Architectural landmark Alton Estate gears up for 50th birthday thanks to Heritage Lottery Fund

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The Alton Estate that overlooks Richmond Park at Roehampton, married together two schools of thought within the British Modern Movement. The anniversary project, managed by an estate-based community group called Regenerate, has been made possible by a grant of £34,100 from the Heritage Lottery Fund (HLF).

Reputedly Europe's second largest housing estate, Alton contributes towards Roehampton's position as one of the most deprived areas in the Borough of Wandsworth. The estate was originally built in two phases by architects of the then London County Council. Alton East, completed in 1958 with a mixture of high and low-rise blocks, was seen as an example of Modernist architecture that had a softer, more humanist, feel.

In contrast, Alton West, built a year later, followed the more purist, 'brutalist' strand replicating, with its five multi-storey slab blocks raised on stilts over parkland, Swiss architect Le Corbusier's seminal Unite d'Habitation in Marseilles. Ironically, not long after completion Alton West featured in the opening sequence of the film Farenheit 451 based on science fiction writer Ray Bradbury's view of a dystopian, totalitarian future.

The project will enlist volunteer help to interview and record the memories of residents, some of whom have lived on the estate since it was built in the late 1950s. The result will be a documentary film, a mobile exhibition and a 50th anniversary event during the summer. The film will be shown at the four primary schools on the estate, elderly persons' day centres, the branch library and other locations.

Commenting for the Heritage Lottery Fund, Head of HLF London Sue Bowers, said: "This project aims to capture for posterity the memories of those who have grown up with the estate and well as those who have moved in subsequently, documenting the ups and downs of life there. It will introduce many local people to the concept of heritage and their individual role in it."

For Regenerate, Simon Gale, said: "We are excited to be able to provide a platform for the community of Roehampton to record its heritage, and we believe the process will help build again the sense of community that has existed in the past. Despite its image and social problems we believe the area of Roehampton is worth celebrating and has an interesting story to be told."

Notes to editors

Alton East consists of both high and low-rise housing set within a mature landscape. The external decoration, with brightly-coloured paintwork and coloured bricks, failed to find favour with hardline Modernists in the former LCC's Architects' Department who considered it frivolous and lacking an obvious function. Nevertheless, it proved popular with residents at the time.

Alton West, by contrast, imported Le Corbusier's starker design with no 'frivolous' detailing but angular simplicity and unadorned concrete. The design of the five blocks drew their inspiration from the Unite d'Habitation at Marseille, although each was far less massive than this 17-storey monster that housed 1,600 people and included a hotel, recreation facilities and meeting rooms.

Using money raised through the National Lottery, the Heritage Lottery Fund (HLF) sustains and transforms a wide range of heritage for present and future generations to take part in, learn from and enjoy. From museums, parks and historic places to archaeology, natural environment and cultural traditions, we invest in every part of our diverse heritage. HLF has supported more than 28,800 projects, allocating over £4.3billion across the UK, with over £840 million has granted in London alone.

Further information

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