



**one below the queen**  
rowley way speaks for itself



## INTRODUCTION

Residents living on The Alexandra and Ainsworth Estate (commonly known as Rowley Way) have seen their landmark estate depicted on film and TV for years, often incorrectly as a crime ridden hell-hole. As well as film crews the estate is a favourite among architects who come from all over the world to photograph and write about it.

Residents decided to make their own film exploring the ideas behind the design of the estate and in the process interviewed neighbours, the architect who designed the estate and others. An intergenerational group of residents worked with an arts and educational charity to decide on themes and questions to explore. Throughout the production the residents learnt practical film making skills, conducted interviews and operated the camera and sound.

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## HISTORY

In 1965, the London Borough of Camden was gaining a reputation as one of the most progressive boroughs in the country and had appointed Sydney Cook as Borough Architect and Director of Housing. Cook was constantly challenging the government's push for high-rise buildings and he started by appointing the architect Neave Brown who set about delivering a series of low rise, high density schemes, which would include one of Europe's great social housing projects: Alexandra Road, officially known as the Alexandra and Ainsworth Estate.

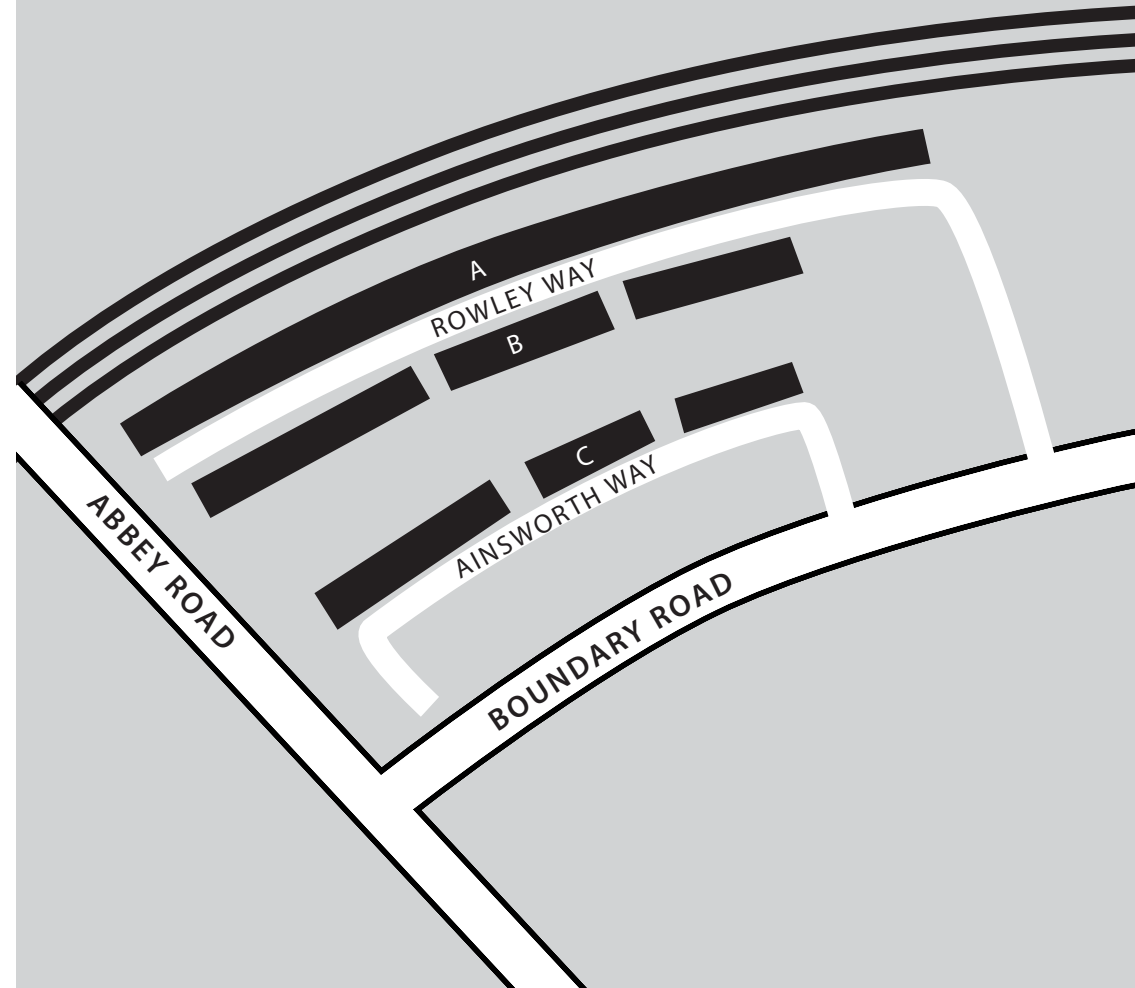
Neave Brown's design was largely finalised in 1968 but the completion of the project was delayed by difficult site conditions and the inevitable problems when using specialised construction on such a large scale. In the end, the project ended up costing £20.9 million and was completed in 1978; it arguably remains the most expensive social housing ever constructed in this country.

The 6.47-hectare site of Alexandra Road near South Hampstead station (the size of 12 football pitches) lies between the railway line into Euston to the North and the brick blocks of the Ainsworth estate to the south. The key

elements of the estate are two parallel pedestrian streets separated by a park, one a kilometre long, formed by two rows of terraces against the railway, and the other by a further row of terraces forming a street with the existing Ainsworth Estate. The two streets, Rowley and Ainsworth Way, provide 520 homes for over 1600 people (and over 700 units when including the Ainsworth Estate).

In the 1980s, with the arrival of Thatcher and rate capping, the appearance of Alexandra Road, conceived as a building that would require regular maintenance, deteriorated rapidly. With repairs and maintenance funded by revenue, and revenue reduced by rate capping, the public areas, concrete and other elements became dirty and unkempt.

In 1989 a group of residents dissatisfied with the inadequate repairs being carried out by Camden, began a petition to return the scheme to its original glory. This campaign headed by resident Elizabeth Knowles and Christopher Dean of DOCOMOMO [an organisation working to protect modernist buildings] succeeded in 1994 in getting a Grade II-star listing for the estate. So Alexandra Road became not only the youngest and largest building ever to be listed, but also the first modern housing estate.



Following these tumultuous years, the estate has grown to be regarded as one of the most important examples of social housing in Europe: displayed in international exhibitions; studied in universities; and heralded in the media. Such accolades are recognition of the estate's success at providing residents with flats that are generously planned and beautifully detailed within the sweeping stepped, concrete streets of Rowley and Ainsworth Way. Neave Brown proved with Alexandra Road that low-rise housing could be delivered in the heart of a city at the density of a tower block but with the quality of public space that high-rise seldom attains.

In 1990, Martin Pawley wrote in the Guardian that 'Alexandra Road is like an epic silent film. It suffers from having been released into a different world to that which it was conceived...set on the very cusp of the change from socialism to the me-generation.' Twenty years on, Alexandra Road still retains its cinematic wonder but having suffered the problems that have blighted much of Britain's post-war social housing it is emerging from the shadows, not only as a valuable part of our national heritage but as a viable example of how mass housing can succeed.

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