Lesnes Estate Retrofit, South Thamesmead, London

AAB architects
December 2023

(Left) Lensbury Way, Lesnes Estate, 1970. Copyright London Metropolitan Archives
(Right) Lensbury Way, Lesnes Estate, 2023. Copyright AAB architects
Residents of the Lesnes Estate, South Thamesmead, want to develop a retrofit strategy to upgrade their homes and make them fit for the future.

Retrofit works could be deployed individually—household-by-household, on a block-by-block basis, or a combination of the two. It is proposed to carry out a feasibility study, including assessment of the existing condition of the houses and flats, and conversations with residents to determine how homes are being lived in. Proposals will include a set of fabric-first retrofitting measures which can be deployed across each home. This study will be carried out in the context of regeneration delay and to support campaigns by residents to retain their homes.
The Lesnes Estate was part of the first phase of an ambitious scheme for what was essentially a new town of 60,000 homes, built on industrial marshland to the south of the Thames. It is mostly composed of 3-storey town houses, arranged above garages in various layouts to create parking mews and interconnected pedestrian courtyards, with six 13-storey towers along the northern edge of the estate. Thamesmead was designed by the GLC and constructed between the late 1960s and early 1970s using the French Balency precast concrete system. With its striking modernist architecture the area-wide mass building scheme has held both architectural and cultural significance since it’s construction.²
South Thamesmead remains an important example of New Towns-era, post-war planning within the UK. Built upon land purchased from by the GLC from the Ministry of Defence, the new area was built to alleviate post-war housing shortages across the city. South Thamesmead was designed following the principles of New Town planning set out by the Town and Country Planning Association, following on from the 1946 New Towns Act. These included integrating schools and facilities within the scheme to build a localised sense of community, integrating a network of green space into the town’s fabric, prioritising social housing, and innovative building design.³
173 of the 596 homes on Lesnes Estate are freehold houses which have been bought by long term residents of the estate. Over the years they have upgraded their homes through means such as window and cladding replacement and converting garages to living accommodation. The estate has evolved in a patchwork manner, where residents have stamped their own individuality upon identical houses they occupy. The original precast concrete walls, however, are predominantly untouched, and houses remain largely uninsulated.

The estate sits within the top 20% most deprived areas in the UK according to the Multiple Deprivation Index (2019). Fuel poverty is a major challenge across the estate, and a key issue which residents wish to address through means of retrofit. The estate sits in a ward with a diverse demography, with 45% of residents identifying as Black, 38% White, and 11% Asian. The Tenants and Residents Association is currently going through the process of constitution in order to apply for funding opportunities such as the AHF.
Examples of alterations carried out to the houses on Lesnes estate.
The feasibility study will:

- Assess the construction of the houses and flats through non-invasive, but detailed surveys of the structure and fabric.
- Understand specific ventilation and heating issues through conversations with residents.
- Accurately draw and model homes as currently constructed.
- Develop tailor-made retrofit solutions for the typology of terrace house upon the estate.

AAB architects have already met with residents to discuss the possible benefits of retrofit and carried out initial research into the existing buildings and previous work to retrofit them.
Retrofitting schemes have been previously carried out within South Thamesmead with the aim to improve conditions within the 1960s building stock; a scheme which monitored and improved energy and ventilation conditions with smart meters upon the neighbouring Parkview Estate, and a deep retrofit of a row of flats and shops upon Yarnton Way. Lesnes Estate, however, has had no coordinated improvements to date, yet residents are keen to thermally improve their homes.

Peabody purchased large swathes of South Thamesmead from Gallion Housing in 2014, with the intention of demolishing and redeveloping the land. This proposal has since been put on hold, and the opportunity to retain and retrofit has since arisen.
Work carried out in a feasibility study for Lesnes Estate will be applicable to the adjacent estates of Parkview and Southmere, of which there are no current plans for demolition or redevelopment. These were constructed at the same time as the Lesnes Estate and follow the same (Southmere) or similar (Parkview) typology. Strategies developed within the feasibility study could inform strategies for these estates. Outreach to residents of these estates could be encouraged within this feasibility study.

A study into retrofit of post-war modernist buildings could also have a wider impact. Currently, knowledge about how to thermally renovate post-war public housing is lacking and it is often overlooked as an option. Focus has often been on individual houses, generally of traditional construction. The opportunity for retrofit at large scale- necessary to tackle the climate and ecological emergency- will be unlocked through schemes such as this. It will help build a greater understanding of how we can successfully retrofit our post-war building stock throughout the UK.
Initial retrofit assessments have been carried out and work is ongoing.

Insulation of the timber roofs of the houses is a priority retrofit measure. Residents are continuing to maintain their own roofs but the housing association owned properties are left to degrade.


