



ART IN THE MAKING

# 12 Views of Kensal House

*With pre-recorded introduction by Steven Foxon, BFI Curator (Non-Fiction)*

In 1936 Kensal House, situated in the west of London, was opened by the Gas Light and Coke Company as a model estate. Designed by the leading architect, Maxwell Fry, Kensal House put into practice ideas about mass housing which echoed the work of Le Corbusier and the Bauhaus in Europe.

This film is a biography of a building which between 1936 and 1984 has changed considerably. It sets out to examine both the ideas that helped bring Kensal House into existence and the changes it has seen in its lifetime.

When the estate was opened, the film *Kensal House*, which became a classic documentary, was made, extolling its virtues with contributions from the architect, the housing manager and the tenants. The '12 views' include those of the people who have known the building from a variety of perspectives, including some seen in the original film. A picture is built of the aesthetic, architectural and social issues which Kensal House represents. Maxwell Fry explains the modernist ideals of the period, while Stephen Bayley of the Victoria & Albert Museum traces the antecedents of the modern flat and the problems facing architects in the 1930s. Tenants resident since 1936 recall their initial reactions and the way they have altered with time, alongside recent tenants who don't share the same sense of the past.

*12 Views of Kensal House* is a timely contribution to the current debate about modern architecture and its future.

## Arts Council of Great Britain programme notes

Less the history than the archaeology of a building, Peter Wyeth's film on Kensal House is an amalgam of two different perspectives: a series of picture-postcard-style 'views' interwoven with a wide range of aesthetic, architectural and sociological opinion about the building, with contributions ranging from Stephen Bayley of the Victoria and Albert Museum and Maxwell Fry through to past and present tenants of Kensal House itself. Also brought into play are excerpts from an earlier film in which the building 'starred' – *Kensal House* (Frank Sainsbury, 1938), something of a companion-piece to the better-known *Housing Problems* (Edgar Anstey and Arthur Elton, 1935). From the opening tracking shot along a graffiti-covered wall (on which, to the accompaniment of Mozart on the soundtrack, the camera picks out the word 'Mozart' in large, spray-painted letters), through to the gently absurdist titles of some of the 'views' – 'fishermen passing along the Grand Union Canal', 'return of the Bristol train', 'waste chute at the new flats to the east of Kensal House', *12 Views of Kensal House* employs a wryly subversive humour. This both reinforces the hint of Peter Greenaway in the title and pokes parodic fun at conventional architectural discourse and the standard art-historical thesis.

More distinctive still in this respect is its refusal to treat Kensal House as a simple, homogeneous object, and a concomitant insistence on constructing the meaning of the building from a series of differing perspectives – economic, aesthetic, political, etc.

**Julian Petley, *Monthly Film Bulletin*, September 1984**

**Housing Problems** is both a propaganda piece and a document of optimism. With its iconic image of new flats rising behind an old row of slum terraces in Stepney, it shows what has been done to improve living conditions by the most 'enlightened' local authorities and planners, and provides an exhortation to others to follow suit. Rather than merely asserting the necessity of new housing, it uses the voices and stories of working class men and women to demonstrate the slums' dreadful conditions, and the benefit of the new estates.

Its method – ordinary people talking straight to the camera about their lives – was an innovation in documentary, though to a modern viewer the rehearsed words sound stilted. A more serious note of condescension might be gathered when the narrator tells us that slum-dwellers 'quickly respond' to their improved living conditions by becoming more hygienic themselves.

With hindsight, it might be easy to see faith in planned housing as the solution to social problems as naïve. Leeds' Quarry Road Estate, displayed as an exemplary piece of planning, was never fully completed; many of the vaunted amenities were never added to the basic housing, and the whole estate was demolished in 1978. Nevertheless, the full horror of the slums is brought home, as the badly housed talk about the deaths of their children and daily encounters with vermin, and the camera pans around houses with crooked stairs, blown plaster and collapsed roofs.

Finally, there's a chilling pathos in the filmmakers' hope that in the next ten years the worst of the slums would have been cleared. By 1945, the Luftwaffe had indiscriminately destroyed large areas of working-class housing, and Britain faced a new and rather more desperate housing problem.

**Danny Birchall, BFI Screenonline, [screenonline.org.uk](http://screenonline.org.uk)**

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#### **12 VIEWS OF KENSAL HOUSE**

*Director:* Peter Wyeth  
©: Arts Council of Great Britain  
*Production Company:* Capital Films  
*For:* Arts Council of Great Britain  
*Sponsor:* Arts Council of Great Britain  
*Executive Producer:* Rodney Wilson  
*Producer:* Peter Wyeth  
*Production Manager:* Andrew Barratt  
*Script:* Peter Wyeth  
*Photography:* Patrick Duval  
*Assistant Photographer:* Martin Shirley  
*Editor:* William Diver  
*Assistant Editor:* Toby Benton  
*Video Titles:* Pullman Video  
*Laboratory:* Colour Film Services  
*Sound Recording:* Stan Phillips  
*Sound Re-recording:* Aad Wirtz,  
Cine-Lingual Sound Studios  
*Post Production Services:* Cinécontact

#### **With**

Maxwell Fry, Stephen Bayley, Lady Newall, Margaret Wilson, Eva Wilson, Alice Cole, Reg Cole, Gwen Cole, Dorette Hawthorn, Mark Eagar Thora Skinner, Catherine Morencie, Ivor Flint, Jessie Watkins, June Parsons, Michael Burgess, Paul Ryan

UK 1984©  
55 mins

#### **HOUSING PROBLEMS**

*Production:* Arthur Elton, E.H. Anstey  
*For:* British Commercial Gas Association  
*Photography:* John Taylor  
*Recording:* York Scarlett

UK 1935  
13 mins

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**Programme notes and credits compiled by the BFI Documentation Unit**

**Notes may be edited or abridged. Questions/comments? Email [prognotes@bfi.org.uk](mailto:prognotes@bfi.org.uk)**

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