

## The development of Angell Town - Lecture by John Burrell of Burrell Foley Fischer, given at the Design for Homes Joined-up Housing conference, November 2000

This Design for Homes CPD module should take you about half an hour to go through

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It is quite curious to me to be speaking in a conference about resurgence of the terraced house, or terraced housing. That is because I suppose from many decades now, from when I was a student, I guess, the terraced house seemed to be something which we very much accepted. At the time we were bemoaning the ill-considered placing of tower blocks and smaller, I suppose, spec housebuilders and realised that in between those two extremes may be there was something much more subtle that was required to sustain cities.

I think at the same time, the issues to do with sustainability at that time, I think in fact things like the blueprint for survival, was much more to do with consumerism, and excessive consumerism, not just transportation and fuel costs, rather than necessarily the architect's province. We seem to be taking on responsibility for sustainability yet again, and it seems the whole issue of consumerism, as such, has been put aside: we will carry on consuming as much as we like in terms of goods and services, etc, but will modify the cities to suit it.

Therefore it is curious to come back to think about the terrace which, as I say, in many ways is almost a given. It sees that the issues back in the 'thirties when riven development was rife – of cars and jams was there. Certainly things I was doing as a student very much conceived the idea of city blocks being based on a fairly mixed idea of a terraced or terrace form of development to contain spaces and provide the density and range of cultural facilities which were required.

At the same time another interest was the whole idea of institutionalised land or buildings, and I would include housing on that, especially where it is dominated by an expression of the process of its construction or its management, and that still goes on.

In particular we looked at the whole notion of brownfield sites in terms of hospital land, and various things were done in the 'eighties and late 'seventies, also the whole notion of what happens when you destroy the city block, and the idea of the terrace and retainment of spaces, in term of the A-Z it becomes simply a white patch and arrows and names, and I think it says something about how the city becomes unintelligible.

This underpinned many of the things we have come on to do in housing, though we have not done that much housing because very often we find that the criteria which are used are not terribly satisfying in terms of producing proper architecture. In the context of the previous scheme which we saw, about converting hospital sites in the 'seventies and 'eighties, in the 'eighties was produced a document which showed how you could use disused institutional land, the now so-called brownfield sites, to actually make new places. They relied totally on the idea of con-

verting what were linear building into terraces by sub-division, and we integrated them into the surrounding streets. That was some more of the funded research in the mid-'eighties.

It was followed up by another bout of research to do with urbanising suburbia, which is really another contribution that terracing could make by keeping the suburbs there, putting them into a hierarchy of spaces to provide additional facilities and density. I will quickly go through these. They are very much slides which illustrated a number of proposals which eventually were incorporated into various NSS documents on the use of those sites and various PPGs, etc. But again, you can see here, in terms of the context of the terrace, you can very much see that new buildings can actually be, in a sense, contemporary, or whatever style, providing the context is provided and the terrace is really necessary in order to actually establish a ground on which variations can occur. (1) Again it was endemic in the thinking that the terrace would be something which was the stuff of the city, if you like, in terms of making spaces.

On the negative side – again these are pretty old slides now but I mean it is interesting that the Milton Keynes plan, it is just like a early transistor computer, a sort of printed circuit diagram from a 'sixties transistor layout. (2)

This shows Washington New Town where the segregation from the housing and the use of land, and the lack of space obviously produces things we all know and have now moved on from. But it was very much a concern.

I think the argument came up, well, that is what people want, they want to do this. Well, if you do what people want – I mean here presumably people want to be there and they also want to be there, so there are wild extremes in terms of what people want and how they want to be located, what they think and what their values are and you cannot absolutely follow those values.

Again in terms of the terrace and the structure of a city, there is a whole range of permutations, some of which have been touched on today and I will quickly



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go through. Again we are certainly looking at Dagenham and Belgravia (3). They suggest completely different types of city and have different vocations and sustainability, the range of facilities they can support, lifestyles, whatever. But basically the same model applied, with the same acknowledgement of space division between public and private space, which is a key issue.

On the slightly more negative side, or as it has been flagged up today, it can get out of hand, and you have pretty undifferentiated terraced housing which depends very much on people's satisfaction with the internal side of their dwelling and their own private lives rather than the public realm.

Following on from that, we began to look at the situations that we know. Part of the research on looking at urbanising suburbia, I have taken an area I know quite well, which is round the north of Regents Park and Primrose Hill (4). If you look at the givens of certain situations, before you change them you probably ought to acknowledge what they have.

In terms of that particular area, which has about 7000 people, it is quite extraordinary how the buildings, which are basements and four or five storeys – this is actually not in Camden Town – but those buildings they were to support three lots of cars in the street, the streets being sufficiently wide to have cars in the centre and cars either side. They have garden levels where you can have families. You can have intermediate levels, or you can have even people in wheelchairs, as in one case I know, and upper levels where you can have flats.

All the variations which we have touched on before are there within that framework, plus they can support ad hoc shops, they can support park, schools, a library, train station, park, a whole number of things which all work very well within that context, plus also they are spatially defined, in terms of not being characterless and people not getting lost, all the various givens which I do not want to go on too much about but we seem to be having to restate these issues. Following on from that, we were asked to look at Angell Town in South London, and originally, because certain work had been done, there was a certain reaction as to how the estate was going to go from a local authority estate to become a hacked estate, run by housing associations.

A handful of people, in particular Dora Boatemay, were very insistent that when it was developed it would be developed very much with the residents and users in mind, and I think in quite a healthy way. She was looking for a community architect – well, she was not looking for a community architect, she wanted an architect, or the residents did, that if things went wrong they could kick and not pay, basically, and if it was a community architect it was just a bit too pally.

Therefore they wanted some sort of clout in terms of what they asked us to do. Plus they did not want the environment created to actually look like it was out of social housing or local authority housing. They wanted to feel like they were part of Brixton and wanted their own wishes acknowledged.

The curious thing that what was demolished there was sort of quite closely placed Victorian villas and the structure that was put back was rather more divided into individual plots. It was a very much a linear arrangement, the classic deck estate, (5) with segregated levels of parking and residents, and upper levels, circulation at each end and walkways, etc. I think you will know what it is like, but a very, very different structure indeed.

Yet the residents, when they were asked, were hankering after what had gone before, the Victorian villa, and their interpretation, which was a help, and the architects got together the idea that you can produce some sort of vertical emphasis or something which reminded them of traditional examples. It is very much a plea, I suppose, for moving strongly in the situation we are in now, in terms of how we had to live in these buildings.

Subsequently (6,7,8) – and I am showing these very quickly, the earlier project we did, the pilot project, because we have only just gone on site with the latest project, and I think all the groundwork for what we have done now acknowledges the work that was done in the past, in terms of talking with the residents about what they really wanted. I think having done the consultation and got the brief from them, it is a cliché that you do your consultation but you do get to the point in the end – and it comes back to the issue about the terrace being very much a given form of structure – that you end up, as an architect, asking pretty dumb questions, which have pretty straightforward, obvious answers: a lot of it is absolute common sense. I think it cannot do us any good sometimes when you ask questions which you have to ask but you know, really, if you are close enough to the client, what they are going to say.



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So we went through that process and I think it is very much a two-way process of learning what the possibilities were, rather than: "Do you want a front door, do you want it secure," and whatever. These things came out in discussion. But I think as we went through, and at this time in particular, I think that dialect was much more sophisticated and much faster.

We actually went through a complete process, on the pilot project, to establish, from the decks, a series of vertical stair cores which are quite expensive to put in, but established, instead of one deck serving sixty or seventy flats with two stairs, one stair was serving just two dwellings one above the other. (9)

I will just quickly go through these slides. At the same time it had the effect, really, I think, of their breathing a sigh of relief down there that somebody was actually getting back to some common sense basics, that at last someone was talking about issues which are not that complicated but actually just what they expect.

This slide shows the frustration they had with that layout, which looked as though it could be terraces, it enclosed the street or the fire path there. But you see the front entrance door. Here is the flat, somebody waiting to go into the flat, their head is above the flat (10). This is the levels of GLC artists' fund! I mean it is completely absurd. If you are in the street, how on earth do you find where it is and when you get there you stand like this. It is extraordinary, and you can read the article in the AJ about the rubber flooring, which has survived remarkably.

It is all wonderful, and I think there is a great problem I have about now, thinking, yes, we have found the answer and here is the panacea, we know what we are doing. Well, you read the reports and they knew then that it was obviously a problem. The analysis here shows very clearly that if you have an entrance here and here (indicating) and there is a problem, it could be any one of a hundred flats, or the occupants of one of a hundred flats could have caused the problem. You do not know who is making a mess on the staircase, is starting fires, mugging people or whatever. You find it is very few in the end, people are quite happy, it is just a minority.

Therefore the emphasis on the work we have done recently, and on this work, is very much against the idea of communal circulation, not because I am against communal circulation particularly but in fact there is an issue about these very clear areas of responsibility between the public and private areas. I think probably again this is me explaining to the French housing minister about streets, doorways and windows overlooking the street. Looking back, it is in a way pretty absurd having to explain things which one has been surrounded by for generations, certainly for the last 200 years. Nevertheless if we are honest it reminds me of Jacques Tatti there, (11) who was a great fan and critic of architecture, also looking at the absurdities of what we do not realise we are in. Again this project went through to completion and we ended up building a street there (indicating the

slide) on a shared surface, as part of it. Again in terms of the idea of the terrace, on the left the horizontality is expressed through the ethos of that particular design, with the ends cut off so that there is no fenestration and then the in-filling of these floors. That created a much more vertical emphasis, which is in fact the way that the units are planned inside.

Again there is a complete lack of understanding about where the public and private space is and how it is contained, and we established a proper clear definition: that is a public space, that is a pavement, that is becoming less private, that becomes someone's forecourt, so that people know when they are transgressing these boundaries.

Again, looking at the idea of a terrace, instead of there being an entrance at one end and a entrance at the other end, and a voluntary through there to get to that deck, you know, we actually cored through vertically to put doorways there. Therefore if there is a problem, it is either the person upstairs, the person downstairs or maybe the person next door, that is easily sorted out. There (12), you do not know who it is, you do not have a hope in hell of keeping things going and the morale drops.



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Following on, looking at the new project we did there, on a five or six storey block, we went through the process of actually identifying ourselves with the residents, lots of examples about different styles of housing, and although they did hanker after the Victorian or Georgian model, we did say well, look, let us see if we need to do that, because you are in a seventies built estate, which is quite interesting. This estate was actually finished by the time I left the Architectural Association and within 10 years we were actually turning it down.

We went to see a number of examples, some contemporary, other classic areas. Coming back to Piers' point about two storeys, three storeys, it is quite difficult to create any sense of urbanity or space when you have two-storey dwellings, and one is even more difficult. The scale and size of things is very carefully worked out, but you need to do it because you do not have that much space anyway. If you look at areas around that work, there is Kennington, where you have tiny pavements and miniscule back yards, tiny buildings but you know you are Kennington, it still feels very urban as well. We have used that to try to avoid communal stairs and flats by giving people mews, which are not very well appointed but they are a lot better than having a flat.

So these are squares in Kennington(13,) which again are very modest, and I think probably this is social housing, one cannot afford to be extravagant, but I think they do have these qualities, quite subtle qualities, of urbanity.

On the left there is the particular area where this scheme is based. Our first phase is here, with another phase going out here and the existing square here, of planting. The other work we did was along this building here and this pilot phase in here (indicating on the slide). This is essentially the master plan, the block plan, giving you a number of units, a number of flats, a number of houses, etc, and clearly it is quite a big monolithic block, with flats in the corners of staircases.

This is going back. On this slide here, this is what we started looking at in terms of the top of the site, trying to take this basic object and turn it into some sort of sense of different kinds of places (14). That is because at the end of the whole process, people that live there are not going to worry particularly about the process of how it was formed – they will worry about the bills and how it is managed – but they will relate to the spaces and they will judge it like that (clicking fingers): if you have it wrong they will not like it, or they will like it, and we have the same thing. Therefore we feel that the efforts one has to put in towards the achieving the quality is very much to do with designing the final product, if you like, because the actual process, if you like, is not actually necessarily their concern.

In taking that very linear, straight-edged block, we started to look at the idea of creating these indented façades here, this view here, down to one end of that (indicating the slide). I suppose it is motivated very much by a public awareness of the whole issue about dumped cars, where is private, where is public, can I view somebody else's personal space or yards, or whatever, and by creating this little private forecourt, which is slightly intimidating but still public, you can get cars on one side of it, on the roadside, too(15). Children can play there. There is a sense of actually your being in a little enclave on your own. It is still very much a public space but you begin to feel that you are entering a different world and you are slightly inhibited from using it.

That is how, in a sense, we ended up with this area here. It is like a little private shared forecourt. It is very much a lesson, I suppose, from what quality pri-

vate sector developers will do, what people with choice choose to live in. That is very much a concern of the residents at Angell Town, to make sure that we do respond to that and do not just dumb down and give them what they have to have.

I am sorry there are not so many graphic drawings of this scheme. It was done at a very, very fast space. It was one of those schemes where either you have tons of drawings and it never gets built or you have no nice drawings and it gets built.

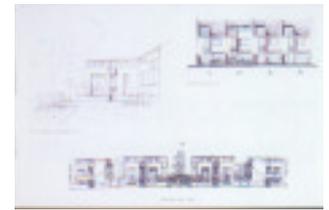
Therefore it went pretty much straight from that into computerised layouts. This is the block as it was in a previous drawing. There is a new route here, a new route here and also a mews through here (indicating), with the indented façades coming back here (16) to parking at that point here.

The idea of the mews obviously creates a through route, changing scale, and what we have done is take the corner flat units which were six, seven or eight flats off a communal stair, and instead make a mews which, in terms of space and in terms of rear yards is probably not the best, but you have a yard at the back by perhaps 3 metres by seven, so if you are a couple and you have a child, a dog or a pet, or whatever, you can be there for a while and then you can move on.

It seemed to us it would be preferable to do that and also create routes in a changing scale, rather than simply just go for this communal staircase idea, which, on the estate there is really a great concern about. I think the other aspect, too, is that generally those features, the communal stair, is what architects tend to feature as their main sort of motif on the building, and all it is doing is really emphasising, giving great importance to the management regime or the anonymous face. Therefore we have chosen deliberately in these elevations to actually emphasise the doorways, the living spaces and the fenestration of the dwelling, rather than that which actually manifests itself in terms of how you manage the scheme. That is, I think, a key point in terms of the final result.



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Coming back to this issue about how you do things, I think these end elevations – and I think we should mention the whole issue about end elevations – these were just chopped off in the classic sort of idea that art is a linear product and you just chop it off and carry on as a process. We have fenestrated them there (17), and I think there were lessons to be learnt, which we talked to the residents about, from how other people deal with changes in corners and views, and also identity to the area because people are going to walk around this place and try to find their way.

In terms of the elevations – and it is not just a superficial game, I think time constraints in the process do not really allow you to make every individual flat different, and in fact the residents did not want the individual flats designed but, as the process has gone through, going on site, design/build contractor and then housing associations, the variety, choice and finesse diminishes.

I am still very critical of that whole process. I think it is still goes in the wrong direction and it makes us increasingly less inclined to do housing, as we would do if the process was much more refined. That is because we are going to sit there for quite a long while, hopefully. For this shows to some extent, almost going back to its access: where I live, where do you live, which is your dwelling, and seeing all the res. variants which you can actually introduce to a dwelling. We have not had chance to explore all these and in fact, in the end, through time and experience we have come down to one basic form. However, coming back to the interiors, those façades are obviously related to how the interiors were planned, and they were planned along the idea of lifetime homes, the most significant aspect of which is to do with access for future lift provision, sizes of doorways and sizes of corridors, which gets you back to a much more generous dwelling. In the short term, probably there are possibilities you can have more flexible use of the space, because they are basically bigger and they look much more like the by-law housing about which we heard earlier on, which have much better space standards.

These dwellings are actually based on lifetime homes and the floor areas are significantly above the Parker Morris levels and they have now been pulled down again by the housing associations for something more akin to what they are used to. However, I think in general it is actually a good thing that the space is available.

There were numerous sketches like this, which we did for different meetings, to show how where you make a provision for a lift shaft to go right through a dwelling in the short term. There may be other ways you can use that (18). This is a relatively modest kind of proposal but there is scope for changing rooms around, making openings and in fact even on the back here, because there is this party walls here (19), you can fit in here conservatories or conservatories here (indicating). There should be scope but I think that will come only if there is a change in tenure,

which I guess in future there could be because right now they are being built for Lambeth. But again, there are numerous exercises to look at the effect of terraces and backs and for discussion with the residents to see what the variations are, within a virtually conventional framework of pallet of ideas.

One would like to think some of those double height windows also create double height spaces, but again the process still does not really allow it to really happen. It may do over a longer period but in the time scales that you are given, in terms of budgets, take up of budgets, etc, it is very difficult.

This sketch on the left here is very much the motif which we for the façade have used (20). It is very much concerned with trying to make sure that each individual dwelling is recognised in terms of its entrance and the principal façade. This section through here, which is most made in softer material (indicating), which is varied from the construction, is where the services will be going through the building to facilitate flexibility in the future. The top attic store is very much to identify the top, the middle and the base of the building.

Again there are a lot of sketches. Looking at how one can actually achieve, I suppose, some sort of coherence in the facades, whilst also having a lot of façades being very different. I meant to put some slides in of building some terraces in San Francisco and also in Sydney, which are very ornate and look a very homogenous Victorian terrace. They are all different, the fretwork and everything is completely different, but because the basic rules have been obeyed, it actually feels as though there is a coherence to the whole thing.

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The second phase we are doing at the top of the site which previously was the sort of hoop coming in here (21, 24), and another is going across here: a pavement, small yards, a court here, an archway through here and a back road coming through there, also a self-building site as well.

Within that basic framework we have actually sought to introduce as many variants and types of spaces as we can (22), and also to respect the existing open spaces and squares, so that the whole place does become not necessarily a run of streets where you become disorientated but actually has some sense of identity.

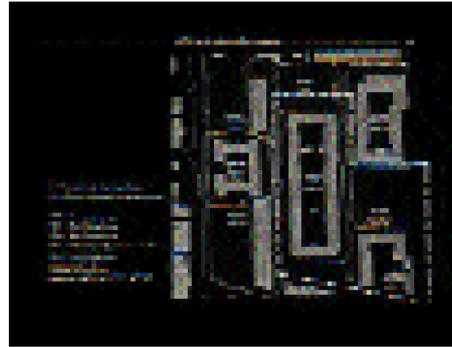
Here are just some visualisations of the buildings as they were before we went to tender. It shows the upper storey, which shows the upper storey, which is fully glazed properly, the top bedroom. There was a big discussion about the ground floor and whether people wanted the kitchens at the front, the back or the garden. Some people want the kitchen to go onto the garden, some not.

There was a discussion about the first floor. We had the same discussion as Piers was talking about, about what goes where, and is there flexibility, which I think there probably will be in terms of how they use the rooms. But the intention is very much to identify each individual dwelling, which is the antithesis of what happened before, when you looked up and you could never tell where you were going, because you saw the window and then, say, you walked down here, and you would never find it. I think the terrace does lend itself to that (23). I think even within this framework here, if people want to paint their doors – because we were asked about door colours, and could we choose four colours because we do not want to choose too many because the builders were going to buy the paint and it would be complicated to go back and paint them. I said: "Well, you can paint them any colour you like." I mean, in a sense, that is what happens in reality: people are painting different door colours, they change their windows to a certain extent, they can do things to it. But if it is within a framework which has some coherence anyway, I do not think it really matters, you cannot really prescribe everything down to the last detail.

The last slide is here (25). We are up to about roof level now. I think within probably the next three months we will be completing the whole scheme. It has been a very, very rapid process.



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