



V&A acquires a fragment of Robin Hood Gardens, East London, as a defining example of Brutalist architecture and social housing.

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The Victoria and Albert Museum, London (V&A), has acquired a three-storey section of Robin Hood Gardens, comprising both exterior facades and interiors of a maisonette flat. The fragment is 8.8 metres high, 5.5 metres wide and 8 metres deep. Completed in 1972, Robin Hood Gardens, located in Poplar, East London, is a nationally important and internationally recognised work of Brutalist architecture. The building was designed by Alison (1928 -1993) and Peter Smithson (1923 - 2003), British architects of lasting international reputation. It is now being demolished as part of the redevelopment of the area.

Robin Hood Gardens is a significant example of the Brutalist movement in architecture, and joins the V&A's world-renowned architecture collections. Brutalism arose in the 1950s in reaction to the sleek and elegant glass structures of modernism and was characterised by the dramatic use of exposed concrete to create facades of often repeating geometrical forms. Not only a style but also a philosophy, Brutalism sought to reframe the relationship between society, architecture and urbanism. The Smithsons are credited with coining the term Brutalism.

Robin Hood Gardens was built by the Greater London Council (GLC) and later transferred to the local authority of Tower Hamlets. The choice of Alison and Peter Smithson as architects gave this wife and husband team their first and only opportunity to create a council estate. Robin Hood Gardens was the culmination of their research on and vision for social housing. It is distinctive for its noise-reducing features, like exterior concrete fins, and for its elevated walkways, known as 'streets in the sky', intended to foster interaction between neighbours.

Alison and Peter Smithson said that they regarded Robin Hood Gardens 'as a demonstration of a more enjoyable way of living ... a model, an exemplar, of a new mode of urban organisation.' Both during their lifetime and since, there has been heated debate as to whether or not the building successfully realised these aspirations. No other work of British social housing has divided opinion to such a great extent.

The announcement in 2008 of the intent to demolish Robin Hood Gardens prompted one of the largest ever campaigns in architectural preservation, initiated by the Twentieth Century Society and Building Design and supported by an international array of

architects, including Richard Rogers and Zaha Hadid, as well as leading architectural historians. In 2015, the application to give Robin Hood Gardens listed status was turned down and demolition was approved. The site is now under development to replace the 252 flats with over 1,500 new homes. This acquisition has been made possible by partnership-working between the development partners, Swan Housing Association, London Borough of Tower Hamlets and the Mayor of London who together have collaborated with the V&A Team and muf architecture/art in the removal.

Dr Neil Bingham, Curator of Contemporary Architectural Collections, said: 'Robin Hood Gardens is an internationally recognised building by Alison and Peter Smithson, the protagonists and intellectual leaders of the Brutalist movement. When demolition of their social housing project was imminent, Liza Fior (Partner of muf architecture/art), who was at the end of her year-long residency at the V&A, proposed that the Museum should collect a fragment of the building and worked with us to help secure it. The V&A's acquisition of a section of Robin Hood Gardens, complete with front and back facades, will motivate new thinking and research into this highly experimental period of British architectural and urban history.'

Dr Christopher Turner, Keeper of the Design, Architecture and Digital Department, said: 'Since its foundation, the V&A has been preserving and exhibiting large fragments of architecture - from the 17th-century timber facade of Sir Paul Pindar's House in Bishopsgate, London, to the gilded Music Room salvaged from Norfolk House in St. James's Square, London. This three-storey section of Robin Hood Gardens, complete with 'street in the sky', is an important piece of Brutalism, worth preserving for future generations. It is also an object that will stimulate debate around architecture and urbanism today - it raises important questions about the history and future of housing in Britain, and what we want from our cities.'

Neil Baron, Project Director for Blackwall Reach at Swan commented: 'At Swan we recognise the acute housing need across East London, which is why we are delighted to be working with our partners to bring over 1500 new homes to Blackwall Reach and increasing the number of social rented homes to over 570 homes. However, we also acknowledge the importance of cataloguing and celebrating the diverse and vibrant architecture of the Capital and the history of the communities that live in these buildings. That is why we are delighted to have worked with our partners at the Victoria and Albert Museum, Tower Hamlets, The Mayor of London, muf architecture / art, Hills Construction and Northeast Demolition to facilitate the acquisition of these elements from Robin Hood Gardens for the V&A. Through these close working partnerships, we have been able to ensure that a part of Robin Hood Gardens will remain in a public collection for future generations.'

## About the V&A's Architecture Collection

The V&A is the world's leading museum of art and design with collections unrivalled in their scope and diversity. It was established to make works of art available to all and to inspire British designers and manufacturers. Today, the V&A's collections, which span over 5000 years of human creativity in virtually every medium and from many parts of the world, continue to intrigue, inspire and inform. As the home of the national collection of architecture, the V&A holds monumental plastercasts, large-scale architectural fragments and entire historic rooms as well as models, drawings and sketchbooks by major British and international architects.

For further PRESS information please contact Kate Morais in the V&A press office on +44 (0) 20 7942 2503 or email [k.morais@vam.ac.uk](mailto:k.morais@vam.ac.uk) (not for publication).

A selection of press images are available to download free of charge from [pressimages.vam.ac.uk](http://pressimages.vam.ac.uk)

## About Swan Housing Association:

Swan Housing Association was first formed in 1994 and for almost a quarter of a century have been providing high-quality affordable homes to rent and buy. Today Swan operates in East London and Essex and locally manages over 11,000 homes, with a secured development pipeline of 3500 homes, many of which are being built by NU living, our in house developer. With ambitious plans to build a further 10,000 homes by 2026 to meet housing need, Swan's social purpose underpins everything we do. To date our commercial activities have generated almost £60m which we have reinvested in the homes and services for our residents

Swan's mission is to "deliver effective services, enterprising solutions and exemplary homes and communities" whilst continuing to provide excellent housing services that meet the challenging needs of the communities of East London and Essex, delivering neighbourhoods that are healthy, vibrant and sustainable.

This acquisition is made possible thanks to:

Swan Group

London Borough of Tower Hamlets

Mayor of London

muf architecture/art

Hill Partnerships

Northeast demolition