

DIY Urbanism: Self-Build in London Not Around It

Hurwundeki gallery, 98 Commercial St, London E1 6LZ. 25 November 2004



Image 1. London Urban Envelope – Time Out proposition for City state London.

We are delighted that mæ has been asked to talk this evening as part of the DIY Urbanism night. Our talk will concern itself with some issues pertaining to Self-Build housing; particularly in an urban setting.

The first question which one might ask is ‘what do we consider to be an urban setting?’ This is not such a stupid question, as we are all aware a city such as London has seen a vast increase in its foot print over the last three hundred years or so. Early suburbs such as Hackney, set outside the old city wall, now exhibit all the characteristics of a dense urban environment. Later suburbs, I’m thinking specifically of metro-land areas such as Hampstead and Kilburn in North London, have merged with the metropolis to such an extent that the places where they begin and end are invisible to the casual observer.

London is no longer a city with suburbs surrounded by the countryside. The South East of England could now be characterized as a suburb, with urban and cultivated pockets. Defining what is urban, and therefore sustainable, in terms of employment opportunity, service provision (public and commercial), short journey times etc. is of prime importance, if we don’t want to rip up the planet with our 4x4’s right now.

The map behind me was produced by our office for Time Out magazine as part of their City-state London issue earlier this year. In order to demarcate City-state London we first had to decide where the boundary of the “City” might be. Mæ took the premise that the boundary of the City exists where urban London meets suburban London. That boundary can only be confirmed by the presence of a truly suburban form, one that cannot exist in an urban or truly rural setting. (i.e. a patch of land may be wet, but can only be described as a wetland environment when certain plant or animal species are present.)

Harvester restaurants, which are reliant on population densities not found in the countryside, can only exist where road links from urban centres deliver a steady stream of potential customers. Harvesters do not tend to survive in the more competitive urban environment where there are so many more potential venues for lunch or supper. If a neighbourhood can support a Harvester it is by definition not dense enough to support a sufficient number of local or citywide pubs, cafes or restaurants that are the mark of a city.



The map shows the position of Harvester restaurants around greater London in relationship to the postcode map, by joining these positions one is left with an irrefutable map of the real, as opposed to political boundary of the “City” bit of London (as these restaurants are positioned on transport arteries into central London they form a new set of gatehouses for the re-defined City-state).

This is what we mean when we describe an urban setting, the territory for the DIY Urbanists.

Image 2, 3. - Self-Build low density houses: kit house and timber semi.



So back to the job in hand. The self-build market is a valuable but often overlooked provider of housing in the UK. Self-build and self-procured projects in the UK currently make up approximately 10% - 12% of new housing, which means that the output of the self-procurement sector is larger than the output of the largest single UK volume house builder.

However this is piffling compared with say Germany, where the self-procured sector can take up as much as 55% of the total new housing market and France where it hovers at around the 45% mark. Of course we believe that the market in the UK for self-build, co-operative, catalogue/kit and self-procured housing is so much greater than at present.

A survey by Norwich and Peterborough Building Society revealed that 70% of homeowners considered the idea of building their own homes. Homeowners: this is just the people on the housing ladder; never mind about people who rent or god forbid don't have a permanent home right now. Nearly 100,000 homeless households are living in temporary accommodation right now. This figure is the highest on record and has more than doubled since 1997.

The Joseph Rowntree Foundation anticipates that the self-procured sector could reach 20,000 units per annum.

One of the problems for this sector is that of density, most kits are essentially suburban in outlook, plot costs for individuals in city settings are often prohibitively expensive. Our wonderful "timber Scandinavian world" gets a bit complex in terms of fire spread when we get closer than 1m to the party boundary.

This boundary is we believe a key to pull individual family self-builders into town, as with barrier rails on stairs in the circulation spaces of large sports venues, (four people use a 3m wide stair with a barrier rail in the center, as opposed to two people without), the party wall as we all know acts as a cleavage – i.e. a separation or a bring together.

Image 4, 5. Party Wall: view and axo

This is a small project, which the office is currently working on, we have talked about in its earliest stages before, but I think that it appropriate to talk about it here. The Party-wall project aims to provide self-builders with the infrastructure that can help deliver self-build housing at a density required in PPG3 and achieve economies of scale through the efficient use of land.

Basically it's a system of serviced plots and, as its name suggests, party walls. First of all footings are provided for a load-bearing façade and party walls whilst all services connections are capped off at screed level. The party walls are structurally and acoustically separated, if next door takes a year to complete their house and you have finished in three months you do not want to be bothered on Saturday morning by their power tools etc. The walls provide all the structure for a project, which is designed to accommodate simple sawn timber joist floor decks. There would be parameters for detailed design agreed with local Authorities and could be subject to an agreed set of design codes.

So we know who these potential self-builders are. They would seem to be most of us, but why do people want to self-build in the first place? There may be cost benefits, (this is often why most people say that they embark upon this route of procurement), however, because self build sector is so small in this country, and because the sites are often single plot or with only a few units, there may not be the economies of scale which any volume house builder can pass on, even with their 10 – 15% profit margin.

Co-operative self-build housing schemes offer benefits in terms of establishing social capital early on in the development of a project. It offers educational benefits, evidenced through a number of assisted self-build training programs run by Housing Associations such as New Islington and Hackney Housing Association. Groups help with cost saving issues. The group approach to self empowered housing provision offers the potential to create, (that most Blairite concept), a truly sustainable community.

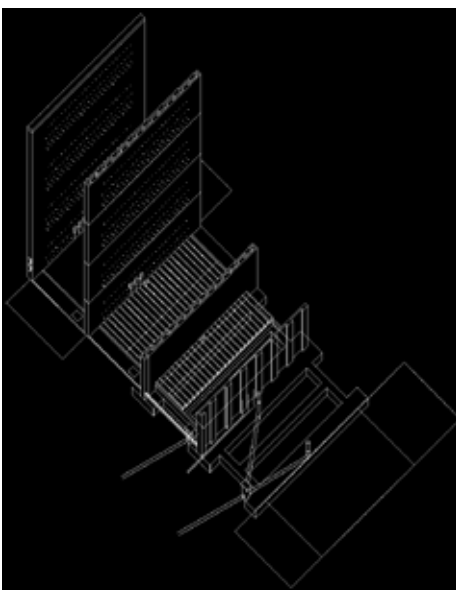




Image 6, 7. That Dutch scheme.

- a. Lacoste Stevenson in Jeff Wall's suburbia
- b. Borneo Sporenburg – West 8 master plan

The willow-the-wisp of cost savings aside self builders would seem to have more freedom than the clients or customers of other sectors to get the homes they want, rather than what they are offered. So product satisfaction would seem an important aspect in the mix, however perhaps the greatest payback for this sector would seem to be neighbourhood satisfaction. The chance to hothouse communities.



If you, or your next door neighbour, or the chap up the road not only built all the houses in your street, but also the bin-store, or planted the trees in the pavement outside the sense of community ownership is enormous. Building together means you will get the chance to know each other. Most people in London have, in recent years seen well meaning, quite well designed, quite well built social housing schemes grit blasted in short order by the disaffected children of the very people who live there; not because they don't necessarily care but because they might not know who's children they are, and because it is not their job to pick up after them.

Neighbourhoods take quite a long time to develop, perhaps the social speed dating of combined endeavour is required if a neighbourhood spirit is to be fostered before our society's toxic parenting practices kill the 'hood in-vetro. It's not just an issue of getting a "nice new neighbourhood" it might be the only way to get a "new neighbourhood" full-stop right now. Of course we hope that the Thames Gateway will be socially fantastic, but it looks rather like chucking thousands of souls into a hamster hutch and telling them to get on with it.



Image 8, 9, 10, 11. Vauban.

This is an image from a German housing development where the local population, government and Housing Associations, and student union housing organizations appear, in our view, to have got something drastically right.

Vauban is a new district on a 38 hectare, former barrack site in south Freiburg. The planning for the district started in 1993, the third and final development phase is due for completion in 2006. It will eventually form a home for some 5000 inhabitants, and 600 jobs. It's all the things one would expect these days, low energy, pretty much car-free and dense, this is achieved by not allowing detached development on the site, though not too dense as a maximum four stories are allowed for each building and priority is given to smaller group development, i.e. no strip block nonsense.



What is interesting about this scheme is the manner in which the local city authority, (who happens to be the site owner), sought to create a socially diverse city district in a participatory manner. The initial stages of the development consisted of an urban design competition for a master plan and implementation strategy. A group of local citizens formed an organization called Forum Vauban – which was recognized by, and financially supported by, the city of Freiburg as a legal body forming a sort of client (i.e. home-builders). The Forum offered help with information exchanges and events to help inform self-builders and ran practical DIY seminars and provided information on energy saving, on design and cost management for some of the projects.



At the other end of the scale the city recognized that by empowering this organization with embedded local officials dealing with planning, road and building standards as advisers Forum Vauban could shorten the time it took to review and agree the multiplicity of individual and group building proposals. In fact this organization went on to drive standards for design, green space, amenity and social policy and energy efficiency, where they were particularly successful. There are over 50 passive houses

and at least 100 units with “Plus energy” standards. The completed projects generally exceed the pretty strict energy criteria originally set down in the development plan organized by the City.

One of the development goals at Vauban is the creation of a variety of housing catering for a balance of social groups. One of the drivers for this was the creation of Baugruppen (small, one off building co-operatives). Several households get together, decide on a plot of land to purchase within the master plan (typically 10 – 15 units), often hiring an architect and building team to assist in the design and construction process. The cost savings generated by this co-development approach, in terms of fees and economies of scale of building materials etc. over individual self-procurement allow larger numbers of lower income households to participate in the scheme. Social interactions through the planning and building process help to knit community before any one moves in. It’s a sort of “bake and shake neighbourhood”.

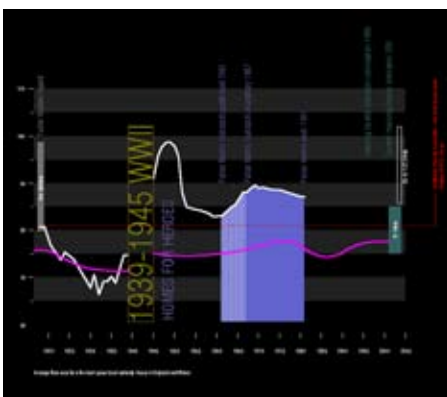
These Baugruppen in turn had the practical assistance of a Citizens’ Building Stock Corporation (The Buergerbau) set-up in order to coordinate their efforts. The corporation offers a range of services throughout the project development, right up to the moment when the self-builders move into their houses. These services include guiding the building group and answering any questions during planning and contract periods, acting as centralized clerk of works and ensuring that the generally agreed standards for the scheme are met in the most efficient manner. This organization currently manages 5 co-operative housing groups in the development.

What this settlement shows is a political will. Local Government behaving like government, giving a lead for its citizens, empowering them, but perhaps more than these two points, trusting them to make their own decisions about what they want and need in terms of housing. Backing them, empowering them through training, helping them organize, and then letting them get on with it like a bunch of grown-ups.

Image 12: space standards diagram:

I was planning to talk a little about standards – about how organizations frame quality for projects such as Vauban, however when I wrote this I realized that time might not be on my side – I would like to show you a graph which the office is working on right now.

A lot of the information for this came from Bernard Kilroy from his article in the AJ 1980. A time when the organ still dealt with big issues. The graph shows space standards for a five person, three bedroom house. On the left are the sizes recommended by the Tudor Walters report of 1918 at a time when local authorities were first allowed to buy land and build social housing under their own income streams. The fall is a result of economic forces followed by two peaks in space standards which are a direct result of government legislation, the Homes for Heroes programme and Parker Morris. Following the abolition of Parker Morris space standards have continued to fall back. The green band shows the ranges expected today by one of our better housing associations. It is only just reaching the bottom end of the spectrum recommended by the Tudor Walters report a full century ago.



We are aware that this is not the only thing that makes good housing but it is too often the thing that gets jettisoned and we feel that at a time when some consider the solution to affordability as being the reduction of sizes there needs to be better debate about how we offer affordability without compromising standards.

Thank you for listening.

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