

Low-rise housing, Tavy Bridge, Thamesmead, Greenwich, London, 1970 from
'Manplan 8: Housing'. Photo by Tony Ray-Jones.

This black and white photograph shows a landscape divided up into many sections with complex intersecting angles and animated by the activities of three children, who are oblivious of the photographer. The photograph is taken from the top of a short, broad flight of steps leading down to a large plaza that connects us to the flats that run in a line across the top third of the image. From this point at the top of the steps, four broad avenues open up – rather like the so-called 'goosefoot' arrangement of paths leading from grand French chateaux or Italian piazzas. The four avenues are crossed by at least four further paths running from left to right, giving the feel of a maze of paths defined by gleaming waist-high concrete walls that either enclose light wells, an opening to let light through to the level below, or planters for trees or flowers.

To the far left of the photograph, the first ramp leads downwards to the left; the next path slopes off to the top left corner before dividing in two. Just to the right of centre the last of the four paths leads directly ahead to the entrance stairs of a block of flats.

Four storeys are visible on the flats, with lots of variation between them, both in the height of the roofline and sections that protrude forward or recede from the line of the facade. Large square balconies are enclosed by triangular side walls, alternating with rows of glazing that run the full width of the blocks.

The newness of the site is suggested by the bare saplings in the planters, and the way that at the top of the steps, some paving slabs are still to be filled in, leaving triangles of bare earth or sand. Here the first of the three children stands, a girl of about five wearing white knee socks and sandals, and a full-skirted print dress with an anorak over it. She's pulling a toy pram up the steps, her feet straddling the unmade section of paving. Her face is turned away from us, focused on the difficult, responsible task of bumping the pram up the steps. At the foot of the steps, a younger girl has her back to us, about to do the same with her own toy pram. Halfway down the avenue on the left, a boy is riding a bike, turning in a circle towards us. His small size makes the enclosing concrete walls seem higher, more maze-like than if an adult was walking alongside. The photograph both suggests that the landscape has potential for play, and that these young residents are involved in serious tasks.