

## Berthold Lubetkin 1901-1990. Our very own Modernist at the heart of the Amwell area.



Berthold Lubetkin was the architect of Bevin Court and numerous other ground-breaking projects for the Metropolitan Borough of Finsbury. He was commissioned initially to design and build the ground-breaking and now Grade 1 Listed Pine Street Health Centre. As a result of the Blitz on London, in April 1941 a landmine fell on Holford Square just off Great Percy Street. As a consequence, Bevin Court was built on the site of Holford Square. Lubetkin was born in Tbilisi, Georgia at the crossroads of western Asia and eastern Europe. He studied architecture in Moscow and Petrograd under Alexander Rodchenko, Vladimir Tatlin and Alexander Vesnin. He travelled to Berlin in 1922, lived in Warsaw between 1923 and 1925 and then moved to Paris, where he learnt from Auguste Perret and worked with Moisie Ginsberg. Lubetkin was invited to London in 1930, where he formed the group Tecton with six graduates of the Architectural Association. The 1930s were to be Lubetkin and Tecton's most prolific period, including work at Whippsnade and London Zoos.

In the 1930s Finsbury was one of London's poorest boroughs. Lice, rickets, and diphtheria were common and most residents had to suffer poor housing and atrocious diets. In Britain as a whole 2,000 people per year died of whooping cough and tuberculosis killed 30,000 annually. Finsbury Council set about tackling the problems with the ambitious 'Finsbury Plan'. The idea was to build a comprehensive health centre amid public baths, libraries and nurseries. In the end the complete plan was never executed because of WWII. Nonetheless, Finsbury represents an important moment in the story of British Modernist architecture.

The 1938 Centre incorporated a TB clinic, a foot clinic, a dental surgery, and a solarium. The basement had facilities for cleaning and disinfecting bedclothes and upholstered items. Lubetkin wanted people to feel welcome but never patronised. He also wanted the Centre to be like a club, or a drop-in centre not that they felt as if they were walking into a workhouse. To this end, the reception desk was left out of the original plans, but had to be added later. Furniture in the foyer was deliberately arranged



into groups as in a café or hotel lounge, not in rows. People felt they could drop in at any time and see clinicians in a relaxed, unthreatening atmosphere. Lubetkin wanted the centre to persuade people to live healthier lives, as well as treat their ailments. Murals on the walls encouraged patients to value fresh air. The glass bricks of the front wall were a conscious attempt to "propagandise" the physical benefits of a light, airy environment. The solarium allowed the children of Finsbury, who spent much of their early lives enveloped in poor air or thick coal-induced smog, a chance to feel the benefits of sunlight. Of this revolutionary new approach to public health, Lubetkin famously commented *Nothing is too good for ordinary people*. The interior of the Centre was bright-coloured in reds and azures, which were designed to contrast with the gloom of the surrounding slums, and the expanse of glass walls on

each of the wings would sparkle on sunny days...*'as beautiful as the hair of a beautiful young girl in the summer sunshine'*. Lubetkin shows us that Modernist buildings are not sombre but celebrations of the modern age. He saw his Health Centre as a multi-coloured beacon in the heart of the smoky city.

**Visit Pine Street, Exmouth Market EC1R 0LP and see Lubetkin's Finsbury Health Centre for yourself.**

**The Finsbury Health Centre Preservation Trust is campaigning to refurbish Lubetkin's pioneering 1938 building. The Health Centre is the original *physical* inspiration for the establishment of our beloved the National Health Service.**

Lubetkin's practice, Tecton was dissolved in 1948, but the firm Skinner Bailey & Lubetkin continued to operate. Lubetkin was awarded the RIBA Gold Medal for Architecture in 1982. We are surrounded by Lubetkin's work in the Amwell area. Not only is there the inspiring Bevin Court but also they adjacent Holford House, the nearby Spa Green Estate opposite Sadler's Wells, the Priory Green Estate north of Pentonville Road, the Penguin Pond at London Zoo – now sadly redundant as it was found to be bad for penguins, especially their feet, and Highpoint, Lubetkin's luxury blocks of flats in Highgate.

Selected further reading:

Alexander Lavrentiev. *Alexander Rodchenko. Photography 1924 – 1954*. Könemann. 1995

Iloš Crhonek. *Architekt Bohuslav Fuchs*. Petrov – Brno. 1995

Dennis Sharp and Sally Rendel. *Connell Ward and Lucas. Modern movement architects in England 1929 – 1939*. Frances Lincoln. 2008

John Allan. *Berthold Lubetkin. Architecture and the tradition of progress*. Artifice. 2<sup>nd</sup> edition 2012

Viewing on line:

*From here to modernity*. Part 1 presented by Kirsty Wark. <https://vimeo.com/23415686>

*From here to modernity*. Parts 2 and 3 presented by Kirsty Wark. <https://vimeo.com/28985915> Lubetkin is featured heavily at the start of part 2

Photo of Lubetkin - Baron. Biographical notes from RIBA website. Edited by David Sulkin