holdings bought Keeling house last year and within 12 months had transformed it from a dilapidated, vandalised heap into a luxury des res. In private hands, the deprived inner-city property has become a much sought-after development of 64 spacious apartments with stunning views only 15 minutes from Liverpool Street Station.

The new-look Keeling House has a flashy glass and aluminium entrance hall above a minimalist water feature. Where there were once abandoned shopping trolleys, there is now a 24-hour concierge.

Keeling House is protected by high railings which will be camouflaged by a hedge of aromatic herbs to which residents can help themselves. The white-washed flats have wood-



The show flat at refurbished Keeling House in East London. The building, which was declared unsafe in 1993, has become a fashionable development of 64 spacious apartments with stunning views

en floors and Italian kitchens.

Yet despite its makeover, Keeling House is still, in layman's terms at least, a tower block: an austere architectural form which never quite fitted in with the British love of privacy and our delight in individual back gardens.

How tastes have changed. Like Erno Goldfinger's brutalist Trellick Tower, in Ladbroke Grove, West London, and the towers on the City's Barbican estate, Keeling House is now at the heart of the new vogue for utilitarian urban architecture.

With power stations being turned into art galleries and grey steel Tube stations scooping design awards, we cannot get enough of the pared-down industrial look.

According to Elain Harwood, a specialist in postwar architecture at English Heri-

age, it was in the early 1990s that we began to appreciate functionality as integral to an object's beauty.

"In the socially committed postwar generation, a lot more thought was put into social housing than into most accommodation in the private sector," she says. "People are now much more aware of the combination of function and appearance in everyday objects. The well-designed, city centre home is the pinnacle of that."

Steve Marshall, of architects Munkenbeck and Marshall, who oversaw the external restoration of Keeling House, agrees. "It used to be only architects who knew about architecture but there is a new generation of pure urbanites who are really up on what is going on in every cultural field. The boldness and

radicalism of the modern movement appeals to creative people who have the money to invest in its vision."

In addition, says Marshall, society is changing, with the rise of the singleton who eschews a house and garden in favour of being at the centre of City life and close to work.

Developers are increasingly looking for interesting brown-field solutions to accommodate the surge in new households. Richard Burdett, director of the Cities, Architecture and Engineering programme at the London School of Economics, says: "The daylight and views offered by the high-rise block is an attractive contrast to the gloominess of many sub-divided Victorian houses."

Of course, design-literate urbanites can afford to be choosy about tower blocks.

They want the real thing, not some 1970s derivative thrown up on the cheap. It goes without saying that a Continental-style concierge — to take in the dry cleaning and make sure that the lift is always working — is a must.

As a pioneering high-rise and the first of Lasdun's "cluster blocks", Keeling House was extremely well thought out, not least because the architect went to the trouble of consulting prospective tenants from the surrounding Bethnal Green terraces.

Keeling has a distinctive butterfly shape: four towers branching from a central column containing the lift shaft and stairs. This maximised the light and fresh air to each generously proportioned flat.

A sense of privacy was maintained by having only two flats on each floor. And Lasdun attempted to recreate the feel of Victorian streets by making most of the building's maisonettes, with two bedrooms upstairs and a front door that opened on to the equivalent of a garden path.

The problem was not design but a chronic lack of investment from the local authority. And the residents knew it. Whenever he returned to Keeling, Lasdun was welcomed and invited in for lunch. Indeed, the tenants grew so fond of their home that they kicked up a fuss when they were forced out.

"I got on well with the families, they were happy and liked the sense of community," says Lasdun, now 85. "It was ahead of its time when it was built for the workers and is now popular with a different class altogether, but I'm glad it has been restored."

The downfall of Keeling House while it was owned by the local authority was that the money only went so far. "The block wasn't made secure and had no edge", says Marshall. "In addition, the residents

lacked the economic and political clout to ensure that the building was adequately looked after and maintained."

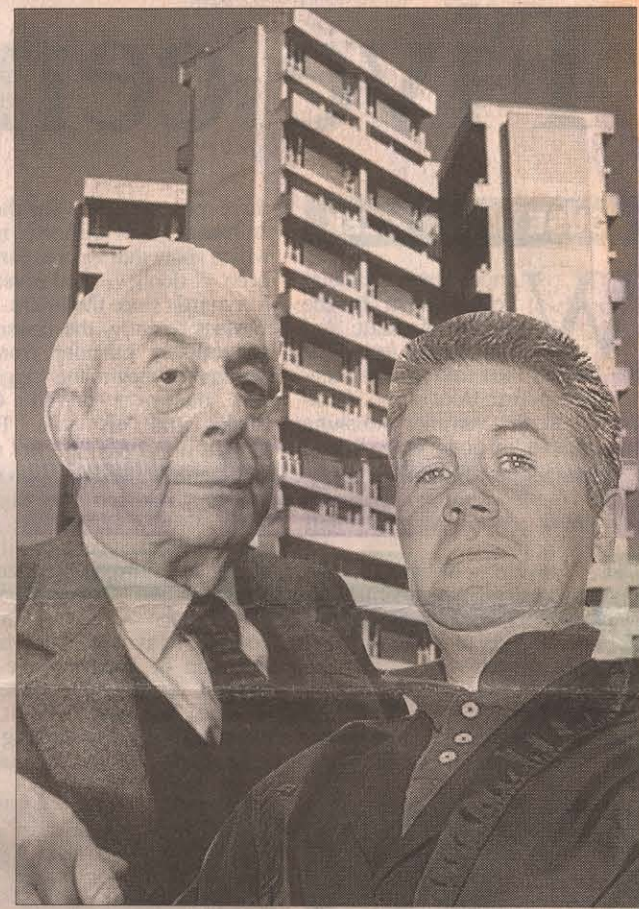
Concrete fell off the side of the building because it had been cast too thin, and repairs were piecemeal. In contrast, once it was in private ownership, Lincoln Holdings carried out a comprehensive recladding of the building and finished the concrete with a protective coating. The £8-million makeover has cost the developer less, it claims, than the original estimates put forward by the local authority for refurbishment.

The rebirth of the tower block does not always mean wholesale privatisation, however. In Islington, Wynford House is an eight-storey block on the notoriously rundown Priory Green Estate but it has been given a new lease of life by the Community Housing Association.

Before work began, the crumbling concrete of the 1957 block, designed by Russian architect Berthold Lubetkin, had been held together by chicken wire. Crack addicts smoked in its broken lifts and drug paraphernalia lined the stairwells.

Now, income from 66 flats let to private tenants will subsidise affordable rents for the remaining 22 properties, and the building has been renamed Priory Heights.

Keeling House made its debut on the property market at the beginning of June but quickly closed again for further refurbishment. Its sleek new doors were finally flung open last Monday. Lasdun has lived to see it loved once more.



Sir Denys Lasdun, left, the original architect, and Stephen Marshall who renovated the 1950s building

● Keeling House sales are being handled by Felicity J Lord (0207-481 8811). Forty-five two-bedroom flats (starting at £185,000) are still available, seven one-bedroom flats (starting at £127,500) and seven penthouses (starting at £375,000 and including a parking space)



The entrance to Keeling House, once blighted by graffiti and abandoned shopping trolleys, now has a Japanese-style water feature and 24-hour concierge.

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