

Lawn Road Flats (The Isokon) — A New Vision of Urban Living

BY JOHN ALLAN

So much of modern architecture's early history depended on a handful of courageous pioneers. One of the first Modern Movement buildings in England was the achievement of an unlikely trio – a plywood salesman and his psychotherapist wife, and a Canadian part-time journalist turned architect. This article and the accompanying text by Magnus Englund tell the extraordinary story of the Lawn Road Flats in Hampstead, London – their origins and heyday, the linked program of furniture design, their declining postwar fortunes and ruination, and then their recent and remarkable rescue and restoration to become a beacon of modern heritage and the epitome of progressive 21st century urban living.

The pioneering Pritchards

Lawn Road Flats in Hampstead, north London (also known as The Isokon) stood at the cutting edge of modern architecture in Britain when the building was opened in July 1934. The project stemmed from the meeting of Jack and Rosemary (Molly) Pritchard, the clients, with the Canadian architect Wells Coates (1895-1958), to whom they had been attracted on account of his innovative work in showroom design and his inventive use of plywood. Jack Pritchard (1899-1992) had become the British marketing manager for the Estonian plywood company Venesta in 1925 and through Le Corbusier had already engaged Charlotte Perriand to design an exhibition stand for the firm at Olympia, London in 1929.

That same year Jack and Molly acquired the site in Lawn Road and initially considered building a pair of conventional detached houses. But being increasingly interested in the progressive architectural developments on the Continent they soon abandoned this idea in favor of an altogether more radical program based on the *existenzminimum* dwelling experiments in Germany and promoted through the international organization CIAM. In 1930 clients and architect embarked on a European study tour and visited the Weisenhoff housing exhibition in Stuttgart, a summation of the progressive architectural design on the Continent since the war which showcased works by the leading modern architects Mies van der Rohe, Le Corbusier, JJP Oud, Walter Gropius, Bruno Taut and others. At this point, apart from a few single villas in superficially modern style, there was nothing in England to compare with these European developments. As the Russian master Berthold Lubetkin (who arrived in London at this time) would later remark,

“after all the energy and diversity of the Continent, England seemed about 50 years behind, as though lost in a deep provincial sleep”. It is for this reason, in addition to its unusually radical accommodation program and illustrious social associations, that the Isokon – a manifesto of progressive urban living – occupies a unique place in the history of modernism in Britain.

The detailed Lawn Road brief was largely developed by Molly Pritchard (1900-85) with Coates and eventually produced the 4-storey gallery access block we see today. Formed in monolithic reinforced concrete the building contained 22 single flats, 4 double flats, 3 studio flats, staff quarters, kitchens and a large garage. The Pritchards and their children occupied the rooftop penthouses. Services included shoe cleaning, laundry, bed-mak-

ing and meal deliveries from a staff kitchen sent up by a dumb waiter in the core of the building. Wells Coates' parallel interest in boat building and product design is evident in the intricate fitting out of the interiors, which aimed to cater for young professionals with a mobile lifestyle. The studio units are only 25 m² in area but include a kitchen, a dressing room and a bathroom alongside the main living/sleeping space. The importance of the dressing room with its built-in storage was particularly stressed as a key factor that distinguished the Isokon units from the average student bedsitter with clothes and clutter typically strewn over the furniture or crammed into a clumsy wardrobe. The experiment showed that *existenzminimum* could be elegant as well as economical. Advance lettings were stimulated by exhibiting a showflat mock-up in 1933, and the building was successfully occupied soon after completion in 1934. By this time refugees from the political developments in Europe were beginning to arrive in England, distinguished émigrés including Walter Gropius, Marcel Breuer and László Moholy-Nagy all of whom were taken in by Pritchard – Gropius and his wife Ise on a rent-free basis. Traveling light with minimal possessions, such residents proved fortuitously to be the demographic for whom the Isokon was ideally suited.

The Isobar – a social hub

In 1937 the staff kitchen, originally situated on the ground floor but insufficiently used, was

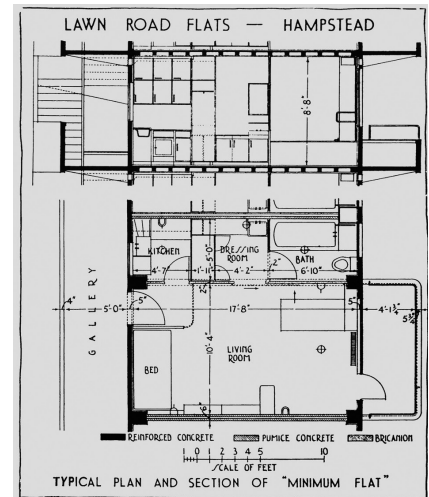


01 Wells Coates, Lawn Road Flats (The Isokon), London, UK, 1933-34. © John Maltby, Pritchard Papers, UEA c. 1960.

02 Marcel Breuer with Ise and Walter Gropius at the Isokon's 1st birthday party, 1935. © Pritchard Papers, UEA.



04 Wells Coates, Lawn Road Flats (The Isokon), London, UK, 1933-34. Typical Studio plan and section. © The Architectural Review.



03 Wells Coates, Lawn Road Flats (The Isokon), London, UK, 1933-34. Typical Studio interior, 1934. © Pritchard Papers, UEA.



05 Isokon Typical Dressing Room, 1934. © Pritchard Papers, UEA.

reconfigured as a restaurant and bar, designed by Marcel Breuer with F.R.S. Yorke and named the Isobar with a decked outdoor area at the rear of the building. Its manager was Philip Harben, who after WWII became the BBC's first TV celebrity chef. The building and its club became a magnet for intellectual life in north London. Famous residents included novelist Agatha Christie and her husband, the archaeologist Max Mallowan, the Soviet NKVD spy Arnold Deutsch who was controller of the Cambridge Spy Ring, the German-born economist and Soviet spy Jürgen Kuczynski, author Nicholas Monserrat, textile designers Jacques and Jacqueline Groag, architects Egon Riss, Arthur Korn and later James Stirling. Regulars at the Isobar also included sculptors Henry Moore and Barbara Hepworth, painter Ben Nicholson, whose studios were nearby, and Sir Julian Huxley, secretary of the Zoological Society of London. Indeed, if Hampstead was the center of 1930s intellectual life in London, then the Isobar was the epicenter.

Wartime and after

Gropius, whose time in England was frustrated by constant lack of sufficient work, was to leave for Harvard in 1937, with Breuer following shortly afterwards. But Jack Pritchard stayed in London during WWII while Molly Pritchard and their two sons Jonathan and Jeremy left for the United States and later Canada. Being made of reinforced concrete the Isokon building remained popular and despite several bombs in the near vicinity, survived the Blitz. It was repainted brown as it was feared its distinctive form could serve as a navigation aid for German bombers. Although the 1930s would prove to be the Isokon's "golden years", normal life (albeit with rationing) resumed after the war and in 1955 the Pritchards staged a 21st-birthday party for the building at which the architectural writer Nikolaus Pevsner (who would later be instrumental in the listing of the building) made a speech, and letters from Walter Gro-

pius and Marcel Breuer were read out. Wells Coates, as well as many pre-war residents, attended the event.

Finding the responsibilities for its upkeep increasingly onerous the Pritchards sold the building in 1969 to the *New Statesman* magazine, who converted the Isobar into flats. They proved to be less than ideal owners and in turn sold it on to Camden Council in 1972. It was listed Grade II by English Heritage in 1974 and raised to Grade I in 1999. Despite this statutory protection it was poorly maintained and began to deteriorate badly. Had the building not been listed it would almost certainly have been demolished and the site redeveloped. However, after a dedicated campaign to save the building (in which **docomomo** UK was a key participant) it was sold to the Notting Hill Housing Group, a progressive London-based social landlord, who undertook the major restoration project with Avanti Architects which is described in the next part of this essay.

06 Wells Coates, Lawn Road Flats (The Isokon), London, UK, 1933-34. Condition before restoration work began. © Avanti Architects, 2000.



07 Wells Coates, Lawn Road Flats (The Isokon), London, UK, 1933-34. Restoration completed by Avanti Architects. © Nicholas Kane, courtesy Avanti Architects, 2005.



Ruin and rescue

By the early years of this century the Isokon was emptied of its remaining residents and became uninhabitable. The block was boarded up and services cut off. Pre-contract survey work by Avanti indicated that every aspect of the building inside and out would require considerable repair and upgrade. However, the guiding principle of the project was that the original layout and character of the building should be honored and restored as authentically as possible. Thus, whilst the minimal size of the studio units might otherwise have suggested they be conjoined to form larger 1-bedroom flats, it was deemed essential to retain the original plan form developed by Coates and the Pritchards as an element of intrinsic heritage significance. Only the penthouse plan was altered by the removal of a non-original partition that had been introduced after the Pritchards' departure to form an additional bedroom. This unique unit has thus now been restored to its original form.

The scope of repair and upgrade work throughout the building was comprehensive but was all undertaken within the protocols of Grade I listing and in close collaboration with English Heritage. Such projects invariably begin with the roof, and the Isokon was no exception. The defective original coverings were all removed and local repairs carried out to the concrete slab. New tapered cellular glass insulation was laid on the structural deck and new asphalt layers installed with enhanced drainage channels, re-formed rainwater outlets and curb upstands. The galleries and balconies were relaid in paving quality asphalt, while the penthouse terrace was finished with promenade paviers.

Inevitably the concrete envelope was in need of major renovation. The original structure consisted of 10 cm monolithic reinforced concrete walls supported on a 3.25 m internal column grid with tee beams supporting hollow pot floors. These features were all expressed internally in order to maintain the streamlined exterior image. The external façades were cast against standardized metal panels, whilst internally a lining of 2.5 cm compressed cork insulation was used as permanent shuttering and plastered. This build-up fell woefully short of current thermal insulation standards and had also been damaged by a combination of weather ingress, trapped moisture behind the many external layers of non-vapor-permeable coatings, and condensation occurring between the cork and the internal concrete wall-face. All surfaces needed to be stripped back to the concrete substrate, followed by local repairs in areas of spalling and damaged rebar, re-facing with fairing mortar and finishing with elastomeric anti-carbonation coatings. Cracks in several locations were re-formed as joints, using scrim "bandages" and elastomeric pointing materials. A small area showing the successive layers of overcoating during the building's lifetime was retained and protected below the escape staircase as a historic record. An aspect of particular interest to local observers and Modern Movement historians was the restoration of the authentic façade color – which was not white as many had assumed from pre-war black-and-white photography and subsequent over-coating, but a subtle shade of pink. The interior was re-lined with a high-performance thermal laminate board, then skimmed and decorated, achieving an insulation value consistent with current regulations.

The original windows had already been replaced in 1979 with poor quality aluminum

substitutes, all of which in our project were replaced again with steel framed low E, argon-filled double-glazed units to the original fenestration pattern. These were polyester powder-coated to the original color, this being discovered by taking paint scrapes from the matching steel door frames which had survived (albeit damaged and overpainted) on account of having been cast in with the monolithic concrete walls.

To achieve the requisite standard of fire separation and acoustic insulation required removal and rebuilding of the party walls. These had comprised thin skins of pumice blockwork, but were replaced on the same gridlines with twinned walls of metal stud fireproof plasterboard partition. Other internal linings had been formed in an expanded metal lathe material called Bricanion, which had deteriorated and also required replacement with metal studwork and plasterboard. The extensive interior joinery and cabinetry work was in various states of disrepair. Wherever found in a salvageable condition it was retained and refurbished; elsewhere it was replaced to identical details and profiles. Minute plan adjustments were made to accommodate standard-sized fridges and washing machines within the kitchens and dressing rooms respectively.

All the building services required renewal. A particular challenge was the heating and hot water system. The original central heating system had long since been dismantled and clumsily replaced by an array of externally mounted heating distribution pipes – removal of which had been an insistent stipulation of English Heritage. Eventually after detailed consideration of electric and gas alternatives we settled on a system of individual gas-fired combination boilers mounted within new casings above the bathroom toilets, thereby

enabling each resident to control and monitor their own energy consumption. This solution also avoided the cost of a new sub-station, which would have been required to meet the additional load of an electric based system and severely challenged our budget. A small but satisfying detail was the bespoke flue terminal to each boiler devised with the approval of the gas supply authority. This avoided the conspicuous protrusions of conventional balanced flue fittings and enabled reuse of the original ventilation apertures in the rear wall. Other features such as Wells Coates' sliding doors and original D handles, or the characteristic Best & Lloyd dressing room wall lights, were either retained and refurbished or, in the case of the lights, re-sourced from the original manufacturers.

The Pritchards' penthouse had been fitted out with extensive use of plywood to further Venesta's promotional agenda. Wall and floor paneling was employed in the main rooms, with an elaborate array of fitted cupboards in the bedroom incorporating ingenious retractable pull-out ply flaps to bring items in deep storage to the front. These installations were in various states of repair, but where salvageable were all restored to a viable condition, with missing fragments being matched and pieced in. This work was carried out by Nick Goldfinger (grandson of the architect Ernő Goldfinger) an expert restorer and cabinet-maker, further enriching the Isokon story. Ernő Goldfinger's own house, 2 Willow Road, now owned by the National Trust and also restored by Avanti Architects, is a short walk away in Hampstead.

A key factor in the winning bid had been the retention of the majority of units for social housing, a proposal that aligned closely with Camden Council's planning policies and also reflected the ethos of the Pritchards' original vision. Re-opened in 2004 the Isokon thus now contains 36 flats, 24 of which (the studios) are occupied on a shared equity basis by key workers such as nurses and teachers, who otherwise could not hope to live in this area of London. The remaining units were marketed for sale to help balance the project budget. In the 14 years since the Isokon was re-opened

it has remained fully occupied with minimal turnover in the resident community and any vacancies being filled instantly – such is the attraction of the block in its restored state.

The Isokon Gallery

The original Avanti Architects' scheme, and a part of the Planning and Listed Building Consent, had included a proposal to convert the garage into a small museum. This was motivated by the desire to secure a communal element in compensation for the lost Isobar, which it had been impossible to reinstate in the main rescue project – partly for financial and partly for regulatory reasons. A new vehicle was created for this purpose, the Isokon Gallery Trust (Chairman John Allan, Director Magnus Englund, Treasurer Fiona Lamb) and in July 2014 on the 80th anniversary of the original building launch the Isokon Gallery opened with an exhibition that tells in detail the story of the building, its residents, its rescue, the plywood connection and the Isokon Furniture Company. It is staffed by volunteers with free entry 11 am to 4 pm every Saturday and Sunday from March through October each year.

The permanent exhibition is supplemented by a changing seasonal display reflecting some aspect of, or anniversary in, the building's history. In 2015 Marcel Breuer was featured to mark the 80th anniversary of his arrival at the Isokon in 1935. The following year the theme was penguins – the international publishing house founded by Allen Lane, the celebrated pool designed by Lubetkin at London Zoo, and the Penguin Donkey – one of the classic pieces in the Isokon furniture program designed by Egon Riss to carry up to 80 volumes of the new paperback books. In 2017 the display featured Walter Gropius whose stay at the Isokon ended 80 years earlier when he emigrated to the USA. In the four seasons since it opened the Gallery has received over 10,000 visitors from all corners of the world. All are welcome and members of **docomomo** International are particularly encouraged to visit the Gallery when they are in London.

Lessons of Lawn Road

The rescue of Lawn Road Flats demonstrates that even early Modern Movement icons in extremities of dereliction are capable of rehabilitation to become viable 21st century properties that can satisfy current expectations of amenity and comfort while at the same time honoring the heritage significance for which they are celebrated. This building, sometimes referred to as London's Narkomfin, was like Ginzburg's Moscow icon, a beacon of modern design that has now become modern again.

But beyond the technical proofs, Lawn Road/The Isokon also has other lessons. In the current housing crisis that is poisoning London, as many other major cities, one cannot but reflect on its significance as a brave example of what can be achieved when altruism and commitment combine with progressive design ideas about urban living. The empty promises of successive UK governments reveal the utter failure of political will or imagination to address the demand for genuinely affordable social housing. Meanwhile, private developers and volume house-builders, profiting from perpetual shortage, have neither the interest nor the incentive to solve the problem, and most local authorities are either politically indisposed or economically too weak to pursue any meaningful social housing programs. The Isokon's contribution may be numerically modest, but its enduring integrity and optimism stand as a shaming rebuke to today's urban planners and politicians – a challenge to do better.

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08 Wells Coates, Lawn Road Flats (The Isokon), London, UK, 1933-34. Restoration by Avanti Architects. © Tom de Gay, courtesy Avanti Architects, 2014.