



# ALTERNATIVE HOUSING DEVELOPMENT IN LONDON: FINDINGS AND KEY ACTION POINTS

KATH SCANLON AND MELISSA FERNÁNDEZ

# ALTERNATIVE HOUSING DEVELOPMENT IN LONDON: FINDINGS AND KEY ACTION POINTS

On 15 July the award-winning modular PLACE Ladywell development was the venue for a day-long discussion of what the Mayor and others can do to bring forward more alternative housing development in London. The event, hosted by LSE London, brought together 50 people with a range of expertise, including developers, borough planners, activists, academics and architects.

The term 'alternative housing' encompasses experimental and utopian schemes such as cohousing, technological innovations like flat-pack or modular housing, and models like WikiHouse that can combine the two. Some of the innovations are profit-driven, but much alternative housing is driven by residents' desire to create housing that is community-driven, affordable and sustainable in environmental, financial and social terms.

Through her research on individual self-build trajectories, Michaela Benson kicked off the day by reminding us that housing must be approached through a social, as much as a financial, legal or policy framework and that each alternative scheme can be seen to offer critical lessons about the deep and persistent structural inequalities of the housing market in the UK. A social approach like the one Lewisham has historically championed in many of its own housing initiatives can enable a welcome shift in housing and land economy for the greater benefit of society.

Housing models that are currently considered alternative, even radical, often centre around new ways of planning, designing, building and occupying homes. Our discussion focused on how to ensure that the best ideas are recognised, disseminated and more widely adopted.



# FINDINGS

## The role of the champion

Most organisations, private – and public-sector alike, exhibit entropy: they tend to do what they have always done. Major house builders build the kinds of homes they have always built, and boroughs follow standard procedures and issue permissions for the usual things. To succeed, a radical new scheme almost always needs a champion – an enthusiastic and committed individual who will work to overcome obstacles and push a project through. We heard from some of these people in the course of the day and their energy and vision was inspiring. No matter how good an idea is, there has to be a person who (co)owns that vision and pushes it forward – otherwise the idea will wither.

## Cross-borough partnerships

Schemes that involve the use of innovative technologies may benefit from novel forms of cross-borough cooperation. Council-led developments like the PLACE/Ladywell site could be scaled up affordably with the provision of an off-site factory in a specific borough that can then serve other councils, providing quality manufacturing, skills and labour. This method of construction and cross-council working model could be accelerated if the GLA and/or central government offered incentives.

## Political will

While local-authority planners advise and negotiate with would-be developers, decisions about planning permissions are ultimately taken by elected councillors. This means it is essential to reach out to



politicians as well as officers to get buy-in for alternative housing innovations. Different local authorities handle affordable housing in dramatically different ways, and this often reflects political attitudes (though not party-political). Where there is political backing, alternative housing can make great strides. But this is not a short or easy process; we heard about a developer who engaged with members in one local authority for seven years before securing the go-ahead for their scheme.

## TA: the pressure on boroughs

Local politicians and officers are becoming interested in and knowledgeable about alternative housing possibilities – but the main housing issue for London boroughs is their legal responsibility to accommodate homeless families. The lack of social housing means many of these families are housed in temporary accommodation (TA), often in cramped B&Bs or hostels and sometimes many miles from their former

homes. This is a huge financial drain (one borough had 2,600 households in TA, with a monthly increase of 50), and is especially unsatisfactory for families with children. If alternative models came forward that offered (a) scale (b) affordability and (c) material adaptability and flexibility, boroughs would be more enthusiastic. (PLACE Ladywell, where we met, provides 24 units for homeless Lewisham families; it was built using an innovative modular construction technique. Other London authorities are currently exploring the concept). Local authorities are under extreme pressure to deal with their homelessness obligations, but the current approach to accommodating households in either social housing or through the market is too binary and in need of serious reform.

### The practical challenges for groups

Groups who want to set up intentional communities face enormous challenges. But the most obvious challenge in London is access to land (not a problem unique to them of course). Groups also need to somehow acquire and use a huge amount of knowledge about how the planning system works, about finance, about the construction process – and also about how to come to decisions, how to share work and how to shape a collective identity. There are specific professionals that support this in other countries (e.g. Collective Private Commissioning in the Netherlands), as well as seed-corn funding. This gives groups confidence and skills not just in developing efficiently but in communicating their messages effectively with conceptual clarity to local authorities and other enabling partners, thereby leading to greater success.

### The offer of autonomous citizen groups

There are existing citizen-led initiatives like Community Land Trusts (CLTs) that are designed to improve the well-being of their communities and ensure genuine affordable housing. Their ethos is therefore aligned with that of local authorities, so they could be considered natural development partners. (We visited a site in Church Grove, Ladywell, where the Rural-Urban Sustainability Society [RUSS] and Lewisham Council are working together in exactly this way.) Private renters in London have also recently begun to organise more coherently as an identifiable group demanding better standards, conditions and regulation in the PRS. Individuals involved in such collective housing activism could try to align their goals with those of the community-led housing movement in London. The GLA could support these efforts and better integrate such groups in their housing plans and delivery.





### Streamlining process

Organisational entropy often means that would-be alternative developers must fulfil all the same criteria and tick all the same boxes as any major housebuilder – whether or not they are meaningful or useful in their case. And the fact that London has 33 separate planning authorities means that there are 33 different sets of procedures and expectations. Marc Vlessing from Pocket Homes said an audit of decision points in one local authority showed that 25 approvals were required for a recent development; of these only 5 were meaningful. He suggested – and others agreed – that improving and streamlining the process and providing an easy-to-follow road map for alternative developers had great potential to speed new provision and make it more scalable over time. Alastair Parvin took it a step further, saying

that these streamlined requirements could be incorporated into an online open-access model like WikiHouse, allowing would-be developers to see immediately whether their proposal complied with requirements or not. This ‘sharing-economy’ approach is particularly geared towards the development of microsites like gaps between semi-detached homes, rooftops and infill land. It has the potential of giving citizens, including social housing residents, the right to regenerate their own infill spaces.

### Best value

When public bodies, including local authorities, sell land they are required to seek ‘best value’ or ‘best consideration’ for it. This generally means they must seek to maximise the sale price. It is possible, though, for them to factor in other



considerations, such as social value, and this can enable alternative housing providers to access land that would otherwise be beyond their reach. While there is general government guidance, at the moment each borough has its own definition, through the borough solicitor, of what best value means. An agreed London-wide best-value standard, signed off by the Mayor, could encourage wider adoption of best practice.

### The role of legal standards

Tom Chance pointed out that when the government mandated a timeline for Zero Carbon Housing it led to the creation of a whole ecosystem of enabling products, companies and experts. Which bits of the ecosystem for alternative housing are underdeveloped, and could government targets help? Part of this involves a fundamental shift in thinking about traditional housing delivery by local authorities, but also a more robust system of sharing legal information to facilitate replicability where possible.

### Pilots/prototypes/programmes

Many participants felt that 'pilot projects' were generally a waste of time – they took a lot of effort and in practice were rarely replicated. A prototype, or a series of prototypes delivered at a London level, was better; it allows people to see things in the flesh and the assumption is that more would be built – that is, a future-oriented programme is built into the prototype project.



### Brexit – an opportunity?

The uncertainty caused by Brexit means a lot of developments in London will pause for a while. This may provide a window of opportunity for alternative, innovative approaches. The register of publicly owned land is being improved and will be a key resource in this 'interim' period.

# ACTION POINTS FOR THE GLA AND BOROUGHES:



**1. Work with the sector** to create an 'Innovative Housing for London' resource and support hub to provide information, training and support for would-be developers and/or residents of alternative housing models.

**2. Create a fund to support training** for local authorities and community groups as well as project development, including professional fees.

**3. Identify plots of public land** or empty buildings that would be suitable for developers of alternative housing models and 'package' them with permission in principle.

© July 2016  
Kath Scanlon and Melissa Fernandez

