

Culture
Exhibition

Happy and healthy in Peckham



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Words: Pamela Buxton

In 1935 a project to study healthy people was launched to preempt and avoid sickness. Artist Ilona Sagar is still inspired



Keep fit class on the roof of the Pioneer Health Centre, Peckham

For 24 years, thousands of Peckham residents were the willing guinea pigs in a radical research project to explore health and wellness in pre-NHS Britain. For the subjects, it was hardly a chore. All they had to do was sign up for an annual medical and pay a modest fee in exchange for use of the Pioneer Health Centre, a gleaming modernist building designed by Sir Owen Williams. Here, they and their families could enjoy the generous sports and social facilities including a splendid pool, or lounge around in the sun, eat healthy food at the restaurant, and generally have fun, while all the time being observed by the medical researchers.

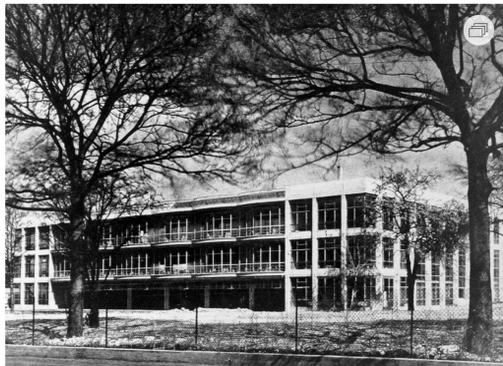
The idea was to identify how best to keep people healthy by studying them when they were well, rather than waiting for sickness to take hold.

‘Our object is to keep people in health for we all know that health means happiness,’ wrote G Scott Williamson, one of the founding leaders of the preventative health project.

This remarkable enterprise is the subject of a new exhibition and installation by artist Ilona Sagar at the South London Gallery, not far from the location of the grade II* listed Pioneer Health Centre itself. Built in 1935, the building is thought to have helped inform the Finsbury Health Centre (1938). It has since been converted into apartments as part of a larger, private housing development – in sharp contrast to the public spirit of the original facility.

Sagar was first attracted to the subject matter by the architecture of the Pioneer Health Centre.

‘It was the building and Owen Williams’ design that I was struck by first – I didn’t know about its history,’ she says.



Designed by Sir Owen Williams, the Pioneer Health Centre in Peckham was completed in 1935.

The first room of the exhibition is full of evocative material that Sagar has sourced from various archives including the Wellcome Trust, RIBA, and the Pioneer Health Foundation. It’s well worth spending time immersing yourself in the films and audio recordings to get a flavour of life at the Centre. The building looks great – complete with swathes of glazing and places to soak up the sun, as well as a lofty swimming hall with plenty of space for the healthy circulation of air. But most of the footage and images is of the members, whether diving in, splashing around in the pool or gamely taking part in group keep-fit.

Kids and adults alike obviously had a whale of a time. One 1980s audio recording recalled how the Centre was wrongly considered to be some sort of nudist club by a local Baptist church because very young children didn’t wear swimming costumes. But it was generally embraced by the local community – others reminisced about the sense of friendship, community and freedom they found there – and no-one seemed to mind being observed.



Children in the gym at the Pioneer Health Centre, Peckham.

Sagar’s moving image installation Correspondence O was inspired by both the collage-like style of some of the archive films and the issues of wellness and health raised by the Pioneer Health Centre project itself.

‘I took as a starting point the stylistic texture of the original archive films...I’m interested in abstract, fragmented use of images,’ she says.

There is no single straightforward narrative. Instead, we follow the female protagonist and hear her thoughts on well-being and health as she swims at the Pioneer centre, takes part in fitness activities and undergoes medical scanning. This is interspersed with other characters including a group of young boys in 1930s clothes. The enigmatic installation also suggests connections between the medical MRI scanner that the character goes through and the LiDAR scanning equipment used by a building surveyor to record the building. The medical monitoring technology is a sharp contrast with the simple visual observation techniques used extensively by medical staff at the Pioneer Centre.



Still from Correspondence O, Ilona Sagar, 2017, at the South London Gallery. The non-linear narrative style is informed by archive film footage of the Pioneer Health Centre.

There is no clear conclusion, just a raising of some pertinent issues relating to wellness and well-being, responsibility for health and access to healthcare, something. It all seems particularly relevant with the NHS under so much pressure from a population that is not only ageing but increasingly beset with obesity and diabetes.

‘It’s not a story about the history of the building but more about the relationship to health and well-being now...I wanted to open up the visceral link between bodies and buildings designed for the purpose of health,’ says Sagar.

‘Even locally, a lot of people don’t know about the significance of the Pioneer Centre. It’s a history I’d like to see given more attention.’

Ilona Sagar: Correspondence O, until 25 February, South London Gallery, 65-67 Peckham Road, London SE5 8UH

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