

Privacy, the Housing Research Unit at the University of Edinburgh and the Courtyard House, 1959–70

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ABSTRACT

With a focus on post-war Britain (and Scotland in particular), this article contributes to the literature on the history of ‘community’ by examining its apparent inverse, namely privacy. In particular, it explores the interest that emerged in 1960s Britain in a type of housing that was considered to provide enhanced privacy for residents — the courtyard house. The article begins by looking at the ways in which privacy was considered in official documentation on homes and housing in the post-war period in both England and Wales, and Scotland. It then turns to the work of the University of Edinburgh’s Housing Research Unit in the 1960s, which included not just the design and construction of housing schemes, but also social investigation of the built results. The article examines the ‘urban’ housing designed in Cumbernauld and the ‘rural’ counterpart in Prestonpans, both of which were intended to provide enhanced privacy for residents. It then looks at the unit’s evaluation of the completed courtyard housing built at Prestonpans as well as another survey undertaken in Dundee, both of which explored the residents’ experience of privacy. Overall, the article argues that the idea of privacy, as understood by designers and experienced by residents, played an important role in post-war housing, as part of the ambition not just to improve standards, but also to provide new choices.

In 1966, researchers from the University of Edinburgh interviewed the residents of a small housing estate at Inchview, Prestonpans (a mining town in East Lothian, eight miles east of Edinburgh).¹ Consisting of forty-five single-storey houses, the estate had been designed by members of the university’s Housing Research Unit (HRU) as a research and demonstration project. Completed in late 1962, it was thought to be the first realised estate of modern ‘courtyard housing’ not only in Scotland but also the wider United Kingdom (Fig. 1).² This type of house — sometimes known as a ‘patio house’ — typically comprises an L-shaped building wrapped around two sides of a private courtyard garden, on to which the house’s main windows face. At Prestonpans, the other two sides of the courtyard are formed either by the blank walls of neighbouring houses or by tall fences, meaning that this space is completely screened. The pedestrian walkways that cut through the Inchview estate were similarly intended to be private, despite their connecting role, as few windows overlook them. Some residents told the HRU researchers that they felt isolated at home on account of their limited view, but for

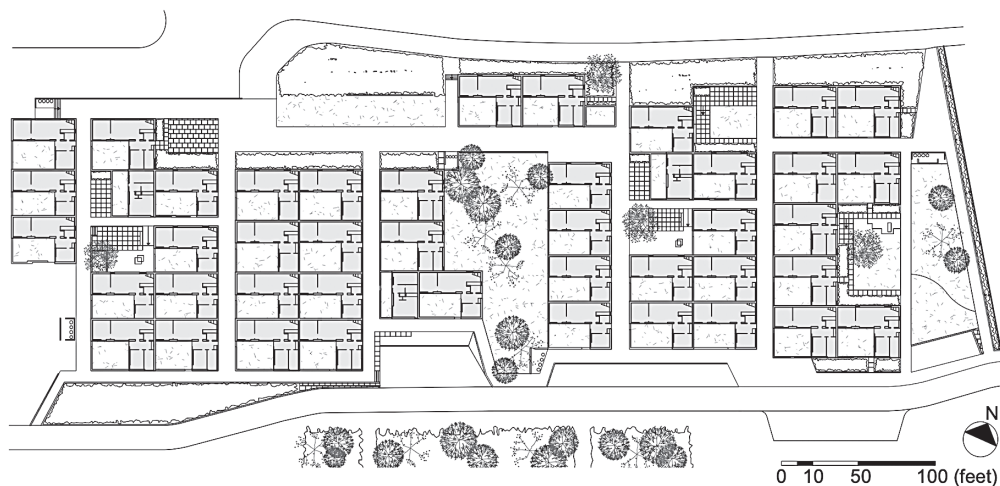


Fig. 1. *Inchview, Prestonpans, Housing Research Unit site layout, redrawn by Nick Mols, 2021*

others the tightly planned grid of inward-looking houses offered new freedoms. One resident remarked of their courtyard garden that ‘it’s terrific, we go out in the summer without bathing suits on and no one can see us’.³

The housing at Prestonpans was one of several projects in Scotland and England designed and/or investigated by the HRU between the end of the 1950s and the early 1970s. This work has not eluded attention; the unit’s place within the histories of post-war architectural research and education has previously been noted.⁴ The present article takes a different focus, however, by locating this work within the architectural and social histories of mass housing. Its starting point is the HRU’s interest in housing density, and especially the researchers’ exploration of courtyard housing layouts. The history of this kind of housing was set out in 1973 by Duncan Macintosh, who examined its morphological aspects in a range of global settings.⁵ Macintosh’s account was published at the height of enthusiasm in Britain for ‘high-density low-rise’ approaches to planning, of which courtyard housing was one; indeed, it contextualised what were then contemporary debates about urban form.⁶ The present article does not simply detail the HRU’s work in order to show that these debates found novel expression in Scotland. Rather, inspired by the HRU’s particular interest in the relationships between housing form and privacy, it joins — and adds a different perspective to — a growing body of literature that shows how ‘community’ was experienced in post-war Britain, with the work of Jon Lawrence and others countering the idea that ‘community’ declined during this period and instead illustrating how it evolved, in sometimes unpredictable ways.⁷

Recent interest in the history of ‘community’ not only reflects the potential of the idea to illuminate major themes in post-war social history, such as affluence, mobility and the family, but also echoes the extent to which this topic was of considerable interest to contemporary researchers. As Mike Savage has argued, the period between 1945 and 1970 saw the rise of the professionalised social sciences.⁸ The everyday

world was to be sampled (not least through interviews) in order to inform a rationally planned welfare state. Understanding 'community' was one prominent strand of this work. Yet, as Miles Glendinning and Stefan Muthesius have noted, 'anybody who is searching for a clear answer as to what constitutes "community", or "a community", in the countless investigations of those years, will need the utmost patience'.⁹ Among the best-known of the 'investigations' is that by Peter Willmott and Michael Young into working-class Bethnal Green.¹⁰ Writing in the mid-1950s, Willmott and Young conceived community as something place-bound, and nurtured or challenged by the built environment. In reality, as Lawrence has argued, 'lived community was much messier and much less inclusive' than Willmott and Young believed.¹¹ Nonetheless, their ideas were hugely influential.¹² Even as more nuanced thinking emerged during the 1960s, Barry Cullingworth and Maurice Broady, among others, still proposed that 'community' could be encouraged by means of sensitive planning and the provision of certain facilities, such as community centres, with Cullingworth overseeing the 1967 Central Housing Advisory Committee report *The Needs of New Communities*.¹³ The persistence of 'community' as a rhetorical and organisational device is evident in the desire to encourage 'community without propinquity' in the late 1960s plan for Milton Keynes, though this formulation also demonstrates the evolution of the idea, with increasing mobility and new technologies being understood as the foundations of new kinds of networks that transcended place.¹⁴

As Lawrence notes, studies of community life also revealed much about privacy. It was 'jealously guarded' in working-class areas: 'people feared the prying eyes and malicious tongues of neighbours'.¹⁵ Accordingly, as was the case in Prestonpans, the privacy offered by self-contained houses on new estates was often welcomed by residents who had moved from overcrowded inner-city housing, and for all that the early post-war new towns were formed from clusters of 'neighbourhood units' intended partly to promote communal identities, their residents evidently enjoyed the opportunity to withdraw offered by their new surroundings.¹⁶ Their response reflected an increase in 'home-centredness' more generally, which was frequently remarked on and fundamentally informed the 1961 Parker Morris report's recommendations on the design of new housing.¹⁷

But what did it mean to design for privacy? By exploring this question, the intention is not to play down the significance of community in this period's social and architectural histories, but rather to complement that lens in two ways: first, by foregrounding privacy, and second, by considering how it was spatialised. Just as we might consider how notions of community shaped urban planning or the conception of building types such as the community centre, we could also ask: how was privacy defined in relation to new housing between the 1950s and the 1970s? How did it find innovative spatial forms, like the courtyard houses designed by the HRU in Prestonpans? And how was it experienced by residents? In what follows, the first part contextualises the subject with reference to England and Scotland. The article then turns specifically to Scotland and the HRU's work in Cumbernauld and Prestonpans, in which ideas of privacy had a principal influence on design. Finally, the article foregrounds residents' lived experience of privacy by drawing on the interviews conducted by HRU members in Prestonpans and Dundee in the 1960s.

PRIVACY AND THE POST-WAR HOME

In March 1943, Mass Observation published the results of a sustained investigation of housing. Privacy, it noted, was 'one of the paramount factors affecting people's feelings' about their home.¹⁸ The report appeared amid growing debate about the form of housing and growing interest in the home on the part of policymakers. The delivery of homes was understood as a ticket to political success, while good housing was thought to have a central place within the welfare state, not least by promoting improved health.¹⁹ At the same time, the dislocation and destruction of war made physical reconstruction essential in bomb-damaged towns and cities and also prompted wider reflection on the value of 'home' and family more generally, almost as a metaphor for the reconstruction of Britain.²⁰ Such thinking was especially clear at the 1951 Festival of Britain, which featured displays dedicated to housing and, indeed, took as its theme 'Britain at home to the world'.²¹

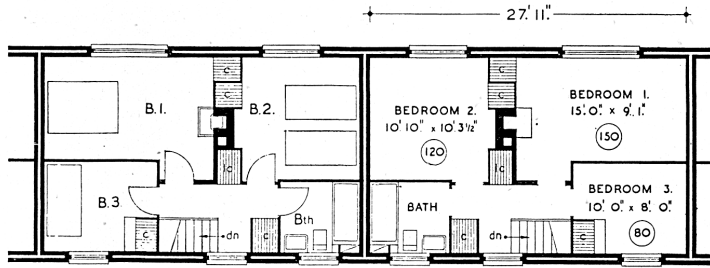
A more introverted approach to the home was evident elsewhere. Mass Observation's study had shown the importance that respondents attached to privacy in the home, not least in terms of having self-contained facilities. Indeed, privacy was a major theme in the official reports on housing design that were published towards the end of the second world war, namely the Dudley report (*Design of Dwellings*) in England and Wales, and the Westwood report (*Planning Our New Homes*) in Scotland.²² These reports set the agenda for post-war housing on new council estates and in the new towns; the separate report in Scotland reflects not only its distinctive housing history, but also the extent to which Scottish housing policy was directed from Edinburgh rather than London. Both reports noted that flats and terraced houses were popularly felt to lack privacy; both also made suggestions for new types of house and estate layout in which, as the Westwood report put it, 'amenity and privacy' could be combined with 'attractive variations in layout'.²³

The emphasis on privacy in these 1944 reports was subsequently developed in further official publications. For example, the 1949 *Housing Manual* (in England and Wales) included 'wide-fronted' housing layouts which provided the density and sense of enclosure of the terrace at the same time as offering greater privacy in that living rooms could face the rear garden (Fig. 2), while the 1958 Scottish *Housing Layout* handbook emphasised the value of 'quiet and privacy'.²⁴ However, the definitive statement of privacy in post-war planning documentation came in 1961 with the Parker Morris report. Here the home was understood as something more than a shelter. It was defined as a place of leisure and identity: there was to be space for recreation and the storage of consumer goods, while centrally heated bedrooms and living areas would permit simultaneous independent activities by different family members.²⁵ The report called for 'privacy and quiet' indoors (for hobbies and homework) and in the garden, a place 'for outdoor living, for children's play, and the baby's sleep'.²⁶ It took a critical view of existing provision: 'in all gardens arrangements are required which will ensure a reasonable degree of privacy for sitting out and having meals outside. Present day gardens are often sadly lacking in this amenity'.²⁷

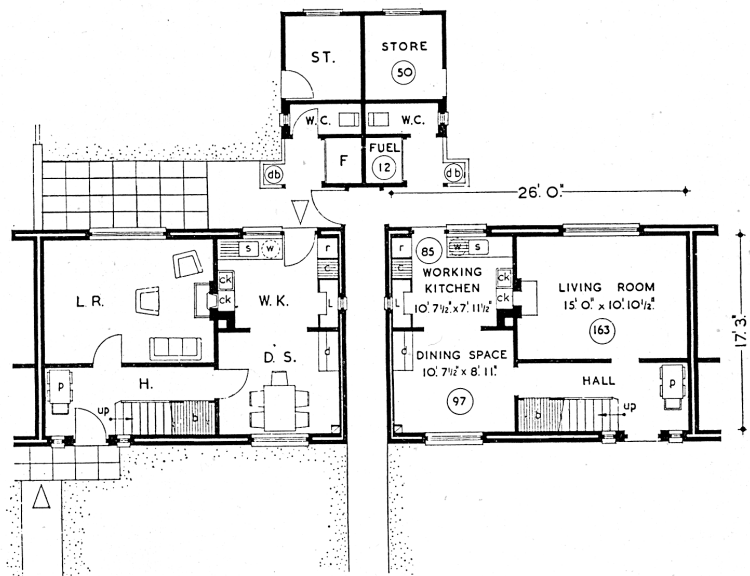
Privacy was also prominent in the planning documents that shaped the conception and design of Britain's new towns in the late 1950s and 1960s, not least as it was recognised that increasing affluence was prompting new demands from potential



ELEVATION TO THE ROAD



FIRST FLOOR PLAN



GROUND FLOOR PLAN

URBAN TERRACE HOUSE

East aspect

Fig. 2. 'Wide-fronted' terrace layout illustrated in the 1949 Housing Manual (Crown Copyright, 1949, licensed under the Open Government Licence v3.0)



Fig. 3. *West Ham, experimental research and demonstration project housing at Ravenscroft Road, designed by the Ministry of Housing and Local Government's architects, 1964 (Architectural Press Archive/RIBA Collections)*

tenants. Again, the garden was now a place of recreation (needing privacy) rather than a place to grow food.²⁸ In Cumbernauld in 1962, it was reported that 'maximum privacy for rooms and gardens' was a key planning principle.²⁹ In the plans for Hook, the unbuilt new town proposed by the London County Council in Hampshire at the end of the 1950s, particular efforts were made to combine high densities with privacy. 'Radburn' layouts of the kind then commonly found on new estates were avoided in the plans for Hook because, with houses served by a road at the rear and a footpath to the front, they were felt to be 'dreary' and because the means of accessing the house via the rear garden was thought to compromise privacy.³⁰ At Livingston, which was designated as a new town in 1963, the space around the home was understood in terms of light, sun, air and privacy, while in the planning of Warrington (1966), 'privacy, propinquity and spatial experience' were recognised as basic needs.³¹ At Washington (1966), those who sought to avoid communal activities 'however informal' were to have 'privacy and a private means of escape'; some houses would be designed so that their garden did not adjoin communal areas.³² In Milton Keynes (1971),

Adequate privacy is a second quality that will affect the average density of housing [...] Not only will space be required between dwellings with facing windows, but in many instances additional privacy can be gained by staggered arrangements of houses, by single storey 'patio' houses, and of course by detaching houses or pairs of houses.³³

Within the new towns, privacy was increasingly also seen as something that would make housing more sellable. From the late 1960s, new town development corporations were required to increase the number of homes being built for owner-occupation, with rented homes also being sold (or planned for eventual sale).³⁴ Yet total withdrawal was rejected. In the case of Maryculter, an unrealised scheme for a new village near Aberdeen proposed by a public-private partnership in 1974, the planners, whose picturesque layout was developed in consultation with Gordon Cullen, sought to 'convert mass housing into an individual experience', but 'isolation' was nonetheless to be avoided.³⁵

Among many studies that confirmed the value to residents of privacy, one of the fullest airings of the topic came in a 1963–64 investigation by the Ministry of Housing and Local Government, whose own architects, led by Oliver Cox, designed an experimental estate of family houses at West Ham (Fig. 3). Privacy and quiet were among the requirements of the brief and led to a 'slipped' terrace layout in which homes were staggered in plan, not least to shield front doors from neighbours.³⁶ However, the houses' large windows were felt to reduce privacy; one tenant reported that her son could not study because of distractions outside.³⁷ Others complained that the presence of nearby high flats meant that they felt they were 'sunbathing on a public highway' when in their gardens, while low fences were also found to be problematic.³⁸ Some residents quickly added additional fencing, and windows soon sported blinds and net curtains.³⁹ Noise, too, could be an irritation, caused by traffic and children.⁴⁰

The West Ham project team was typical in defining privacy as involving something more than simply a home of one's own. As a Scottish Development Department report later put it, there were three aspects to consider: 'visual, aural, social'.⁴¹ As far as 'visual' privacy was concerned, there was much discussion in official reports, plans and critical reviews of how housing layouts and detailed design alike could avoid both overlooking (that is, seeing from one property to another) and in-looking (seeing from the street into a house). In this respect, the quantum of space was thought less important than careful design. Thus the masterplan for Hook (published in 1961) proposed few windows on the 'public' side of wide-fronted houses, a strategy that was also apparent in Cumbernauld.⁴² The planners of Hook also paid particular attention to gardens, which would have to be small to achieve the sense of dense urbanity they favoured. However, it was thought that small gardens would only be accepted by residents if they were secluded.⁴³ Similarly, the plan for Redditch new town noted that 'a small but entirely private garden or external courtyard of terrace is often of much greater value than a larger space which does not offer the privacy and intimacy of use in relation to the house that most people require'.⁴⁴ In other cases, the privacy of bedrooms was stressed. The unbuilt plans for Maryculter featured houses in which terraces were staggered in plan, with first-floor bedroom windows being set at right angles to the street to achieve 'privacy of rooms on the "public" side of the houses'; the need to 'avoid overlooking of [a neighbour's] private outdoor space' was

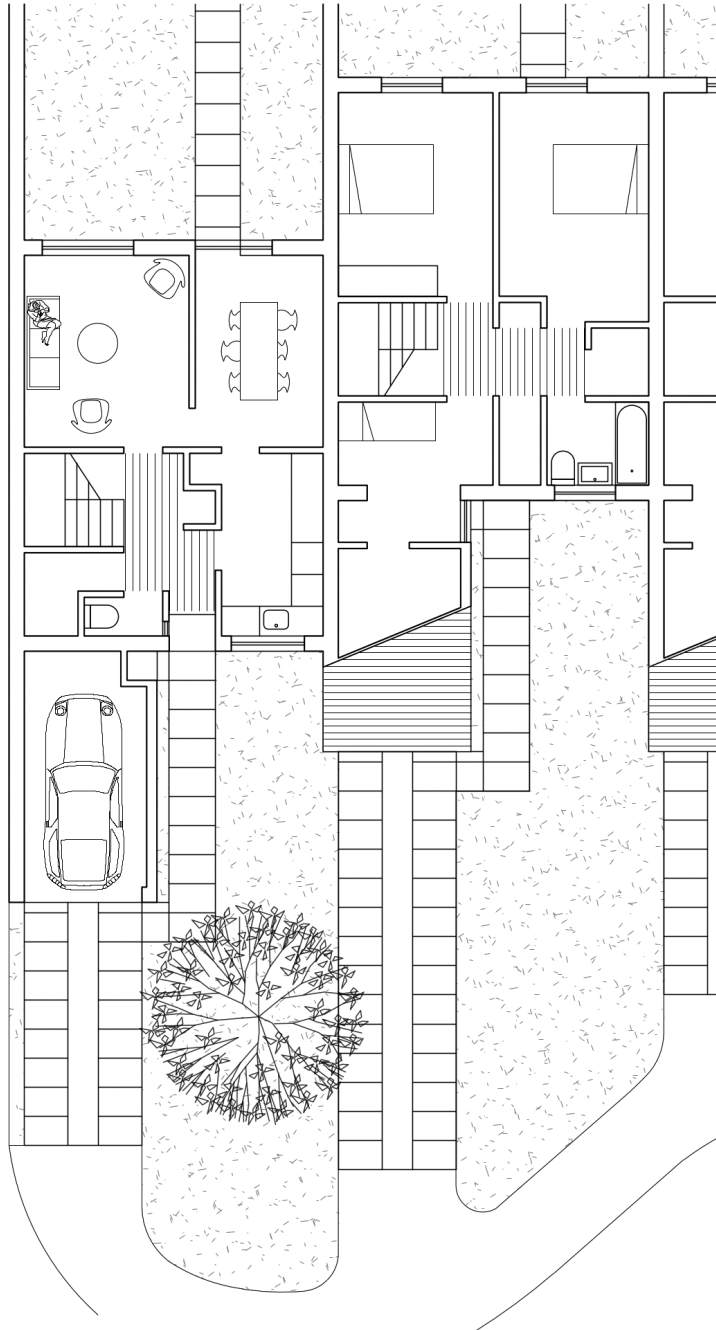


Fig. 4. Maryculter, unbuilt housing proposal by the Scottish Special Housing Association and Salvesen, c. 1974, ground- and first-floor plans showing the principal rooms to the rear, redrawn by Nick Mols, 2021



Fig. 5. Irvine, terraced housing by the Development Corporation at Pennyburn 2 with landscaped square, c. 1971 (Architectural Press Archive/RIBA Collections)

a further goal (Fig. 4).⁴⁵ Maisonettes (duplexes) were often cited as a type of housing that had advantages over flats in terms of privacy, especially for bedrooms. The London County Council noted of the Loughborough estate in 1956 that ‘tenants have a liking for maisonettes — they offer more privacy and quiet and have more the feeling of a private house’.⁴⁶ They also avoided some of the in-looking that could occur in single-storey deck-access flats, where bedrooms might face walkways. As far as aural privacy was concerned, soundproofing figured in the 1940s reports and continued to be emphasised, especially as television became increasingly commonplace.⁴⁷

Definitions of ‘social’ privacy were more subjective. As the sociologist Margaret Willis noted, it figured especially large in working-class respondents’ discussions of privacy, whereas middle-class interviewees emphasised visual and aural privacy; working-class experience of cramped housing no doubt partly explains this difference, along with a sense that prying neighbours might be passing critical judgements or gaining knowledge of private matters.⁴⁸ Withdrawal and privacy were often associated with respectability and sociologists’ reports frequently cite residents’ wish to balance a degree of contact with a desire not to be overfamiliar: ‘you must

talk to the neighbours but you mustn't say too much', reported one householder in 1950s Oxford.⁴⁹ In some cases, neighbours might turn away from even the possibility of friendship for fear of becoming too close.⁵⁰ Nonetheless, the wish for privacy of this kind could surprise some designers. David Gosling, the first chief architect at Irvine new town at the end of the 1960s, reflected on some of the initial housing for which he was responsible (Fig. 5):

The houses were designed around pedestrian squares with approximately 30 houses in each square. Though I came from a working-class background, I had adopted many middle-class values and assumed that families would wish to interact socially. I discovered I was completely wrong and that impoverished families, with little or no mobility, valued, above all else, privacy.⁵¹

The result of this discovery was the inclusion on Irvine's Pennyburn 3 estate of courtyard houses, which proved to be especially popular (Fig. 6).⁵²

Privacy thus emerges as a subject of particular debate across Britain in the post-war decades, attracting the interest of policymakers, designers and sociologists, and shaping the forms of new housing. This discussion reflected and supported two developments: first, a new home-centredness; and second, the desire of residents to choose the degree of contact with their neighbours. Yet could there be an overemphasis on privacy? An early resident of Cumbernauld told the *Guardian* in 1965 that

the planners and architects of the new town have accented privacy in their housing designs, perhaps too much. The result is houses whose windows overlook none of their neighbours [...] One's natural instinct is to go and knock on people's doors.⁵³

The resident's house was 'built around an individual courtyard, [with] no outer windows at all'.⁵⁴ In so doing, she made the same association between the courtyard house type and the idea of privacy that was informing the Housing Research Unit's work at this time.

HRU EXPERIMENTS IN URBAN FORM 1: CUMBERNAULD

Experiments in housing form and density were running themes in the work of the University of Edinburgh's Housing Research Unit (HRU). Based in the university's architecture department, the group was officially founded in April 1959, but was conceived during 1957–58 — hence it predated by nearly a decade the better-known Centre for Land Use and Built Form Studies (later the Martin Centre) at Cambridge University.⁵⁵ Reflecting the centrality of 'research' to modernist architectural discourse as well as its growing importance within architectural education, especially in the wake of the 1958 Oxford Conference, the HRU was the brainchild of Robert Matthew, then professor of architecture at Edinburgh, who had long been committed to an interdisciplinary and collaborative view of architectural practice; the HRU's focus — mass housing — had been of major interest to Matthew since the 1930s, when he had worked for the Department of Health for Scotland.⁵⁶ Although there are parallels

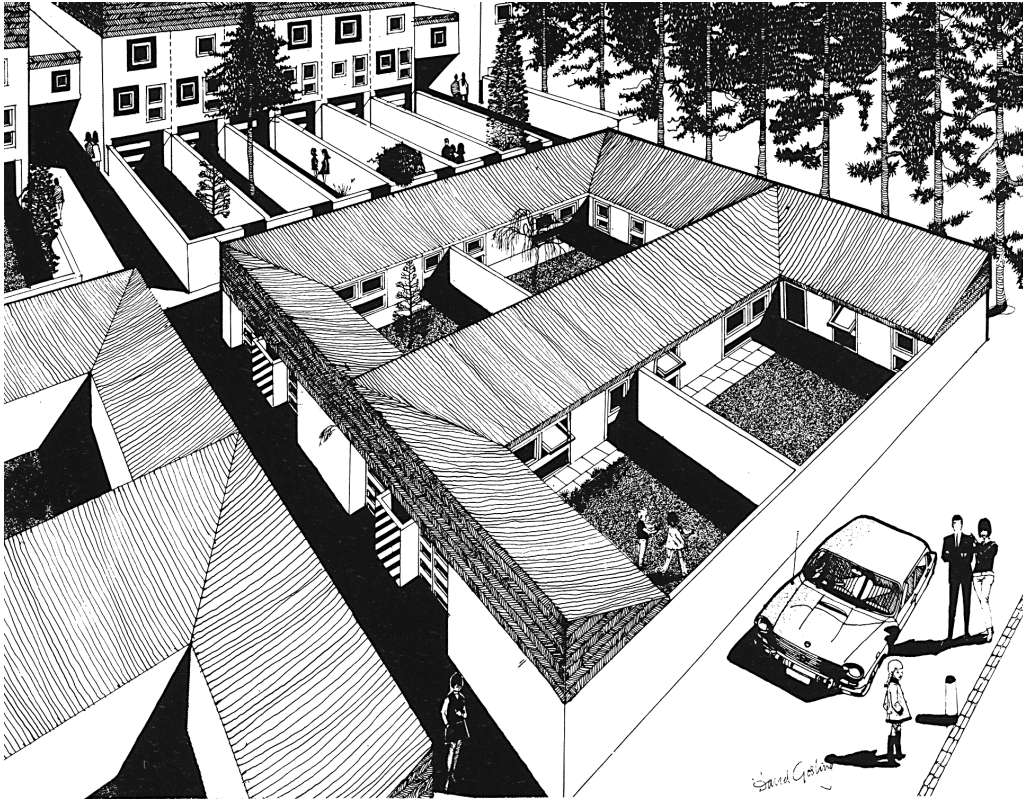


Fig. 6. Irvine, proposed courtyard housing at Pennyburn 3, designed by the Development Corporation and illustrated in the Irvine New Town Plan, 1971 (North Ayrshire Council)

with the research and development groups that existed within post-war central and local government, as well as the Building Research Station in Watford, the model for the HRU was the unit at Bristol University founded in 1949 which, supported by the Nuffield Provincial Hospitals Trust, was carrying out detailed multi-disciplinary investigations of hospital design.⁵⁷ Indeed, the HRU also secured Nuffield funding, as well as support from the Department of Scientific and Industrial Research and, initially, the university. HRU staff included architects, quantity surveyors and sociologists.⁵⁸ An advisory committee was created in 1962, including the sociologist David Donnison and A. W. Cleeve Barr, chief architect to the Ministry of Housing and Local Government.⁵⁹ The group was renamed the Architecture Research Unit in the mid-1960s and survived into the late 1970s.⁶⁰

Throughout the 1960s, the design of experimental housing projects and their monitoring after completion formed the core of the HRU's work. This approach ran alongside Matthew's interest in 'live' design projects as part of the undergraduate architecture curriculum. In the spring of 1958, the *Architects' Journal* carried an account of live projects at Birmingham's School of Architecture and this may have spurred his

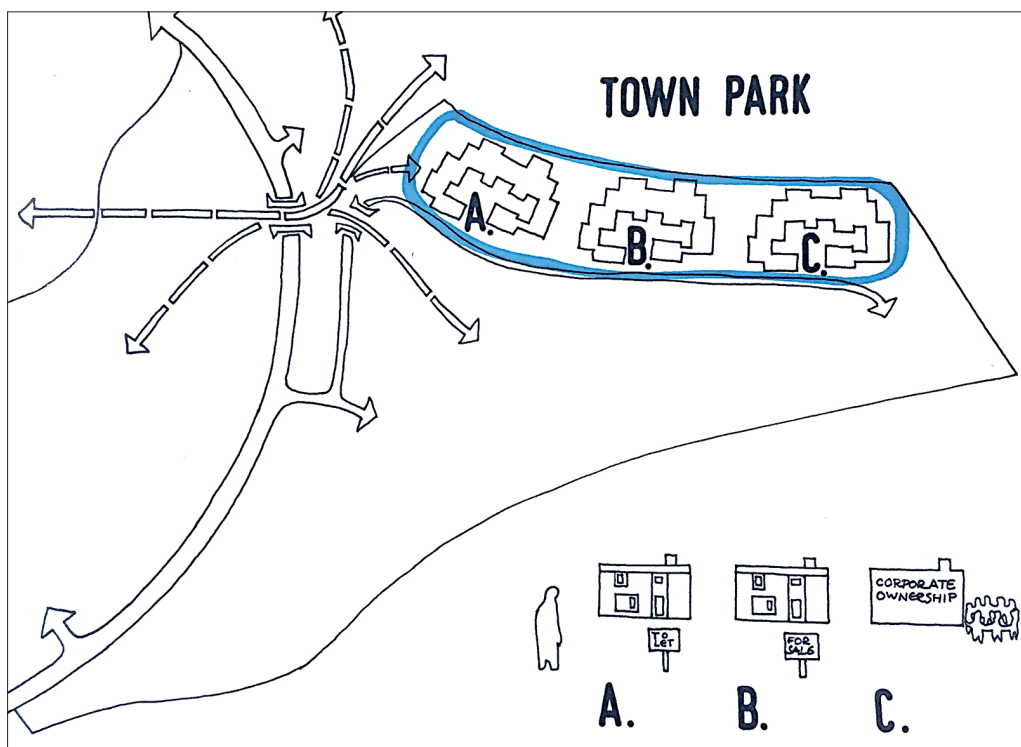


Fig. 7. Cumbernauld, Housing Research Unit proposals for the Park 3 Area, February 1962, showing identical clusters of housing for differing tenures (University of Edinburgh, Centre for Research Collections)

interest because, in September that year, a site was secured at Pinkie Braes, Musselburgh, for fourth-year Edinburgh students to design housing for the Scottish Special Housing Association (a government body delivering rented housing across Scotland between the 1930s and the 1980s).⁶¹ The project went ahead and the houses were built, and when they were occupied, in October 1961, the HRU assisted the students in interviewing the residents; further interviews took place in 1962.⁶² The HRU's project at Prestonpans was conceived as a postgraduate equivalent of this Musselburgh housing.⁶³

The HRU's reports belonged to the emerging genre of what today would be called post-occupancy evaluation. During the 1950s, government ministries increasingly produced reports that evaluated recent projects; the architectural press also began systematically to revisit buildings in use.⁶⁴ In effect (and especially because, in its 'official' version, it could involve social scientists), this work represented the application to architecture and design of the kind of professionalised sociological techniques that, as already noted, were increasingly in vogue during the post-war decades.

For the HRU's first research project, Matthew wanted to compare two estates of similar design and construction: one urban and the other rural.⁶⁵ The 'urban' scheme was in Cumbernauld; the 'rural' equivalent was in Prestonpans. Concept design for

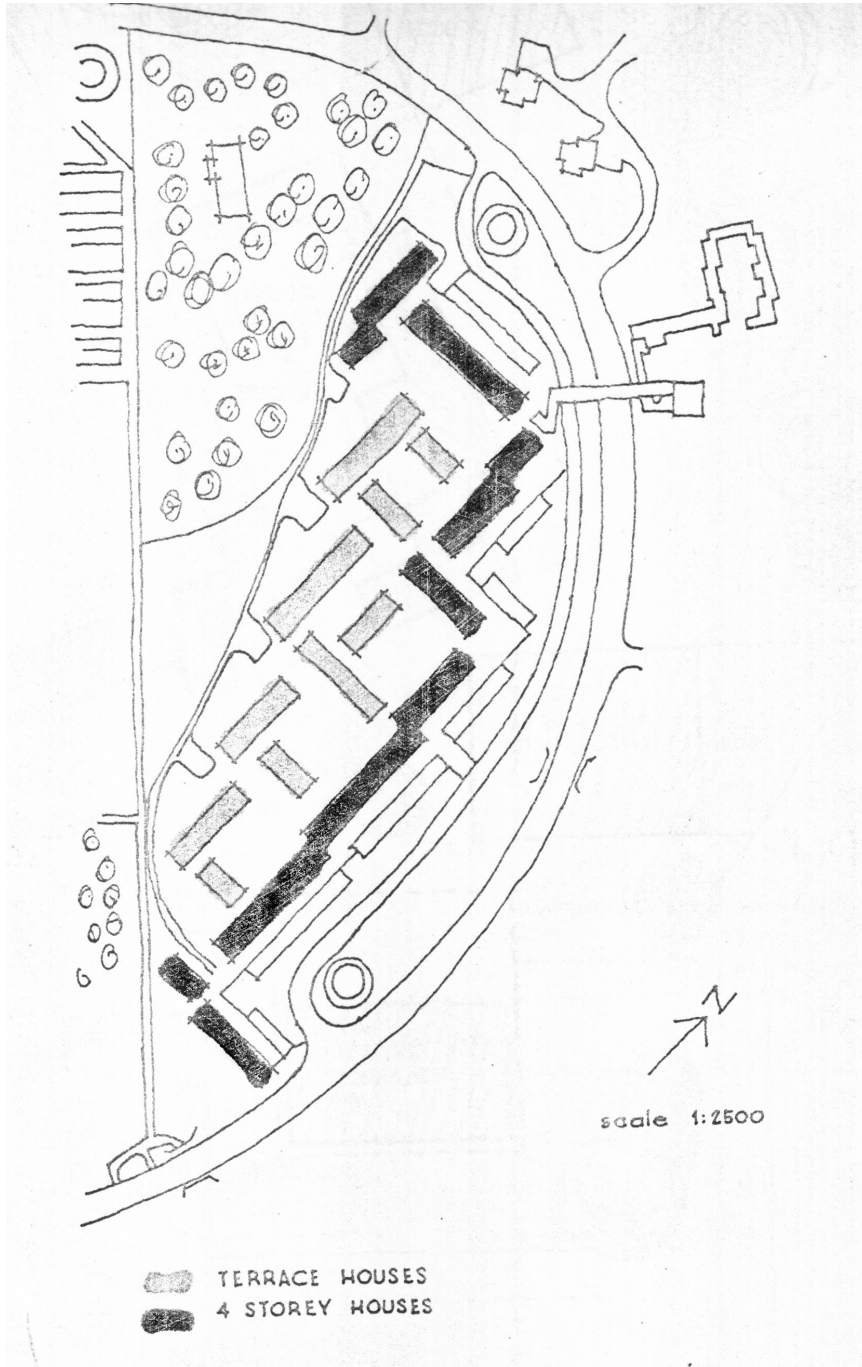


Fig. 8. Cumbernauld, Housing Research Unit proposal for Park 3 West, June 1962
(University of Edinburgh, Centre for Research Collections)

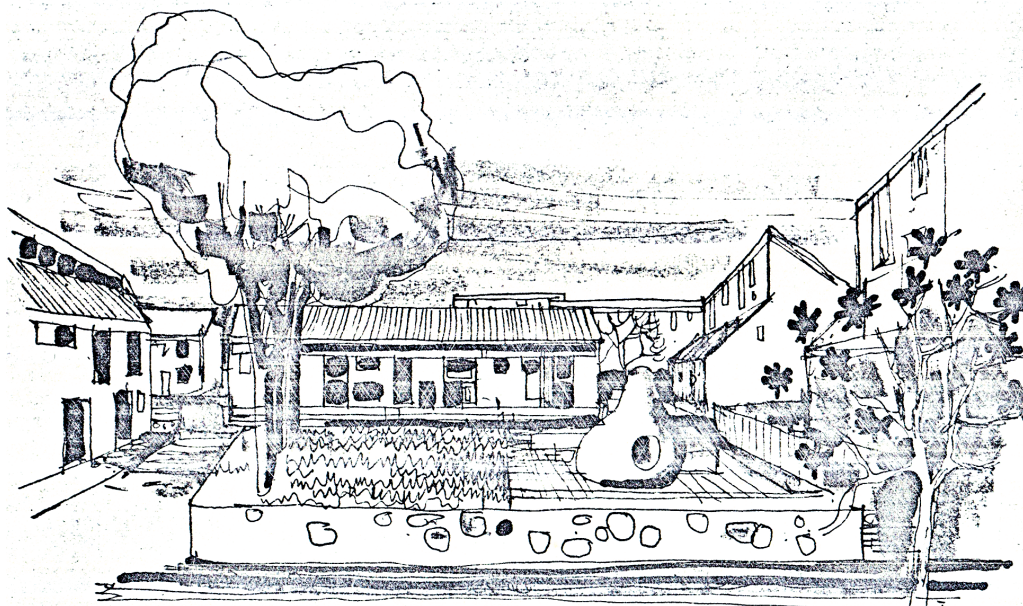


Fig. 9. *Cumbernauld, Housing Research Unit initial proposal for Park 3 West showing communal gardens (University of Edinburgh, Centre for Research Collections)*

both took place in parallel after 1959. Although only Prestonpans deployed L-shaped courtyard housing, the thinking about privacy was common to both.

Designated in 1955, Cumbernauld was Scotland's third post-war new town, and the first 'mark 2' new town in Britain. Its concentrated form deliberately contrasted with the low-density neighbourhood units of earlier new towns, and its megastructural town centre placed it at the architectural cutting edge. Initial discussions between Matthew and Cumbernauld Development Corporation took place in 1957, before the HRU had formally come into being.⁶⁶ A site in the Kildrum area — subsequently known as 'Park 3' — was made available in September 1959.⁶⁷ The aims of the research changed several times. Although the initial idea was to make comparisons with the Prestonpans project, the brief evolved, with that aspect of the investigation soon being supplanted by a new focus on housing tenure which would be unique to Park 3. As of early 1962, it was proposed to build three groups of identical housing: one to be rented from the Development Corporation (as was then the predominant approach in new towns); one to be rented from a Housing Association; and one for owner-occupation.⁶⁸ There was also some discussion of providing housing for co-ownership on a Scandinavian model. The context for all this was the 1961 Housing Act and the 1962 Housing (Scotland) Act, introduced by the Conservative government to boost alternatives to local authority housing, especially housing associations and co-ownership.⁶⁹ Other aims for the research at this stage included: studies of dimensional co-ordination and building costs; an exploration of the design of courtyard/patio houses; consideration of the use in the



Fig. 10. Cumbernauld, single-aspect housing at Park 3 West (Maclehose Road), designed 1963–64 and built 1967–70, photograph of 2022 by the author

Scottish climate of different sizes of public and private open space; and an investigation of flexibility in the design of flats.⁷⁰

Plans of February 1962 show on the east side of the site three identical building clusters corresponding to the three different types of tenure (Fig. 7). The form of these clusters — in which different house types were to be arranged in a continuous ‘wall’ of accommodation — anticipate in plan the later housing at Southfield in Edinburgh, designed in 1963–65 by Roland Wedgwood and completed in 1968 (Wedgwood had been an early member of the HRU and designed the Southfield scheme after leaving the group).⁷¹ However, the idea of having three comparative clusters in Cumbernauld stalled. A revised scope emerged, focused on the western part of Park 3 and conventional renting only. Although officially there was not the money for the full scheme, it would appear that the Development Corporation had little enthusiasm either for owner-occupation or the experimental nature of the project.⁷² New designs were presented in June 1962 (Fig. 8).⁷³ The project was now framed as an investigation of traffic management, with a layout that critiqued the typical ‘Radburn’ cul-de-sac. Against the latter, it was argued by Wedgwood and other group members that segregation between vehicles and pedestrians could never be total: there would always be moments where those on foot had to cross traffic routes, while children often played in areas that designers had envisaged as being for motorised traffic.⁷⁴ Instead, looped service roads were to encircle the site, which would accommodate terraced housing and four-storey blocks of flats. On one side of the road, the housing was to be shielded by a ‘barrier’ of garages and a wide grassed and paved area.⁷⁵

Although thus conceived as an alternative to Radburn planning, this new layout also highlighted the HRU's growing interest in privacy. The houses were to be accessed from pathways that connected small communal gardens intended as 'meeting points and places of climax in the continuous uninterrupted pedestrian route' (Fig. 9).⁷⁶ Each dwelling was to have private open space, with gardens at ground level and large balconies to upper flats; mention was made of 'an attempt to create more usable living space'.⁷⁷ Although there was an emphasis on neighbourliness, particularly in an area described as the 'Focus', where there would be shops and a community hall, in the layout the primary concern was for domestic privacy, especially where the houses were concerned. The terrace designs located the living room above the dining-kitchen at the rear of each house — the elevated location giving it a garden view, but also keeping it away from the 'working' part of the home and also, perhaps, the eyes of curious passers-by.

The executed proposals of 1967–70 were simpler in conception and form than the earlier schemes, but some of the earlier ideas about private open space and traffic survived (Fig. 10). Two hundred houses, largely single-aspect, were set within a gridded layout of pedestrian walkways and landscaped parking areas. The houses are brick-clad at ground-floor level, with black timber boarding above. The brick walls form a continuous barrier that shields the houses' private gardens from the pathways and parking areas. In addition, low-rise blocks of flats (since demolished) were set along the north-eastern site boundary, adjacent to the main distributor road.

HRU EXPERIMENTS IN URBAN FORM 2: PRESTONPANS

The HRU's 'rural' housing at Inchview, Prestonpans, was designed by James A. Gray, A. Zammit, A. J. Willis and others in the HRU between 1959 and 1962. The Prestonpans project, which Gray presented in a thesis of 1963, is of particular importance not only on account of its early place within the history of post-war courtyard housing in Britain and the fact that it was largely completed as first planned, but also because follow-up studies were carried out after completion.⁷⁸ The project was reviewed in the *Architects' Journal* on completion.⁷⁹ Subsequently, a lengthy report was produced.⁸⁰ The site attracted international visitors; the planners of Albertslund, Denmark, were reported to have emulated the Prestonpans design after seeing it.⁸¹

The HRU's task was to design low-cost housing to the local council's brief, but with some scope for experiment in terms of estate and house layout, and with provision being made for a subsequent study of the houses in use.⁸² An initial approach by Matthew to East Lothian county council in spring 1958 received a positive response and a site was identified at Cuthill, west of the town centre. The site, which had been acquired from the Coal Board, was less 'rural' than Matthew had hoped for, but the potential to apply the findings of the 'primarily experimental' project in other mining areas appealed.⁸³ By May 1959, a brief had been prepared. Thirteen houses to the acre were required, with forty-five houses in the first phase. Mention was made of an 'urban landscape' with easily maintained public areas (the council having no parks department), while individual gardens were to be 'small and private'.⁸⁴

Initial design work took place during the second half of 1959, including interviews with residents already living in Prestonpans as well as study visits to Denmark, Italy,

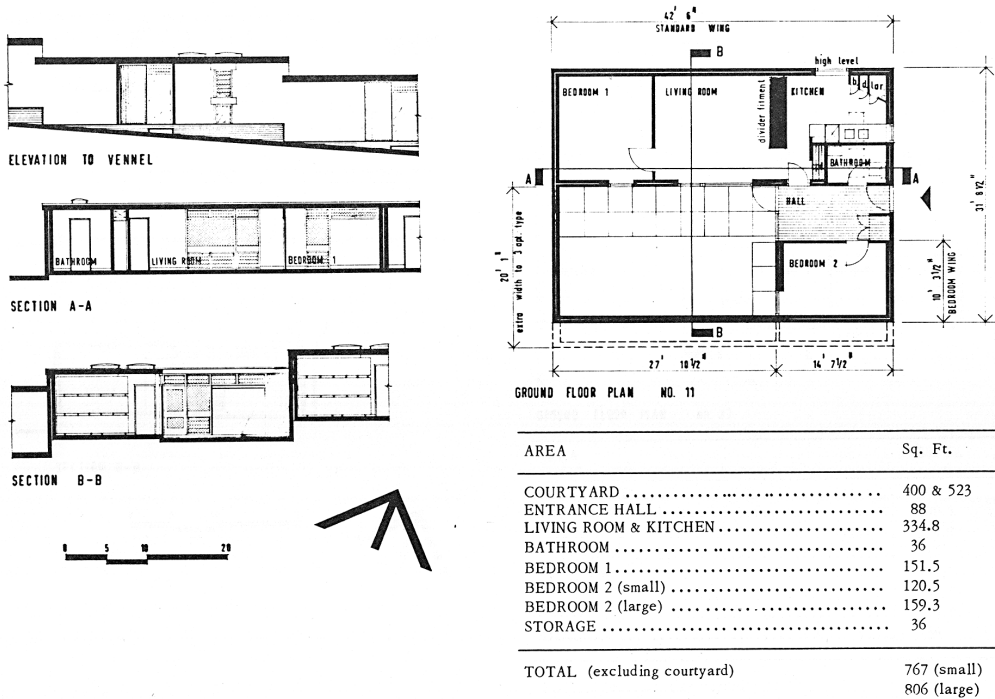


Fig. 11. *Inchview, Prestonpans, plan of two-bedroom house with enclosed courtyard, c. 1962* (University of Edinburgh, Centre for Research Collections)

France and the Netherlands.⁸⁵ During this period, as with the Cumbernauld project, the research focus changed. At first, the aim was to evaluate ‘new and beneficial building materials and to reduce the time spent on actual house-building’.⁸⁶ Increasingly, however, two topics came to the fore: shelter from wind and rain on the ‘blustery’ hillside coastal site (what today we might term ‘climate-responsive design’); and the effect of site layout on the creation of a community.⁸⁷

Sketch designs were approved in December 1959 and developed proposals were presented in May 1960.⁸⁸ The design comprised a continuous building form with a mix of house sizes, punctuated by private courtyards (Fig. 1). Fourteen houses were for five people (‘4 apartment’, to use the usual Scottish terminology, in which living rooms and bedrooms are counted as ‘apartments’), twelve were for four people (‘3 apartment’) in two sizes, and two were for two (older) people (‘2 apartment’). Houses were oriented facing south, away from the coastal winds, on a rectangular grid. Six paved vennels (pathways), some part-covered, linked the main coast road and a new parallel service road at the rear of the site. All but the smallest houses had an L-shaped plan and private courtyard; bedroom and living-room wings opened off a central hall (Fig. 11). Some houses were directly accessed from the vennels; in other cases, the private courtyard ran alongside the vennel, with the house being entered via the courtyard. Within the individual homes, most windows faced the courtyard.

The exception was the kitchen: while some were top-lit, others had a narrow window looking on to the vennel. An open area with planting at the centre of the estate was intended as a focus for play and neighbourly meetings (Fig. 12).

On the one hand, the design was justified with reference to the 'intimate scale and huddled character of a Scottish coastal village'.⁸⁹ The typical pattern of inter-war council housing — that is, low-density houses in open gardens — was felt not only to be a recent import to Scotland, but also to lack the shelter that the HRU prioritised.⁹⁰ By contrast, the traditional Scots rural pattern of 'high garden walls' offered 'privacy and shelter'. A layout with houses along streets, however, was too space-hungry and, at the proposed density, was also thought inadequate in terms of sunlight: with a courtyard layout, however, the required density could be achieved while the re-entrant angle of the L-shaped house plan might in addition be a useful suntrap.⁹¹ Yet, while it thus appealed to Scots tradition and climate, the design also existed within a contemporary architectural context, namely the widespread interest in courtyard housing. In Britain, a few examples were built before 1939, but the type came to greater prominence in the 1950s, particularly due to the advocacy of Walter Segal, whose influential *Home and Environment* (1948) featured a chapter on the 'patio house'.⁹² Segal was interested in the urban potential of this typology, as was the influential architect-planner Ludwig Hilbersheimer, who in a 1944 book proposed tight-knit groups of single-storey L-shaped houses to achieve high densities without compromising on privacy.⁹³

During the late 1950s and 1960s, members of the international architectural avant-garde including Team 10 explored courtyard-based urban layouts, including the so-called 'mat-building': a low-rise structure, punctuated by courtyards, as exemplified by projects such as the Free University of Berlin of 1964 by Candilis-Josic-Woods.⁹⁴ A number of courtyard housing schemes were built internationally, including Carrières Centrales in Casablanca (Candilis-Josic-Woods, 1951–53), Grenhusene in Hvidovre, Denmark (Sven Eske Kristensen, 1953), the third stage of Adalberto Libera's Tuscalano housing scheme in Rome (1952–54) and Jørn Utzon's Kingo Houses in Helsingør, Denmark (1956).⁹⁵ As noted, Denmark and Italy were visited by HRU members, whose report suggests that they were familiar with Tuscalano, Grenhusene and the Kingo Houses; the last they thought 'extravagant of land'.⁹⁶ In Britain, *Architectural Design* discussed several courtyard schemes; an article in October 1956 about unbuilt 'urban high-density housing' designs for central London by Chamberlin, Powell and Bon included courtyard plans.⁹⁷ In 1958, the same architects contributed to a much-publicised study for the reconstruction of Boston Manor in west London as a high-density suburb with patio houses cascading down the hillside.⁹⁸ Meanwhile, a tangible prototype was offered by three single-storey houses by Powell and Moya in Swindon (1960), with living rooms and bedrooms facing a private walled garden, and the kitchen fronting a narrow walkway.⁹⁹ On a larger scale, courtyard houses were included in two prominent competition-winning designs: Frank Perry's proposal for Leith Fort, Edinburgh (1957), and Michael Neylan's Bishopsfield estate, Harlow (1960).¹⁰⁰ The HRU's estate at Prestonpans progressed faster than these projects, as East Lothian councillors noted with discomfort — they would have preferred not to have been the pioneers.¹⁰¹

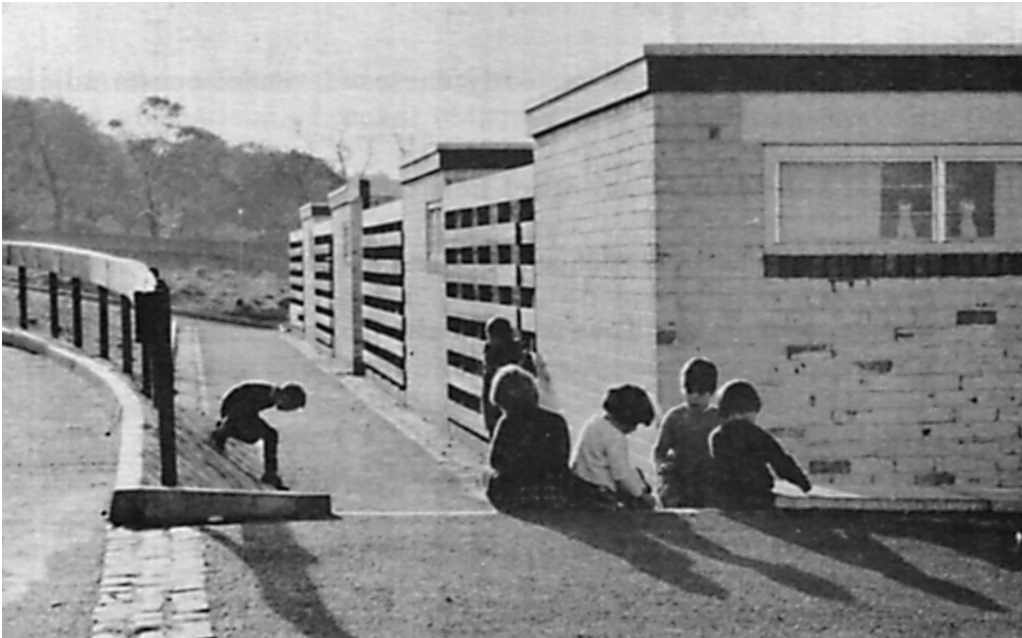


Fig. 12. *Inchview, Prestonpans, view of courtyard housing, c. 1962*
(University of Edinburgh, Centre for Research Collections)

During the 1960s, courtyard layouts formed one strand of a growing body of 'high-density, low-rise' housing in Britain.¹⁰² In 1961, Cleeve Barr discussed the type (dubbed the 'introverted' house) in a talk at the Building Centre in London.¹⁰³ Subsequent examples included, in addition to the much-published Bishopsfield, a Segal-like scheme at Talavera Lines, Aldershot (designed from 1960 by A. W. Butler of the War Office Architect's Department), High Kingsdown in Bristol (Whicheloe Macfarlane, 1967) and an estate in Rotherham (Gillinson Barnett and Partners, 1967) where houses were laid *en escalier* on a hillside site.¹⁰⁴ L-shaped plans became the most common of all single-aspect types, with a growing number of examples in Scotland by the end of the 1960s, including at Galashiels (Langlee by Wheeler and Sproson) and Peterhead (Clerkhill by Baxter Clark and Paul).¹⁰⁵ Such layouts were not confined to council and new town estates. An early 1970s scheme of clustered courtyard houses for sale at Forestfield, Crawley, offered a 'closely knit community with maximum privacy and minimum interference', with residents being told 'it's your life and you can choose how you want to live it'.¹⁰⁶ This turn of phrase identified a feature often associated with courtyard housing: privacy.

PRESTONPANS AND DUNDEE: PRIVACY IN PRACTICE

For Segal, one of the fundamental attractions of the courtyard plan was that it offered its residents the 'advantage of complete privacy'.¹⁰⁷ Seclusion was a particular concern, and something that the conventional house-in-a-garden failed to provide:

The garden of the small house, in fact, is not so much a place in which to sit down, to have tea, to see friends — in short a garden to live in and to feel at home. It is a garden to work in, a garden to be admired for its flowers or lawn [...] But it is not designed for that sort of leisure which is a privilege of every family and a strictly private one.¹⁰⁸

An L-shaped plan, by contrast, offered ‘complete protection from sight’, allowing residents to ‘live in the open well-protected from the eye of the curious’ (Fig. 13).¹⁰⁹ The result, he concluded, was an ability to ‘live one’s life without one’s neighbours voluntarily or involuntarily taking a part in it, to associate and enjoy the company of others as one might choose, and to keep those little domestic secrets which the neighbour is keen to discover’.¹¹⁰ Segal’s approach was subsequently echoed by Serge Chermayeff and Christopher Alexander in their celebrated *Community and Privacy* of 1963. Privacy, they argued, was threatened by the traffic and noise of modern life. They proposed various solutions, including inward-looking courtyard plans that would deliver ‘voluntary communality rather than inescapable togetherness’.¹¹¹ Privacy was thus to be experienced first and foremost within the courtyard home and garden.

In a courtyard housing layout like the HRU’s Prestonpans estate, the intervening walkways may have been relatively un-overlooked, but, in contrast to the houses, they could be conceived in more communal terms, as a restatement of the kind of traditional street environment favoured by the likes of Willmott and Young. Indeed, the architect Andrew Gilmour, who worked during the 1960s for the London County Council, made this point when considering some of the housing typologies then in vogue: ‘this myth [...] that people living in the “casbah” layout would be better [people]: the honest *Coronation Street* Londoners, and that those in the tower blocks [...] were distancing themselves, and the four-storey maisonette people were separating themselves into a proletarian sludge’.¹¹²

The HRU’s justification of the courtyard plan at Prestonpans reflected residents’ interest in privacy, as well as its significance in publications and wider discourse. During the design stage, interviews with people in Prestonpans suggested that privacy mattered to them: front gardens often had hedges, while there was ‘direct support for the increase in privacy’ that the new housing at Inchview might offer.¹¹³ The obvious attractions of the courtyard plan for the designers, compared with linear streets, were that it alone offered ‘many more degrees of seclusion, up to complete privacy [...] while retaining a density of the order asked for’.¹¹⁴ Even if a linear layout had been viable in terms of the required density, high walls (at eye level) would have been needed between gardens, rendering them rather oppressive.¹¹⁵ Though the gardens of the courtyard plan were small, they were private, especially those completely within the ‘mat’ of housing.

Having hypothesised that residents would welcome the ‘additional privacy and shelter’ offered by the courtyard approach, the HRU sought to explore whether that was the case as part of a broader study of the housing in use.¹¹⁶ The HRU sociologist, Norman Dunhill, visited forty-two residents in their completed homes on four occasions between 1962 and 1965.¹¹⁷ Most had previously lived nearby, in a majority of cases in two-storey terraced housing. Given that, on account of the ‘experimental’ nature of the design, they were permitted to decline a move without affecting their

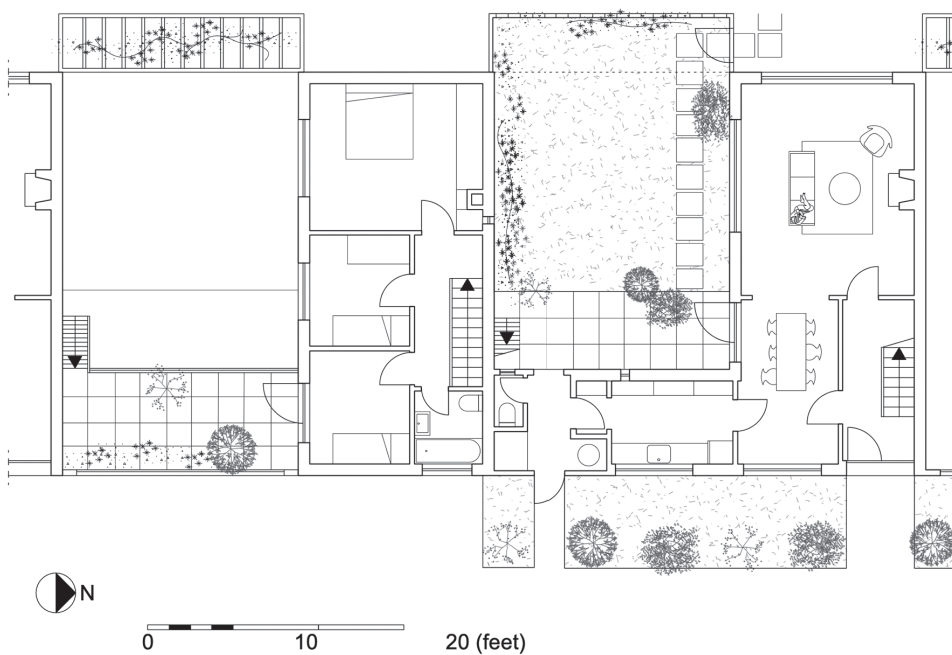


Fig. 13. Design for two-storey courtyard house by Walter Segal, 1948, redrawn by Nick Mols, 2021, from the original with kind permission of John A. Segal

position on the housing waiting list, they had already to some extent voted with their feet.¹¹⁸ Residents largely comprised young families. Adult householders were typically aged in their twenties and thirties, one-third of the population was under ten years old, and 88 per cent of those employed were in manual trades, particularly connected with coal mining.¹¹⁹ Overall, 90 per cent were satisfied. Those who had moved from houses and flats were more satisfied than those who had come from prefabs (usually a detached property in its own garden), and those in smaller and better-off households were typically more positive than those in larger and poorer ones.¹²⁰ That said, most of the residents were unconvinced by the appearance of the housing, and some were positively embarrassed by it: locals apparently had likened the estate to a 'piggery, an air raid shelter, public lavatory, and a home for the blind'.¹²¹ The layout also prompted some critical comments. Local mobile traders complained that sales on the estate were lower, as residents could not hear the chimes of their van, while the refuse arrangements — a compromise involving remote bin stores — were unpopular.¹²² Car owners would have preferred to park closer to their homes, and the noise of children's play in the communal areas irritated some.¹²³

It seems nonetheless that the appearance of the houses played little part in residents' overall assessment of the development, which was based to a greater degree on the experience of life there. Residents were positive about the (partial) central heating, the arrangement of indoor space, the provision of top-lighting in some of the rooms,

and the extensive built-in storage. Many residents had made particular efforts to acquire new furnishings, and to adapt the interior layout to suit their tastes and needs: in this respect, the external uniformity of the housing concealed diversity within. The privacy of the housing was especially positively received by many residents. While older and disabled residents missed having a view out, thirty-four of the forty-two householders interviewed were satisfied, even when their outlook was relatively restricted.¹²⁴ The courtyard was frequently mentioned in positive terms. One resident noted:

we like this house as your outlook is your own here [...] Everybody doesn't know what you're doing. We can sit out in the garden and keep ourselves to ourselves.¹²⁵

Another resident commented that 'we hardly ever went into our old garden, but here it's different: you can go outside and it's nice and private'.¹²⁶ Some residents drew attention to a lack of privacy in their previous home and felt the courtyard design far superior for this reason.¹²⁷ Thirty out of forty-two families regularly used the courtyard as a sitting space and the courtyards were for the most part well maintained.¹²⁸ Aural privacy, meanwhile, was thought to be good. Cavity wall construction minimised sound transfer between houses, and only six respondents felt that they needed to be particularly quiet in order not to disturb their neighbours.¹²⁹

Although much of the discussion touched on visual privacy, there was a social undertone to responses. Seclusion and respectability were, as elsewhere, seen to be connected. Two women who shared a washing machine and were often 'in and out' of each other's houses were seen by their neighbours as 'rough' for this reason.¹³⁰ Otherwise, however, most residents thought that the layout was no more or less friendly than the estates from which they had moved, with most making new friends and many reporting casual contact with neighbours in the vennels.¹³¹ The researchers concluded that residents' 'approved code of conduct' appeared largely to be one of 'reserved withdrawal'.¹³² Indeed, relationships generally seemed harmonious. The police noted in 1964 that they were yet to attend a quarrel between residents.¹³³

To provide comparative material for the Prestonpans study, in 1965 the HRU team turned its attention to Ardler, Dundee (Fig. 14, 15 and 16). Designed after 1960 by Baxter Clark and Paul, a Scottish practice with particular expertise in housing, this large estate included eighty-seven courtyard houses.¹³⁴ Their layout differed slightly from the Prestonpans houses in that each house had two courts. As well as the private garden courtyard, akin to that in Prestonpans, the houses also had a smaller 'entrance court' located between the pathway and the front door, overlooked by the kitchen, replicating the oversight of the approach to the threshold found in traditional street housing.

Forty-five Ardler residents were interviewed. As a group, they differed from the interviewees in Prestonpans, being older and less likely to have children, and for the most part having moved from an earlier estate of prefabs rather than an inter-war cottage estate. Nonetheless, the findings — written up in a 1968 report and subsequently publicised in the *Architects' Journal* — echoed those of the Prestonpans study.¹³⁵ Respondents understood privacy according to the same visual, aural and social criteria: freedom from overlooking and in-looking; freedom from noise; and being able

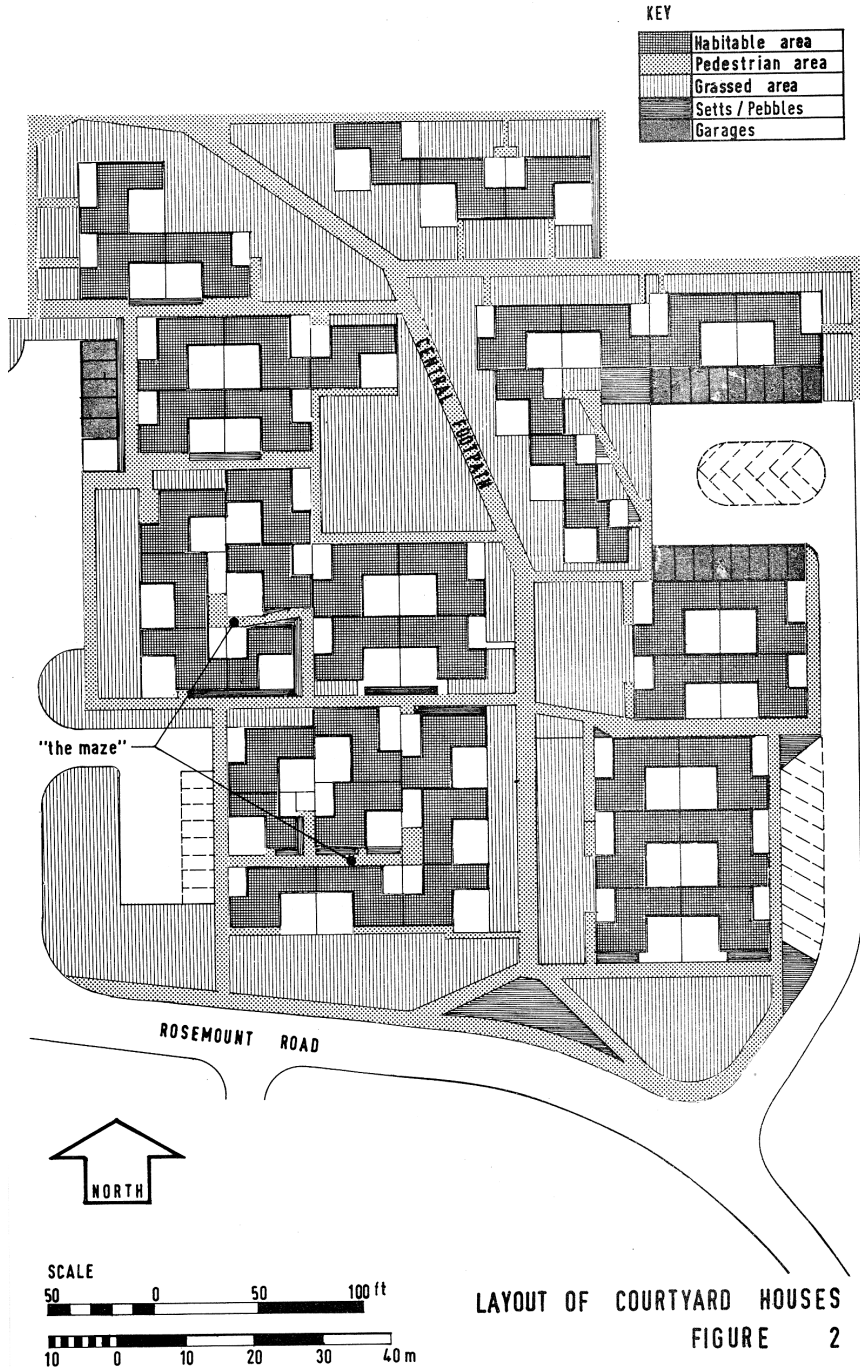


Fig. 14. Dundee, Housing Research Unit layout plan of the Ardler estate, begun 1960 (University of Edinburgh, Centre for Research Collections)

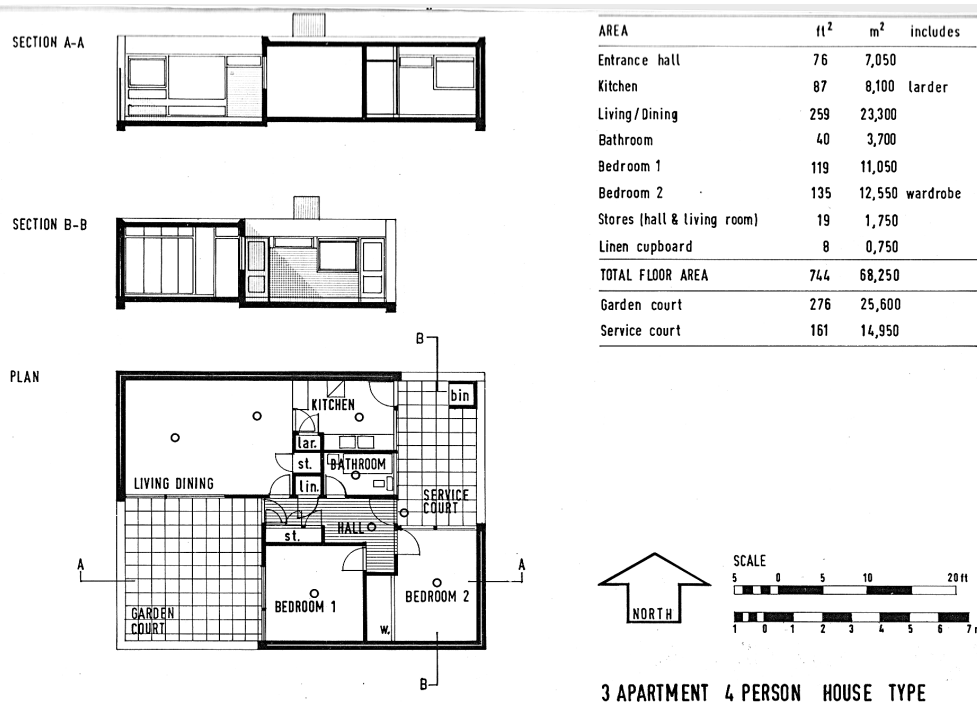


Fig. 15. Dundee, plan of two-bedroom courtyard house on the Ardler estate by Baxter Clark and Paul, c. 1960 (University of Edinburgh, Centre for Research Collections)

to live their lives without intrusion or unwanted contact. As far as visual and acoustic privacy were concerned, there were comments about in-looking from some residents, and while those who had come from (detached) prefabs noticed acoustic transfer through party walls, others felt that the superior insulation and enclosed layout of the new houses led to better soundproofing than they had experienced previously.¹³⁶ Overall, the layout was viewed positively by many respondents: privacy attracted 'many enthusiastic comments'.¹³⁷

The courtyards at Ardler were typically smaller than at Prestonpans: 344 sq ft as opposed to 441 sq ft in the case of a four-apartment house, for example. They nonetheless similarly provided space for gardening, clothes drying, storage and pets, and were again at the centre of many residents' perception of privacy. 'Privacy is being able to sit outside without folks passing and saying "hello",' noted one.¹³⁸ While some Ardler residents — typically older or more shy — felt their home to be a 'prison', 89 per cent of those interviewed were reasonably satisfied with the limited outlook from their living room (that is, the view of the enclosed courtyard), and many valued the way in which the layout allowed them to choose the level of contact they had with neighbours.¹³⁹ Residents' previous prefabs were commonly felt to have lacked seclusion on account of their open plots: gardening, for example, would be interrupted by passing neighbours wishing to chat.¹⁴⁰ In the new houses, however, 'you are all to yourself', reported one;



Fig. 16. Dundee, courtyard house on the Ardler estate, photograph of c. 1989
(Historic Environment Scotland)

'you can do what you like'.¹⁴¹ Another remarked that it was possible 'to sit outside in anything, even a bikini', and the study team noted that this seclusion was particularly appreciated by those who wanted to sit out without worrying about their appearance, perhaps on their return from work.¹⁴² One resident commented that her disabled son valued being able to spend time outdoors 'without having to fear the taunts of children as they passed by'.¹⁴³ Yet the court could also be a place for sociability, with one resident holding weekly coffee mornings for friends and neighbours, something she had not done previously. In this respect, the reporters reiterated the importance of tenants of being able to choose to withdraw: neighbours 'knowing too much' was deemed a problem.¹⁴⁴ The tenement way of life, with shared stairs and drying areas, was the 'antithesis of privacy'.¹⁴⁵ Contact thus once again emerged as the central component of privacy and

perceived marker of status, with the study team suggesting that architects needed to look beyond the questions of visual and acoustic isolation which, it was suggested, they typically understood as the main determinants of privacy.¹⁴⁶ Such a conclusion, if nothing else, appeared to confirm the value of the kind of broad, multi-disciplinary investigation that the HRU favoured.

Privacy remained an important theme in the later work of the HRU (or the Architecture Research Unit, as it became in 1965), which included an investigation of 'shared open space' in Scottish owner-occupied housing in 1972.¹⁴⁷ A further 'live project' at Juniper Street, east London (1975), also considered the design of private space.¹⁴⁸ In form, however, the unit's design work abandoned the courtyards of Prestonpans. Andrew Gilmour, who joined in 1968 from the London County Council, was increasingly sceptical about what he termed 'the casbah' approach, not least the idea that, as noted above, it accommodated 'the honest *Coronation Street* Londoners', and instead he advocated a layout informed by traditional Scottish tenements, 'a clustering of thresholds' on staircases.¹⁴⁹ There are parallels in this search to give common spaces a clear identity and sense of surveillance with the influential idea of 'defensible space', which emerged in the 1970s and understood communal areas not as the benign incubators of community that had been proposed in the 1950s and 1960s, but rather as the potential harbours of antisocial and criminal activity.¹⁵⁰ It offered a rather different understanding of domestic privacy and communal neighbourliness from that which had informed the advocacy of courtyard housing.

CONCLUSION

This article has examined the work of the University of Edinburgh's Housing Research Unit, identifying the unit's particular interest in privacy and relating it to the significance attached more generally to this idea in the design of housing and the new towns between the 1940s and the 1970s. Privacy was both a counterbalance to and component of the idea of 'community', much discussed by contemporary researchers and subsequent historians. It was defined not simply in quantifiable terms — visual and acoustic — but also in terms of residents' contact with their neighbours. These considerations had fundamental impacts on design, not least when it came to courtyard housing. With enclosed gardens and a limited outlook, this sort of layout 'appeared to provide the kind of privacy that informants wanted', reported the HRU's 1966 Dundee study.¹⁵¹

Although the fashion for courtyard designs had passed by the early 1970s, the scope for formal innovation of this kind, at least in a British context, was in any case diminished after 1980 with the curtailment of council house construction, the field in which many of the most innovative designs of the previous two decades had been realised. The emerging idea of 'defensible space', too, meant that the largely unwatched vennels and walkways of a courtyard estate could be reframed as places of potential danger, though such concerns had not been evident in residents' responses to the HRU interviewers in the 1960s. Furthermore, during the 1980s and 1990s, questions of architectural 'image' (including renewed interest in historicist motifs), worries about the resilience of flat roofs and a new interest in energy efficiency also impacted on the projects that have been

the focus of this article. While the Prestonpans houses survive, albeit in modified form with new rendering and pitched roofs, much of the Ardler estate has been demolished, as have, in recent years, the flats at Park 3 West (although not the houses).

It is perhaps no coincidence that density and privacy were of particular interest to the HRU's researchers. Unlike other parts of the UK, where row houses prevailed, Scotland's major cities in 1945 largely comprised multi-storey blocks of tenement flats with a shared access to the street as well as common drying areas and yards. In the post-war decades, the worst of these tenements were cramped and overcrowded, with numerous households in inner Glasgow, in particular, sharing basic facilities such as sinks and WCs. Accordingly, within a wider British context, questions of space and neighbourly contact took on particular significance during Scotland's housing drive. Privacy could be framed as something 'modern' in its contrast with previous models of enforced communality, and also the extent that it was being provided for all — not just owner-occupiers. Certainly, the residents of new housing in Scotland appreciated the extent to which their domestic environment was now their own, and that they no longer had to share drying areas, bins or other facilities.¹⁵²

Ultimately, however, community and privacy were not binary opposites; one did not supplant the other. Herein lies the challenge of attempting to characterise the post-war welfare state, which was able to accommodate simultaneously attitudes that might otherwise appear opposed.¹⁵³ Indeed, the Central Housing Advisory Committee's report *The Needs of New Communities* appeared in 1967 just as the recommendations of the Parker Morris report, overseen earlier in the decade by the same committee and emphasising privacy at home, were becoming mandatory in council housing in England. Citizenship, as defined and encouraged by the state, could be at once communal and individual, enacted both beyond and within the home. The examples discussed in this article embody this duality particularly well, offering the privacy of the individual home but also, in their dense arrangements and pedestrian walkways, embodying and perhaps also nurturing the modern community. Within this community, residents had agency: the choice of when to engage, and when to withdraw.¹⁵⁴ In Dundee, one Ardler resident noted of her courtyard house, 'if you want visitors you can have them, if you don't that's fine'.¹⁵⁵ In this way, one might ultimately characterise the wider post-war housing drive not simply in terms of improved standards and facilities, but also an ambition to provide new options and freedoms for all.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This article is one of the publications from the project 'Community and Citizenship in British Architecture, 1945–1990', funded by the British Academy and Leverhulme Trust (ref. SRG19\191630, 2020–22). For permission to reproduce images I would like to acknowledge the University of Edinburgh's Centre for Research Collections, John A. Segal and North Ayrshire Council. I am especially grateful to Nick Mols for redrawing several plans. I would also like to thank Miles Glendinning, for the transcript of his interviews with Andrew Gilmour; Mark Swenarton, for encouraging me to think about high-density low-rise housing in the first place; Paul Wynn, for sharing his dissertation; and the editorial team at *Architectural History* and especially Otto Saumarez Smith for his editorial input. Finally, I am very grateful to the four anonymous readers, whose detailed comments and suggestions were most helpful.

BIOGRAPHY

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