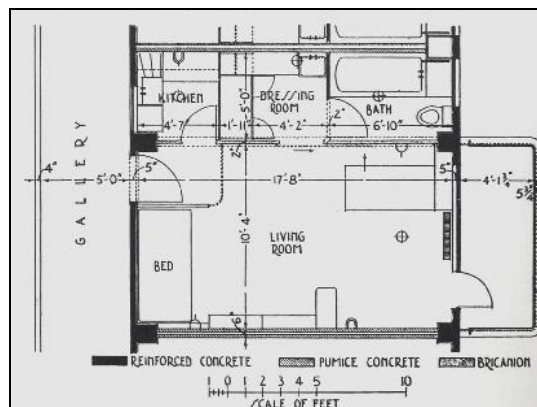


LAWN ROAD FLATS and ISOKON



Lawn Road Flats (aka The Isokon) stood at the cutting edge of modern architecture in Britain when the building was opened in July 1934. The project stemmed from the meeting of Jack and Rosemary (Molly) Pritchard, the clients, with the Canadian architect Wells Coates, to whom they had been attracted on account of his innovative work in showroom design and inventive use of plywood. Jack Pritchard had become the British marketing manager for the internationally successful Estonian plywood company Venesta in 1925 and through Le Corbusier had already engaged Charlotte Perriand to design an exhibition stand for the firm at Olympia in 1929.

That same year Jack and Molly acquired the site in Lawn Road and initially considered building a pair of conventional detached houses. But being increasingly interested in the progressive architectural developments on the Continent they abandoned this idea in favour of an altogether more radical programme based on the *existenzminimum* dwelling experiments in Germany and promoted through the international organization CIAM. Clients and architect visited the Weissenhoff housing exhibition in Stuttgart in 1930 showcasing works by the leading modern architects Mies van der Rohe, Le Corbusier, JJP Oud, Walter Gropius and others. At this point, apart from a few single villas in superficially modern style, there was nothing in England to compare with these European developments.

The detailed Lawn Road brief was largely developed by Molly Pritchard with Coates and eventually produced the 4 storey gallery access block we see today. Formed in 4" monolithic reinforced concrete the building contained 22 single flats, four double flats, three studio flats, staff quarters, kitchens and a large garage. The Pritchards and their children occupied the rooftop penthouses. Services included shoe cleaning, laundry, bed-making and meal deliveries from the staff kitchen. Wells Coates' parallel interest in boat building and product design is evident in the intricate fitting out of the interiors which aimed to cater for young professionals with few possessions and a mobile lifestyle. The studio units are only 25 sq m in area but include a kitchen, a dressing room and a bathroom alongside the main living/sleeping space. Advance lettings were stimulated by exhibiting a showflat mock-up in 1933, and the building was successfully occupied soon after completion in 1934. By this time refugees from Europe were beginning to arrive in England, distinguished emigres including Walter Gropius, Marcel Breuer and Moholy-Nagy.

The Isobar

In 1937 the staff kitchen was reconfigured as a restaurant and bar, designed by Marcel Breuer with F.R.S. Yorke and named the *Isobar* with a decked outdoor area at the rear of the building. Its manager was Philip Harben, who after World War II became the first TV celebrity chef at the BBC. The building became famous as a centre for intellectual life in north London. Residents included the novelist Agatha Christie and her husband, the archaeologist Max Mallowan, the Soviet NKVD spy Arnold Deutsch who was controller of the Cambridge Spy Ring, the German-born economist and Soviet spy Jürgen Kuczynski, the author Nicholas Monserrat, textile designers Jacques and Jacqueline Groag, architects Egon Riss, Arthur Korn and later James Stirling. Regulars at the Isobar included sculptors Henry Moore and Barbara Hepworth, painter Ben Nicholson and Sir Julian Huxley, secretary of the Zoological Society of London.

Wartime and after

Jack Pritchard remained in London during World War II while Molly Pritchard and their children Jonathan and Jeremy left for the United States and later Canada. Being made of reinforced concrete the building remained popular and despite several bombs in the near vicinity, survived the Blitz. It was repainted brown as it was feared its distinctive form could serve as a navigation aid for German bombers. In 1955, the Pritchards staged a 21st-birthday party for the building: Philip Harben returned to make the food, architectural writer Nikolaus Pevsner made a speech and letters from Walter Gropius and Marcel Breuer were read out. Wells Coates as well as many pre-war residents attended the event.

Bauhaus in Belsize Park

An integral part of the project was the development of new furniture by the Isokon Furniture Company that would complement the flats, and in 1935 Walter Gropius was appointed Controller of Design. When he left to become Professor of Architecture at Harvard University he duly recommended Marcel Breuer, his former Bauhaus colleague who had moved into flat 16 in early 1935, as his replacement. Breuer designed several classic modern pieces in plywood including chairs, tables and the Long and Short Chair. Moholy-Nagy designed promotional material for the company including sales leaflets, show cards and the firm's logo - an outline of a curved plywood chair. He also later moved to the US and formed The New Bauhaus in Chicago. The fourth Bauhaus teacher to stay at Lawn Road Flats was Naum Slutzky, a Russian-born goldsmith who would remain in Britain for the rest of his life. The Isokon Furniture Company folded in 1939 with the outbreak of World War II when its supply of plywood from Venesta was cut off following the Soviet invasion of Estonia. However the company was restarted in 1963 and since 1982 the furniture has been made by Isokon Plus with the approval of the Pritchard family.

Ruin and Rescue

The building was sold by Jack Pritchard in 1969 to the New Statesman magazine, who converted the Isobar into flats. They in turn sold it on to Camden Council in 1972. It was listed Grade II by English Heritage in 1974 and raised to Grade I in 1999. But it was poorly maintained and began to deteriorate. After a campaign to save the building it was sold to the Notting Hill Housing Group who undertook a major restoration project with a team led by Avanti Architects. Re-opened in 2004 it now contains 36 flats, most of which are owned on shared equity basis by key workers such as nurses and teachers.



The Isokon Gallery

The Avanti proposals included conversion of the garage to become a museum and in July 2014, on the 80th anniversary of the original building completion, the Isokon Gallery opened with a permanent exhibition that tells the story of the building, its residents and the Isokon Furniture Company. It is run by the Isokon Gallery Trust, a registered charity, and staffed by volunteers with free entry 11am to 4pm each Saturday and Sunday from March through October. The Gallery is supported entirely by proceeds from its small gift shop, one-off charges for special events and the donations of benefactors. If you would like to make a donation please use the **Donate** facility on our website. www.isokongallery.org

An English Heritage Blue Plaque marking the residency of Walter Gropius, Marcel Breuer and László Moholy-Nagy has been installed on the Gallery wall and was unveiled on July 9th 2018.