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From the *Westbahn* to West Yorkshire:
Quarry Hill Flats and the Internationalism of Red Vienna

“To see all of this under a summer sky in Vienna is to see a very fine example of humanised architecture.”¹ This reflective observation was recorded in the Leeds Minority Housing Report, written by a delegation of West Yorkshire architects who visited the Austrian capital over the summer of 1932. First printed as a shilling pamphlet in February 1933, and then as the Labour Party booklet *Decent Houses for All* in 1934, the Minority Report was circulated amongst architects, urban planners and the general public alike. Ultimately its wide readership paved the way for the groundbreaking housing programme of inter-war Leeds, which was placed into action by the city’s Labour Council from 1933 to 1935.² Searching for a solution to Leeds’s notorious Victorian slum housing, members of the West Yorkshire Society of Architects joined a Birmingham-led mission to Austria, Germany and Czechoslovakia, where they would be profoundly impressed by the social housing estates of Red Vienna. The “humanised architecture” seen under the Viennese summer sky belonged in fact to the monumental Karl-Marx-Hof, which, according to the Minority Report, was softened by colourful flowers planted in troughs of an equally monumental size, adorning the estate’s iconic archways and private balconies.³ Out of all buildings visited in Central Europe, it was the Karl-Marx-Hof that would be the direct inspiration for one of the most innovative housing experiments in twentieth-century Britain: Quarry Hill Flats in Leeds. In this way, elements of Viennese social democracy travelled westward along the rail lines of the *Westbahn*, arriving perhaps unexpectedly in an inner-city pocket of the West Yorkshire capital.

¹ Leeds Minority Housing Report, February 1933, S. 86.

² Alison Ravetz: *Model Estate. Planned Housing at Quarry Hill Leeds*, London 1974, S. 28.

³ Minority Report, S. 86.

New Models for British Housing

By the start of the twentieth century, Victorian mass housing had become associated with brick terraced structures that were rapidly designated as “slum” areas, rife with disease and overcrowding. The Houses of the Working Classes Act of 1890 addressed these issues, with a summary published by the Fabian Society arguing that “the provision of house accommodation for the industrial classes has hitherto been left almost entirely in the hands of private enterprise, with the inevitable result that high rents are exacted for the privilege of occupying squalid dwellings whose very existence is a grave social danger.”⁴ The 1890 Act marked the advent of social housing in Great Britain, as it granted local councils the authority to not only condemn slum areas as part of public health initiatives, but also to purchase land for the construction and financing of new housing for the working classes, predominately in the form of tenements and housing estates. The Act applied initially only to the London councils, however it was extended beyond the capital in 1900; this was followed by the 1919 Housing and Town Planning Act (also known as the Addison Act, after its author Dr. Christopher Addison, the then-Minister of Health), which “provided the legal basis for the early post-war state-subsidised housing programme by defining the financial arrangements and relationships between central and local government.”⁵ Inter-war British towns and cities were transformed by this mandate, intended to ensure that those most vulnerable, amongst them the working classes and veterans of war, would have access to quality modern housing.

Around the mid-1930s, much of the United Kingdom began to look towards the Viennese example as a means to address the inter-war housing crisis. References to Vienna’s

⁴ Houses for the People: A Summary of the Powers of Local Authorities Under the Housing of Working Classes Act, 1890, and the Use of Which Has Been and Can Be Made of Them, London 1899, S. 2.

⁵ Roger Smith and Paul Whysall: The Addison Act and the Local Authority Response. Housing Policy Formulation and Implementation in Nottingham 1917-1922, in: The Town Planning Review 61 (1990) 2, S. 187.

council flats became a frequent fixture in the British press, with royalty showing as much of an interest in Red Vienna as much as local authorities and urban planners. The daily *News Chronicle* reported on 6 March 1936 that King Edward VII visited “Vienna’s Model Flats” in 1935, following this up shortly thereafter with visit to the tenement slums of Glasgow, considered to be some of the poorest housing in the country. Speaking with the Lord Provost of Glasgow, the king mentioned the Karl-Marx-Hof specifically as a model to cope with the dire situation in Scotland’s largest industrial city, with the paper emphasising that “many experts have described these houses as the finest of their kind in Europe.”⁶ Northern cities in particular sought to benefit from continental urbanism, as the widespread use of pre-existing British models had proved to be largely unsuitable for the region following the First World War.

In the British context, social housing is often associated with the 1944 Dudley Report and the building projects of the post-war era that it inspired⁷; however, the historical debates and practices go back much further. As Cheryl Buckley has noted, “[h]ow to improve the lives of the working class and the poor in Britain was a key concern for social reformers, architects and designers, and local and national governments... From the middle of the nineteenth century, reformers had understood the necessity of improving the living conditions, diet, and material environment of those with low incomes.”⁸ Late Victorian workers’ housing projects had been built by industrial employers aimed at creating model communities for their own workforces—these included Saltaire (1851), connected to the textile mill owned by Sir Titus Salt in Bradford; Bournville (1879), for those employed by the Cadbury’s chocolate factory outside of Birmingham; and Port Sunlight (1888), for workers at the Lever Brothers soap factory on the outskirts of Liverpool. Slightly later, New Earswick

⁶ About Time Better Houses Were Found, in: *News Chronicle*, 6. March 1936.

⁷ S. Martin Gaskell: *Model Housing: From the Great Exhibition to the Festival of Britain*, London 1987, S. 109.

⁸ Cheryl Buckley: *From York to New Earswick: Reforming Working-Class Homes, 1899-1914*, in *Studies in the Decorative Arts* 16 (Fall-Winter 2008-2009) 1, S. 96.

(1902-1904) advocated for more of a mixed model, comprising workers and managers based at the Rowntree Factory in York, as well as other working class communities wishing to be rehoused. Seebohm Rowntree in particular noted the need for an inclusive community that provided for men, women and children of all generations; it was with such prescriptions in mind that the architects Raymond Unwin and Richard Barry Parker, who would go on to design Letchworth and Welwyn Garden City, planned an “overall layout [that] allowed for communality by placing streets at right angles and in small closes, and by putting large rear gardens back to back so as to enable informal social interaction.”⁹

One major challenge to the realisation of these projects was that the harsh effects of nineteenth-century industrialism had taken their toll on both the landscape and people of northern English cities such as Manchester and Leeds. This made it virtually impossible to implement the utopian ideals of the garden city movement, as set forth by Ebenezer Howard in his 1898 publication *To-morrow: A Peaceful Path to Real Reform* (re-published with substantial revisions in 1902 as *Garden Cities of To-morrow*). While Howard was indeed concerned with the clearance of Victorian inner-city slums, his famous concept of the greenbelt was far better suited to the larger open plots of London’s outer suburbs.¹⁰ The reality of inner-city living necessitated a different approach, and planners began to recognise that massive urban blocks, in the style of Viennese council estates, could offer a healthy and modern solution for densely populated Northern cities. Furthermore, the amalgamation of the model workers’ village and the garden city, combined with the comfort of Central European design, was seen as a means to cultivate a sense of sociable community at Quarry Hill.

⁹ Zit. n. Buckley, *From York to New Earswick*, S. 104.

¹⁰ See Ebenezer Howard: *Garden Cities of To-morrow*, London 1902, S. 24.

The Viennese Model of Workers' Housing

The inter-war period in Vienna necessitated novel approaches to deal with a desperate housing and general public welfare crisis. When the Habsburg Empire was officially dissolved in October 1918, the Social Democrats, proponents of the Austro-Marxist insistence upon maintaining a multinational Austrian state, found themselves confronted with a much smaller “Alpine republic.” This residual state experienced economic collapse and widespread hunger, as Austria was left with the provinces that were the poorest in natural resources and most expensive to maintain. As the architectural historian Eve Blau has described the situation: “With the drawing of the new national boundaries, Vienna, where both industry and population were concentrated in the new state – its 1.8 million inhabitants in 1918 represented a little less than one-third of the total population of the republic – was suddenly cut off from essential supplies of coal from Silesia and Bohemia, oil from Galicia, and food produced in Hungary, Moravia, and Southern Styria. These resources were now beyond Austrian borders and were inaccessible because of high tariff barriers erected by hostile successor states.”¹¹ The policy of maintaining supranational stability amongst the multiethnic population of the empire was thus transposed onto eliminating class conflict in the post-imperial Austrian state – it should also be noted that the Viennese working classes were by no means a homogenous group, and in terms of ethnicity reflected the diverse nationalities of the Habsburg Empire, while the Viennese middle class identified increasingly with German nationalism.

Alongside food shortages, post-imperial Vienna inherited a massive housing problem that was rooted in the city’s rapid population growth during the nineteenth century. This was made more acute by wartime immigration, the deterioration of old buildings during the war, and the halt to new construction projects. Shortly after the Social Democrats gained control

¹¹ Eve Blau: *The Architecture of Red Vienna, 1919-1934*, Cambridge 1999, S. 26.

of the city, they embarked on a formidable building scheme to create new affordable housing as well as a new “domestic culture” (*Wohnkultur*) for those who were to be re-housed, or to finally have a place to live. Two strands of housing brought a new sense of urbanism to Vienna: the development of settlements, in which workers adapted designs by prominent architects and constructed their own co-operative housing, and the erection of *Gemeindebauten*, or social housing blocks. Furthermore, as evident from the model built by Otto Neurath’s team at the Museum for Society and Economy (*Gesellschafts- und Wirtschaftsmuseum*), this housing programme extended the urban perimeters of the city to encompass the suburbs well beyond the Ringstraße and the Gürtel, the outer ring road that encircled Vienna’s 2nd through 9th districts, and radiated out towards the 10th through 23rd districts (Fig. 1).

By 1934 – which is the date that officially marked the end of Red Vienna due to the Austrian Civil War and the subsequent Austro-Fascist takeover – 400 *Gemeindebauten*, or social housing blocks, were built throughout all of Vienna’s 23 districts, with 64,000 new living units created in order to accommodate the urban population. In the *Gemeindebauten*, workers’ housing was incorporated with a wide range of public facilities, including kindergartens, libraries, medical clinics, theatres, sports facilities, cooperative stores, and public gardens. To complement these massive building projects, the Socialist municipal government also developed a strategic policy of interior design, and I just want to briefly lay out some of the administrative structures that were created to ensure that the residents of post-imperial Vienna engaged actively and thoughtfully with the decoration of their homes. This might seem like a curious thing for a local government to invest in so heavily, however it was connected both to debates on hygiene and the elimination of slums, and to the long Viennese tradition of *Gemütlichkeit*, or culture of cosy relaxation, often in the sociable company of others. An early initiative from 1922 was the idea of Margarete Schütte-

Lihotzky, the most prolific woman architect in Red Vienna. Schütte-Lihotzky is perhaps best known today for her 1926 Frankfurt Kitchen, designed for architect Ernst May *New Frankfurt* social housing project in Germany.¹² The Frankfurt Kitchen became the prototype for the affordable built-in kitchen that would become so popular throughout Europe and the United States, and its influences was also seen in the kitchens at Quarry Hill Flats. Under the guidance of Schütte-Lihotzky, the Public Utility Settlement and Building Material Corporation (*GESIBA: Gemeinwirtschaftlicher Siedlungs- und Baustoffanstalt*) set up a goods trust so that social housing tenants could order quality inexpensive furniture and other necessary household items. While the trust took craftsmanship and style into consideration, the emphasis was really on collaborating with the design industry to raise the general standard of living of the working classes.

As the *Gemeindebauten* were well-integrated into the urban fabric of Vienna, estates were built according to a variety of specifications, and in very different environments. Some of the most desirable included the Reumannhof, designed by Hubert Gessner, a student of the famed modern architect Otto Wagner, and named after Jakob Reumann, the first social democratic mayor of Vienna. The construction of the estate took place from 1924 to 1926, as it was erected on the outskirts of the fairly central 5th district, just within the borders of the Gürtel. While the location allowed for its monumental façade to be seen from Vienna's busy outer ring road, in actuality the estate was comparably small, comprising a mere 478 living units. In 1927, the Rabenhof opened in the post-industrial 3rd district, on the site of candle factory dating back to the 1840s, which had been converted to the Krimsky artillery barracks in 1860.¹³ Designed by architects Heinrich Schmid and Hermann Aichinger, also students of Otto Wagner, the large plot of the former industrial site made a more extensive estate

¹² See Peter Noever, ed.: Margarete Schütte-Lihotzky: Soziale Architektur, Zeitzeugin eines Jahrhunderts, Vienna 1996.

¹³ Die Wohnhauslage der Gemeinde Wien im III. Bezirk, Vienna 1929, S. 5.

possible, where residents of the 1,097 apartments could enjoy life just a few blocks away from the Danube Canal. Three years later, in 1930, the most famous of all Viennese social housing estates opened, and it proved to be the one that would go on to have a massive influence in Leeds: the Karl-Marx-Hof.

The Karl-Marx-Hof is undoubtedly the most famous architectural monument of Red Vienna. Situated about a 15-minute walk from the Danube River, at the edge of the Vienna Woods in the northwest of the city, the semi-rural location of the estate lent itself well to this site of social experimentation. It was also well-connected in terms of rail transport, with easy links between the local Heiligenstadt station and the international Westbahnhof, which made access easy for visitors from across Europe and beyond (including the West Yorkshire Society of Architects). With 1,382 living units for around 5,000 residents, the Karl-Marx-Hof was built from 1926 to 1930 according to designs by another Wagner student, Karl Ehn. At the time, it was the largest building in Vienna, with an impressive façade that graced 1.2 kilometres of the Heiligenstädterstrasse. Ehn's design remains striking in terms of scale and layout; as Eve Blau has noted, the estate was (and continues to be) the size of a small town: "It has two central laundries, two communal bathing facilities with tubs and showers, a dental clinic, maternity clinic, a health insurance office, library, youth hostel, post office, and a pharmacy and twenty-five other commercial premises, including a restaurant and the offices and showroom of the BEST, the city-run furnishing and interior design centre."¹⁴ In the contemporary press, city officials described the Karl-Marx-Hof as a type of garden city in its own right, due to its size as well as the vast array of amenities on offer to residents.¹⁵ This sense of garden city living was enhanced by the estate's prominent archways, which lead to a series of courtyards and communal recreation spaces (Fig. 2). Furthermore, at the front

¹⁴ Zit. n. Blau, *The Architecture of Red Vienna*, S. 324.

¹⁵ *Die Neue Wirtschaft*, 14 October 1926, S. 11.

entrance to the estate stood Otto Hofner's iconic bronze statue of a sower (*Der Sämann*), which served as a confident symbol of working-class strength for the past, present and future.

The Experiment at Quarry Hill, Leeds

The West Yorkshire city of Leeds proved to be a unique site of experimentation for the Viennese social housing model in Britain. From the 1760s onwards, it was an important centre of the Industrial Revolution, known internationally for its factory production of woollen textiles. This early and rapid industrialisation meant that by the inter-war period, certain areas of the city had endured more than 150 years of unsanitary housing and environmental pollution. Housing in the east end of Leeds, including Quarry Hill, was especially dire, with the sanitary map of 1842 depicting dozens of textile mills and dye-works along the River Aire, which formed the geographical border of the area. The proliferation of industry called for nearby workers' housing, which was constructed cheaply, and on every available plot of land. Despite the increasing number of houses becoming available, there were still not enough living units; workers often lived in poorly ventilated cellar apartments, alongside a river that was being used as an open sewer for the factories.¹⁶ By the twentieth century, Leeds had a notorious reputation amongst architects for having some of the worst housing in the entire country, with slums, largely consisting of Yorkshire vernacular "back-to-back" houses, still being condemned and cleared well into the 1930s.¹⁷

When Labour city councillors took hold of local governance in 1933, they took quick action to reverse the city's poor reputation and provide suitable homes for its large working-class population. Among this group of councillors was the East London-born Reverend Charles Jenkinson, a fiery Church of England clergymen and ardent supporter of housing

¹⁶ Zit. n. Ravetz, Model Estate, S. 15-17.

¹⁷ Leeds Housing, in: The Architects' Journal, 17. June 1937, S. 1050.

reform in his adopted home of Leeds. Jenkinson's boisterous personality and commitment to the construction of new workers' housing paved the way for the arrival of the architect Richard Alfred Hardwick (RAH) Livett in Leeds in 1933, and his subsequent appointment as the city's Housing Director in February 1934. Livett's greatest architectural achievement would be the design of Quarry Hill Flats, which he modelled on the Karl-Marx-Hof. Located at the junction of Eastgate and Mabgate, where the industrial east end, characterised by its greyness and stench, met the city centre of Leeds, resplendent with its luxurious Victorian shopping arcades, Livett's Quarry Hill Flats became an iconic symbol of inter-war progress and an engagement with continental sensibilities for the benefit of a deprived community. The area, among many others in Leeds, had been designated for massive slum clearance, however its central location meant highly visible publicity for the erection of a grand housing estate. On the Quarry Hill site alone, 2,790 houses had been demolished by the start of building, with approximately 9,060 people displaced and in need of re-housing.¹⁸ The large plot of land that was made available by the Quarry Hill slum clearance thus offered the ideal conditions for an estate of a similar scale to the Karl-Marx-Hof; in fact, one of the recommendations of the Birmingham-led visit to Vienna in August 1932 was that the building of modern estates on such sites should include no less than 500 individual living units, in the form of flats.¹⁹ This was particularly innovative at the time, as British housing culture, including urban workers' housing, had continued to favour the single-family home with private garden over multi-storey blocks.

¹⁸ Official Programme for the Opening of Quarry Hill Flats, 30. März 1938, S. 5.

¹⁹ City of Birmingham: Report to the Estates and Public Works and Town Planning Committees respectively of the Deputation visiting Germany, Czechoslovakia and Austria in August 1932, S. 70.

Traces of Red Vienna in Leeds

The first section of Quarry Hill Flats opened to the public on 30 March 1938, and proved to be a celebratory affair, with speeches by the Lord Mayor Alderman J. Badlay and Reverend Charles Jenkinson, followed by an inspection of the flats and presentation to the first tenant. 938 dwellings, ranging from two-room to six-room units, with an estimated population of 3,280 people living on the estate.²⁰ Individual blocks carried the names of people who had put Leeds on the map, among them abolitionist and workers' rights campaigner Richard Oastler, and the locomotive pioneer James Kitson. This was a similar practice to the naming of Viennese social housing estates, in which leading figures in the history of Central European social democracy and the history of workers' rights were honoured in this way. Livett's design directly referenced the Karl-Marx-Hof in a number of ways. Dwellings were self-contained, with communal laundries provided for every 500 flats (Fig. 3). Other amenities on the estate included built-in kitchen units inspired by the Frankfurt Kitchen of Margarete Schütte-Lihotzky, sun-facing balconies, playgrounds for children, kindergartens, shops, and a restaurant.

Livett's buildings were placed into dialogue with the Karl-Marx-Hof in subtle ways. The crescent-shaped curve of the buildings, especially that of Oastler House, known as the "Oastler Ellipse" (Fig. 4), were characteristic of many Viennese housing estates. Monumental archways leading to entrances and courtyards, with those of Kitson House perhaps best representative of the Viennese influence (Fig. 5). Despite the cold and damp Yorkshire climate, these outdoor spaces allowed for a tight-knit community to flourish, starting with the very first residents. A photograph of Lupton House, dated 3rd May 1939, shows the interior area of the courtyard complex, with women chatting underneath washing lines in the yet-to-be-cultivated gardens while they watch children play on the slide across the green (Fig. 6).

²⁰ Programme for the Opening of Quarry Hill Flats, S. 6.

Livett's courtyard designs served to create micro-communities on the estate, in a very similar way to the successful phenomenon of sociability at the Karl-Marx-Hof. Finally, exterior windows were adorned with the flower boxes that had so greatly impressed the West Yorkshire architects upon their summer encounter with the "humanised architecture" of the Karl-Marx-Hof, with the intention of bringing a renewed sense of optimism to a city emerging from the ashes of Victorian industrialization.

Unfortunately, the optimism at Quarry Hill was not to last long. Britain entered the Second World War in September 1939, bringing a halt to the continued construction of the estate. During the war, Quarry Hill Flats became home to a mixed community of vulnerable residents, including Jewish refugees from Central and Eastern Europe, as well as internees from Japanese occupied territories and refugees from Malaya, Burma and Egypt. This diversity, however, remained a source of pride for who grew up in Quarry Hill. As a Mrs. E. Murphy reminisced in a letter from July 1985, "Quarry Hill was a community of English, Irish (2nd generation), Italian, Polish, Jewish. Poor working class people mostly, very clean homes...My father very proud [sic] of his roots always said Quarry Hill was the best in Leeds."²¹ The first occupants after the war were hundreds of returning troops, many of whom had fought at the Battle of Dunkirk.²² The estate even became legendary for its rumoured place in Nazi military strategy, with residents remembering being told that "when the Nazis invaded England, London would be 'bombed off the map' and Hitler intended to settle his storm troopers and hierarchy in the Quarry Hill Flats, as the base for his future activities."²³ The irony of this was that the very model for Quarry Hill Flats was the site of early fascist violence in Vienna; during the Austrian Civil War of February 1934, the Karl-Marx-Hof

²¹ Letter from Mrs. E. Murphy to Dr. David Fleming, Leeds City Museum, dated July 1985, Leeds Local and Family History Library, File LG363.5 OLD.

²² Quarry Hill – Eighth Wonder of the World, in: Yorkshire Evening Post, 30. June 1990.

²³ Letter from Mrs. Barbara J. Meadows to Dr. David Fleming, Leeds City Museum, dated 16. August 1985, Leeds Local and Family History Library, File LG363.5 OLD.

became a battlefield between the Austro-Fascists and the Social Democrats, with residential flats being bombarded by fascist artillery.²⁴ The fascists emerged victorious, driving many Jews and socialists to flee Vienna for safer shores, including England, where a sizeable community ended up in West Yorkshire and some perhaps in Quarry Hill itself.

Quarry Hill Flats became unfairly associated with anti-social behaviour as early as the 1950s. In 1951 the BBC aired a radio drama feature called “The Quarry Hill Experiment,” in which the estate was declared a “dump” and portrayed in a negative light by actors instead of residents (who were never consulted during the writing of the script). Those living on the estate staged protests in an effort to show the true vibrancy of the community, which was showcased in annual events such as the carnival, which proved to be a popular feature of the Leeds city calendar. Nevertheless, the BBC never apologised or made any corrections to the programme. The biased press continued with national tabloid coverage through the 1950s and 1960s, in which the estate was condemned in the *Daily Mirror* on several occasions.²⁵ The nation-wide ridicule continued into the early 1970s, when the working-class community at Quarry Hill became satirized in the British television sitcom *Queenie’s Castle* featuring Diana Dors and filmed on the estate from 1970 to 1972. The combination of such negative external perceptions and neglectful maintenance on the part of Leeds City Council led to the demolition of Quarry Hill Flats in 1978, just forty years after they were first opened. Despite the destruction of the estate, its historical existence continues to be a reminder of the international teachings of Red Vienna, a time when a West Yorkshire city council looked towards the Austrian capital as a pragmatic model for housing working-class communities.

²⁴ See Erika Weinzierl: *Der Februar 1934 und die Folgen für Österreich*, Vienna 1994.

²⁵ John Killingbeck, Quarry Hill Flats Tenants’ Association Papers, Leeds Local and Family History Library, File LQ331.833 Q27.



Fig. 1
Homebuilding programme of Vienna: Units built as of 1930
 Three-dimensional model
 Museum for Society and Economy, 1930



Fig. 2
 Karl-Marx-Hof with *Sower* statue by Otto Hofner, 1929



Fig. 3
Quarry Hill Flats, Communal Laundry, 1939



Fig. 4
Quarry Hill Flats, Oastler House, 1939

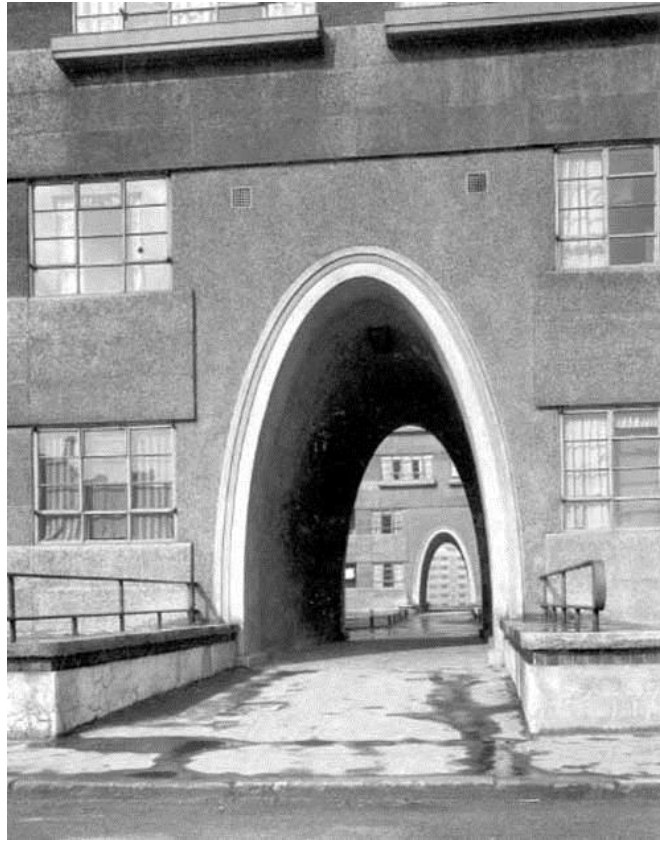


Fig. 5
Quarry Hill Flats, Kitson House, Entrance, 1939



Fig. 6
Quarry Hill Flats, Lupton House, 1939