

Social housing projects could learn from past successes

Past collaborative efforts of architects and policy-makers have produced elegant social housing solutions. Kate Macintosh reflects on two examples and how their lessons could help the housing crisis.

Social housing is in short supply. 1.7 million homes, built at the public's expense, have been sold off for a fraction of their market value since 1980. East London boroughs have already lost half their stock (of course the more attractive half) and the 'right to buy' policy has had the unintended consequence of stoking the housing market and at the same time shrinking the social rented sector to the least desirable properties.



The Byker development in Newcastle, adjacent to remaining old terraces.

Furthermore, for the last 15 years the government has encouraged local councils to hive off their stock, either to housing associations or arms-length management organisations. Cash to maintain existing stock has been withheld under a bizarre redistribution formula through which the Treasury receives £800 million in council house rents from local authorities but returns only £600 million to councils, with no guarantee that the £200 million difference will be ploughed back into housing.

8 Since the credit crunch has hit, even housing associations are having difficulty funding new developments because they are unable to sell off the allocated proportion of their stock to raise finance.

There were officially 149,900 homeless families in UK in 2007 and there are considered to be 400,000 additional 'hidden' homeless: single people shacking up with friends. How can this situation be improved? One solution is to restore the right to councils to buy

sites and build homes to let. If a change in government policy allowed this, it is to be hoped that such developments would be informed by the two success stories described below.

The Byker development in Newcastle¹

In 1970 Newcastle City decided to carry out a massive redevelopment of the area to the north of the centre known as Byker. The existing housing in this 200-acre site was all 19th century, two-storey terraced cottages. They appointed a UK-born architect who had worked all his professional life in Sweden, Ralph Erskine². What Erskine brought to the development process, apart from a well-honed sensitivity to environmental issues, was a commitment to respect for the user-client and a belief in *real* consultation. The process of development was openly discussed with the locals at all stages.

The team responsible for the implementation had a site office in a former undertaker's parlour, where locals could drop by at any time in the working day. Life for the 15 office staff would have been impossible without support from the residents for what was being planned. The policy was adopted that all residents who wished would be re-accommodated in one of the 2,400 homes of the completed scheme. The site clearance and rebuilding were therefore carried out piecemeal, taking great care to protect as far as possible the adjacent houses from the nuisance of building work. No doubt the sharing of that on-site life by the architects led to a mutual tolerance.



A three-storey terrace in the Byker development

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The first show flat was furnished with furniture loaned by a local resident and the whole process lasted until 1984 when the site office closed.

The Byker approach sets a benchmark for achieving urban renewal in a way that brings socially sustainable improvements. It required full commitment from the architects, who gave uncounted unpaid hours to the participation process.

The site is known for its landmark barrier-block for single people and childless couples, featuring its largely imperforate, undulating northern wall, which protects the low-rise terraces of housing on the southern slope from the noise and disturbance of a rapid-transit route, linking Byker with the city centre. The unity of the design has since been compromised by right-to-buy, but the management proposal put forward by Erskine's team has now been adopted and the Scheme was listed grade 2* in 2007.

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The Lifschutz Davidson building and OXO tower – part of the Coin Street development, London

Coin Street Community Building on London's South Bank

The achievements of the Coin Street Community Builders (CStCB) provide a very interesting example of community building. Their achievements are the result of tenacious campaigning and endeavour, which was sparked off in 1974 when the (then Conservative-controlled) Greater London Council (GLC) proposed selling off a site on the south bank of the Thames. This site stretched from Waterloo to Blackfriars Bridge and was earmarked for large-scale office development.

After many years of campaigning, the policy of GLC changed in 1981 in favour of the community builders. The site was sold to them in 1984.

Since that time the CStCB has created four housing co-operatives and 220 homes, which provide housing for 1000 people. There is also a public park, a riverside walk, an office building with ateliers for artist/craftspeople and a roof-top restaurant within the OXO tower and factory. The retention of these two buildings from the site's industrial past was the key to achieving a balance sheet that stacked up.³

The group has more recently completed a community centre with a 64 place crèche and a conferencing suite for hiring out. They have further development plans (all funded from lettings profits) for a swimming pool and fitness centre.

The whole enterprise is run as two not-for-profit companies, CStCB and Coin Street Secondary Housing Co-operative. The CStCB team also initiated the setting up of South Bank Employers, a partnership of organisations in the area with a social focus, through which they liaise with other enterprises in the area on employment, festivals and cultural events.

Kate Macintosh



The interior of the Haworth Thompkins Nursery

Public housing: the future

Faced with a stalemate in the housing market, the former housing minister Caroline Flint announced at the start of the credit crunch that she would be "willing to take a totally pragmatic" view of whether councils could be allowed to establish joint ventures with developers to build both private and social homes while retaining management control over the latter. If council home building is re-activated, the lessons of Byker and Coin Street would prove useful guides to the way it is handled.

Kate Macintosh MBE Dip Arch is Vice-Chair of SGR. She was awarded the MBE in 1987 for services to architecture.

This article is based on a presentation given at SGR's 2008 conference (see p.19).

Notes and references

1. Harwood E and Powers A (Eds) (2008). *Housing the Twentieth-Century Nation*. Holberton, Paul Publishing. ISBN-13: 9780955668708. See contribution by Drage M, 'Surprising the Colleagues for 35 Years, a Social History of Ralph Erskine's Arkitektkontor AB in Newcastle'.
2. A sponsor of Architects and Engineers for Social Responsibility (AESR) – see also: http://www.erskine.se/e_intro.htm.
3. The project plan was put together by architects Lifschutz Davidson (<http://www.lifschutzdavidson.com>) and Haworth Tompkins (<http://www.haworthtompkins.com>).