

# Journal

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Open House: at his Barbican flat for sale, architect Dave King reflects on the contemporary relevance of Brutalist architecture



In our Open House series, we talk to sellers about what makes their home a special place to live. Here, at his Barbican flat for sale, architect and co-founder of shedkm Dave King reflects on the contemporary relevance of Brutalist architecture, what the Chamberlin Powell & Bon-designed estate got so right and why he's not moving that far.

**Dave:** "I've thought a lot about why the Barbican has endured as a piece of architecture. In fact, it hasn't just endured, because it's more popular now than it was at the time it was built. So, what is it about the Barbican that seems to be more relevant to modern life than life in the 1970s, when it was finished?"

"I think it's because the Barbican proposes a kind of lifestyle. It works really well as an oasis in the middle of a very big city, and it's one of the very, very few places where the whole business of having a high walk above the traffic has actually worked, and that's because they were able to do it across the whole of the estate.

"Some people will say the Barbican has remained popular because it's got cinemas and concert halls, which are certainly part of it, but they've been done all over – at the Brunswick Centre in Bloomsbury, for example. What hasn't been replicated is this feeling of calm and peace in the middle of the city.

“My wife, who wasn’t that into living in London, walked up the staircase to the podium level and said, ‘I like this’. When I asked why she said it was the peace, that it didn’t feel threatening and she felt safe – whether you like the architecture or not, that’s true.

“It’s one of the things that makes the more brutal, overall concrete-y feel a bit more acceptable. It’s sort of similar to when you’re in the middle of a big city and you go into a huge cathedral and there’s this amazing peace. It doesn’t matter if the stone is dark, or the ceilings are high, or it’s gloomy, even, there’s a stillness to those spaces. And I think the Barbican is similar in that way.

“The landscaping also helps. I think the gardens here are beautiful and enhance the feeling of an oasis. There was a definite attempt in Chamberlin Powell & Bon’s design to connect with nature as far as they were able to. There are a succession of lakes and waterfalls for a start, and there was a planting policy. I think the more formal aspects are quite architectural, in a way, which was quite unusual, and very brave at the time.

“But I would actually say something that maybe not many people have said, that the original planting policy in the Barbican was a little bit institutional, rather a lot of flowerbeds, like in public parks. The council have planted some more trees down here, but it will take time. But yeah, my feeling about this connection with nature is mixed. Yes, there is this huge attempt to do that, but times have changed a little bit, and the sorts of parks and gardens way of dealing with it has now got a bit outdated.

“More recently, they’ve had to renew the landscaping. They’re now moving towards a much more naturalistic, semi-wild policy, like at the Olympic Park. I think this is a great improvement. I think there now is a movement to bring this more naturalistic way up onto the podium as well.

“I respond to the period in which it the estate was built. But, of course, that particular period has come very, very much back into fashion. The originality of the interiors in the Barbican is now sought after because, I think, all these new flats in London are just like going into hotel rooms, or whatever the style is now; so consistently characterless. Whereas these flats have got character, with the heavy wooden windows and slightly impractical pre-metric system kitchens.

“Lots of people are restoring the flats to how they were once built and there’s now an ongoing feeling that the original way it was is the way it should be. The flat that we’re hoping to buy, also in the Barbican, is owned by a conservationist, and everything is totally original – only her furniture is new. Which is what we like about it.

“It’s a good place to live. You get to know people and form a community. We’re hoping to move over to the other side of the estate, to a flat that’s all on one level. And, when you go out the front door you go straight into the lift, and it drops down into the children’s playground in the garden, which is great for when we look after our grandchildren. It won’t be a massive change, because we love it here.”