

White Heat London 5 / Fabrication

Central House Multi-storey urban workshop

Lush & Lester Architects

1963-65

The County of London Plan of 1943, aimed at post-war reconstruction, envisaged purpose-built, low-cost workshops sited close to where employees and owners lived so as to maintain local trades and encourage women into work. Like a block of flats but for industrial use, the flatted factory is a multi-storey building whose many occupiers have their own private space but share other facilities. The tenants' areas are often open-plan and common parts include freight as well as passenger lifts and loading bays. The first was built in Hackney in 1959; others followed. In Whitechapel, road realignment created a redevelopment site on which a flatted factory was to be built to support its dominant industry, present for centuries in the locality: fashion.

Above ground floor showrooms and first floor warehousing were several levels of workshops. The simple rectangular plan was divided into quadrants, reached by two external staircases. This facilitated access to individual firms or further sub-division via modular partitions. A reinforced concrete frame allowed high floor loadings and extensive glazing gave good daylight. Unusually, underground parking was provided.

Although part of Central House (which was named after the development company who leased the plot) was used as intended, the remainder was occupied by the Sir John Cass School of Art which remained until 2017. Schemes to reshape or replace the building are currently being debated.





The short elevations are articulated by the external stairs, their landings at half-storey level. The frame was clad with pre-cast exposed aggregate panels alternating with fair-faced concrete painted light grey. A central light well helped illuminate the deep floors.

Workers in metals, cobblers and furniture makers had occupied period buildings like those previously on the site. They produced bespoke, short-run or similar goods. Flatted factories respected this enterprise culture and brought it into the present, a useful model many decades later when London again faces demand for small-scale, artisanal manufacturing enterprises to be housed sustainably close to their final markets.

Concrete column heads in the form of inverted pyramids support the upper floors. The flatted factory was popular in countries with ties to Britain, with many examples surviving today in India, Singapore and Hong Kong. Cecil Lush and Alfred Lester worked in a wide variety of fields, including commercial, institutional and retail and in building student and private accommodation.