

Darwin Court Southwark, London

Seventy six rented homes including 16 flats for frail older people and a resource centre.

The building, owned and managed by public sector provider Peabody Trust and designed by architects Jestico and Whiles, was completed in 2003. It won a Civic Trust Award in 2004 and Welhops European design award in 2006.

Key features

- There are two blocks of flats above a resource centre. All flats have balconies and there is a large communal balcony on each floor as well as two roof terraces.
- The location is conveniently near to residents' old homes and support networks. The resource centre is an asset, but there are questions about access to it.

Design and planning

The architect worked with the idea of flats clustered around stairwells, to avoid long corridors and create more cohesive communities within a large complex. The original scheme included a centre for the care of frail older people but that proved too expensive and was modified so that care and other support services are provided to people in their own flats.

For the architect, the idea of making spaces 'ready to be colonised', in which residents could get to know each other and establish new friendships, was central to the project. They also fought to retain a hotel-style reception, and insisted that the building should not feel institutional, despite its large scale. The building comprises two blocks with eight flats on each of the five upper floors of each block. The flats are organised round a common core, and the building has a resource centre which is open to the public with health facilities, social spaces, a café, IT suite and pool on the ground floor. There are gardens at the front of the building, accessible from the public areas. The residential floors are accessed by two secure private entrances and lifts.

Because the flats are on the upper floors, Darwin Court residents enjoy wonderful views from their large, low-set picture windows and their private balconies. They also have the use of a larger communal balcony on each floor, and two expansive roof terraces, which are not only natural informal meeting places, but also enable residents to cultivate their own garden.

The building has a bright and open public face, which welcomes visitors without compromising the privacy of tenants, underlying the development's close integration with the surrounding community. In the absence of a local pool, the swimming pool is regularly used by schoolchildren during the day. The café is used by various organisations, and the staff members say it is a great place to work in, as well as to live in.



Darwin Court, London © David Churchill



Modern lift technology has meant that frail and older people have no problem getting to their flats.

Although the bedrooms are fairly small, each unit has a spare room which can be used by relatives and there is a separate guest room that can be booked.

Sixteen flats were designed for frail older people from the start. Peabody accepted the architect's proposal of designing the remaining flats as good-quality, general needs housing, with level access and the potential for adaptability in future.

At the start, some tenants were surprised that the resource centre was not exclusively for their use. It is a challenge to co-ordinate the needs of the different groups that rent the spaces at low cost with the needs of the tenants. Making the café appealing to both locals and tenants has also been a problem. It is operated by Peabody, through agency workers, but only during the week. Peabody would not build a swimming pool again as it has been hugely expensive to run, but the trust is committed to running it as a community resource.

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Residents' views

Many residents came from the neighbouring Aylesbury Estate, earmarked for demolition and redevelopment, and they are very happy with their new life. The location enables people from the estate to carry on with their lives without the trauma of uprooting themselves from a neighbourhood and community they know so well.

Design and architectural features

- Two blocks of flats above a resource centre
- All flats have balconies and there is a large communal balcony on each floor
- Two roof terraces provide natural meeting space.

Points for residents

- Convenient location near to their old homes and support networks
- Resource centre is an asset, but shared use by outside groups and residents is sometimes a challenge.