

What the new commonhold lease means for design

Lecture by John Weir - Group Design & Development Director, Wilcon Homes. Given at the Design for Homes Intensive Flair conference, June 2001. 30 mins CPD

Design for Homes should be congratulated on the way today's delegate list is drawn from three camps. I have never seen so many housebuilders, architects and local authority people looking in the same direction, which really must be a first. So if the housebuilders could now imagine that they are architects, and dare I ask that the architects imagine that they are housebuilders, then the people here from local authorities have it very simple by comparison; my request to them is to get planning consents through more quickly, which, relatively, is fairly simple.

First I want to make a bit of a plea. Take an article from a recent architectural publication which, in my humble opinion, is pretentious and precocious nonsense! It is talking about an award-winning housing scheme, so it must be Dutch, number one prerequisite for all this sort of stuff. But what is absolutely horrendous for our profession is the way it describes the housing. I've not seen the scheme so I don't know whether it's good or bad, but hear what the magazine says:

"But the reiteration of the familiar and the everyday was also used as a compositional means, as in the works of artists as rare as Andy Warhol ... both the impersonal pop art repetition of banal images in the most awful, minimalist way of stacking and arranging matter are relevant to this architecture."

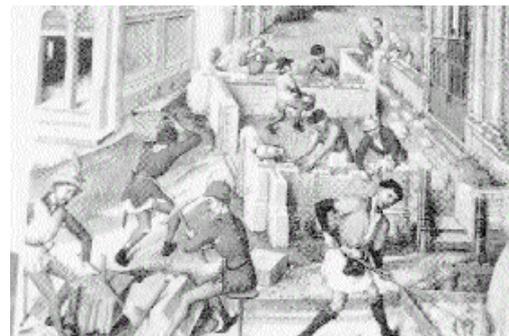
What's this got to do with people? What about the people who are going to live there, which is what it should be all about, when you get down to it? Then it's actually describes the third dimension, it says, "more dramatically by integrating the transverse stair into the main living room" Aren't we really moving forward!

I am a lapsed architect. But this kind of writing brings our profession into disrepute and my plea to you is that if you order this magazine, cease doing so; or whenever you see these sorts of things please write and complain vehemently because it is doing us no good whatsoever if we really want to move forward.

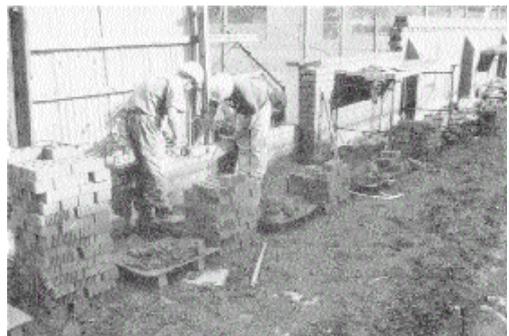
Chaos. I don't like the use of acronyms but when things go badly this stands for "Come Home At Once Son". It is the world we live in. I want to talk about the kind of world that we operate in. To be President of the USA you have to get fewer votes than the guy you are competing with. Back in this country, you go to church one weekend and the vicar will give you the sermon, then the next weekend you have exactly the same vicar but last

week he was a man and this week he's a woman. I have friends who have 15-year-olds trying to be 20-year-olds and I've got 50-year-old mates trying to be 18-year-olds. The world is in absolute total chaos and people are not too sure as to where they have to position themselves.

But we in the housebuilding industry know. At work I have two pictures over my computer. This shows a house being built in the 15th century (1). If you look closely enough you will see the bricklayers, you will see the bricks, mortar, somebody mixing the mortar. Now I want to take us on 500 years. This is the other picture I have over my desk and if you look very carefully you'll see the bricklayers again, you'll see the mortar and you will see one dramatic difference (2). Yes, these guys are wearing safety helmets. It's taken our industry only 500 years to transform itself and bring safety into it.



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We have a problem and it goes like this. There are three time zones. The past, the present and the future. We as a culture in the UK associate the present with the past. We do this for all kinds of reasons, such as to do with the Empire, the Commonwealth and winning the World Cup. So we associate the present with the past.

If you look at other dynamic cultures they associate the present with the future and I don't feel that we could have held the Olympic Games in the way the Australians did and have that forward-looking aspect to all sorts of things.

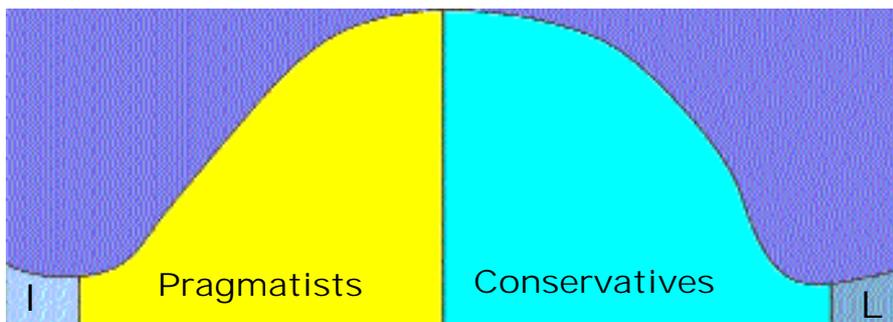
This is a change we have got to go through. I have turned to my people at work and told them that they have to understand that experience has never been worth so little and knowledge and imagination have never been worth so much. That is where we have to go forward. So here we have two guys, the two richest guys in the world, I believe (3, 4). The guy on the right, the Sultan of Brunei made his wealth from a material resource which took tens of millions of years to compose and now is running out. This guy, Gates, has made all his money with knowledge and imagination and he's done it all within the past 20 years. We are entering very different times and it is the hierarchy of knowledge and imagination that is now important.

As an industry, we still rely on experience. If you look at this on the far left (5) the little "i" stands for "innovators" or "imagers" whatever you want to call them. There are very few in our industry. They have to be pragmatists, if you explain it to them they will take it on board and after a while will understand and hopefully adopt it. You have a whole bunch of conservatives who actually need to see it in action before they will adopt it. Then finally you have L for laggard and with these people, no matter how well it's working, they don't want anything to do with it at all.

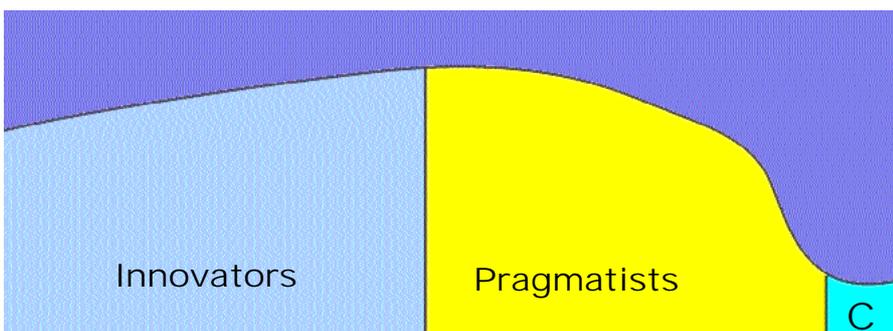
If we look at the industry of knowledge and imagination it's stacked full of innovators (6). It's got a load of pragmatists, fair enough, but there is a limited number of conservatives and those didn't tolerate laggards. It is just not part of it. Bill Gates would not want that in his organisation. I think we as a culture and as an industry we all have to change and move things forward because without a shadow of doubt it is knowledge and imagination; we live in a knowledge economy and here is the queen of knowledge. This, without any shadow of a doubt, is the woman who caught on to this and made an absolute fortune out of it (7). Delia hasn't got a factory making loads of pies, she's done it purely from knowledge and she has made a fortune because her knowledge works.



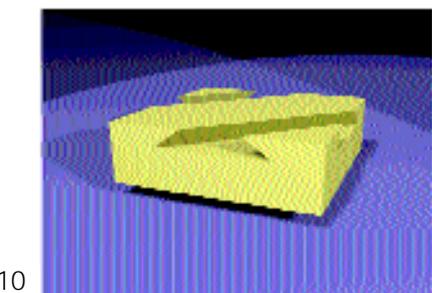
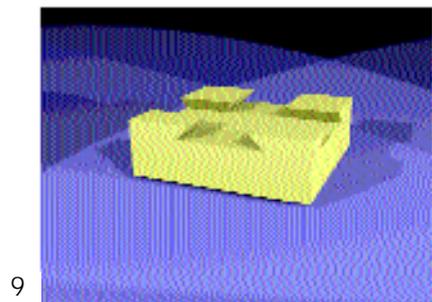
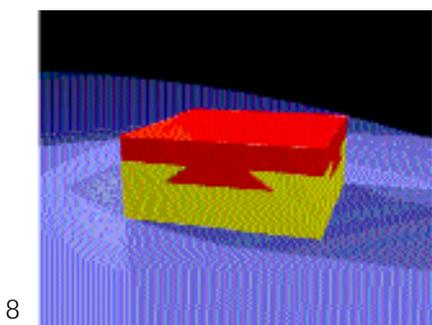
5 EXPERIENCE



6 IMAGINATION



Some of you have probably seen this (8). I found it very interesting because there is this need to think differently about how we are going about doing things. It is two blocks, one red, the other yellow, and it would look the same from whichever side you looked at it. You are supposed to take it apart. I couldn't see how because if you look at the bottom bit, how the hell are you going to push with the dovetail, that top bit in, or extricate these two parts from each other (9)? Anyway, you can see how it is done. This is how the block actually is (10). It's not a trick. It's just a different way of looking at things. And you can just slide the thing in and out quite easily.



recorders are able to record, this can't. This only plays. If you had turned to somebody and said, "I'm going to design this tape recorder that doesn't record and only one person can listen to", people would have called you barmy. People at Sony thought differently and found one of the most successful products ever.

In my business I am totally customer focused in what we try to drive for. I think our business should be all about people, meeting the expectations of people, surpassing those expectations in places where they want to live. But if you are going to do it, you have to go out and gather knowledge from these people to understand what they want. This is the perception, we've done a lot of work on this recently at the company I work for (12). It doesn't matter whether you are the top UK housebuilder or you are Joe Bloggs from round the corner that just does extensions, to a greater or lesser extent, this is the perception of housebuilding. It is sad. It is even sadder that the cartoon is from a broadsheet rather than the tabloids. But that is the perception and we have to deal with it.



What we have to do as an industry, all of us, architects, housebuilders, people from local authorities, we have to start thinking differently about how we go about things. I think this is one of the greatest examples of that. This is a Sony Walkman, invented I think in 1979 and now the most successful electronic consumer item for entertainment there's ever been (11). Before this there was the tape recorder and it was a static item you had at home. This is mobile. But it was a piece of furniture in your house. Now it's a fashion item that you wear. I suppose most important of all, tape

We have to go out there and not only understand people's perception of our industry, we have to understand how they live their lives. What is it that they want to achieve? How do they want to live (13)? How can we accommodate that better for them? How many of us here, whether housebuilder or architects, readily go out into people's homes to see how they are living today and their aspirations for how they wish to live tomorrow? How much human factor research is actually being done out there?



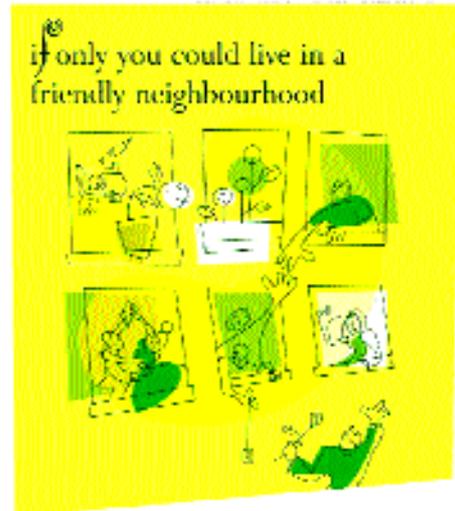
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And when you do set about to develop, you should gather knowledge of the community into which you are going (14). People are afraid of going into communities but they have a great deal to offer in terms of telling you what is good, bad, indifferent about the place, what they aspire to have there, what they would most benefit from. We now carry out this regularly with most of our students. It is a question of going to all walks of life and having planning weekends and discussing it with people. And for the kids in the schools it is important to go there because they are the generation of tomorrow. They are going to spend longer living in our homes than the people we sell them to, in all probability. I think we have to get out and gather knowledge from these people also. It is a knowledge-gathering exercise. There is a need to go to where a lot of this knowledge is, in terms of urbanism. We are creating things that can transform the way people live their lives.



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If we are not going out and gathering the best knowledge in terms of urbanism and how people want to live, we are taking very light the work that we are trying to do. We must gather knowledge from all these sources because that is what it is really going to help to deliver the best to the people who are going to live in the product, if you wish to call it that, that we will create.



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The Building Company

The new neighbourhood

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As you have probably seen I work for Wilcon Homes. We have done a lot of the research of the type I have been alluding to. We went out and said to people, "If you could buy from a different type of housebuilder, what would that housebuilder be like?" This is our response to that (15). I don't think people necessarily understand the product that we are selling - 75% of people when looking for a new home will not consider buying new. Now in any other industry that would be absolutely horrific but that is a fact in our industry.

One reason is that people do not buy the home but the comfort of buying into a neighbourhood. That is what they are really looking for and new homes struggle to offer it. My father told me, "Always buy the worst house in the best neighbourhood, never buy the best house in the worst neighbourhood". That is a real driver in people's choices. Now historically when we have sold a new home, it is just this product at this moment in time and it has no history and hasn't much of a future planned.

That can change because if you go out to the community, you can develop the history for the site you are going to put these homes on. You consult and it gives some history which you can offer when

you are selling the house. Then get the right infrastructure in place: in terms of planning I am far more interested in getting the right road hierarchy and massing, the type of brick and roof tiles and the details. The important factors from where I sit are joining streets up and linking them together. Don't put the houses too far back from the pavement. Very simple rules, a simple approach to doing things that will go a long way to create the physical infrastructure that is going to create neighbourhood.

Now this is where commonhold can start to play its role as we can put in what I call the infrastructure, a social infrastructure on which people can hang things so that they can see the possibility of a neighbourhood going forward. I will come back to that but what our research found was a demand for something totally different. You can see how we are striving for neighbourhood in the design.

We have found that people buying new homes feel as if they are not in control of anything or contribute to very little. By and large, what happens is that they get a choice of kitchen doors and sign a cheque for £250 000. They have no idea when it will be finished, no idea when they can move in; they do exactly as the solicitor tells them and some of the frustration about buying homes is that they feel they do not have control.

Historically if you went round most new homes being built you would see the houses being built one after the other as the site develops, good or bad, in terms of design. There are different ways now we can do this. We have to look at the build process a little differently. I am interested in giving our customers as much choice as far down the build process as I possibly can. That is a great marketing advantage. In trying to do that I am not interested in prefab or pod bathrooms at all. It is not how I perceive it. We have to retain flexibility of choice down the build process, not force the customer to order it at all right at the start.

But we have to get more efficient methods of construction. I divide the provision of housing in two separate areas one which I call the community side, that is putting the shells up, getting the envelopes up, getting them clad and creating the neighbourhood (15, 16). That requires a discipline of efficiency and it is a question of ASAP. Get the envelopes up and clad so that people have an idea of what the place will look like. Then we have to have what I call "responsive home fitting". I am really keen that what we actually do is go back and shop-fit out homes to suit the requirements of the purchaser. That requires a different kind of discipline which is responsive and agile. In this way, the approach becomes two separate approaches rather than the one.



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This is a development that we are pioneering in Northampton. We give three very different choices which are slightly exaggerated here (19, 20 ,21). None the less we give a contemporary, a classical and a traditional approach to all of this. People can then choose what they want, which when people shut their front doors by and large they should be able to live how they want because is a private right. But going with it is what I call the public responsibility. This is really packaging this all together, and this where I believe the commonhold comes in for a development like this of more than 400 units.



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want to run their neighbourhood in the future. They own the common areas and what is put in place is that which will enable those areas to be maintained; they get fully comprehensive property insurance, structural insurance on the property, the outside of their houses are painted every three years. We have put all of this in place because we think it might help that sense of neighbourhood that people take comfort from, to think that they will have a say in the way that their neighbourhood develops. They choose to pay more, stop it altogether or even reallocate the money for a bus to take the kids to school. Whatever is needed, they will have the right to do.

This is what commonhold is a first in trying to achieve. It is not simply for blocks of apartments and flats. This has far greater significance and if we put in the right physical infrastructure today we can start to put in the right social infrastructure which helps guarantee the neighbourhoods of the future. You just have to make your mind up do you want to do it or not.

People say would you please tell me which way I ought to go from here. "The simple answer to that is that depends a good deal on where you want to get to." Now that isn't Tom Peters or some management guru but a guy we have all read, Lewis Carroll, and he wrote this 150 years ago or thereabouts. He was associating the present with the future when he said it and not the past. That is what we have to do.



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Every household is a trust member and agrees to contribute into a pot on a month-by-month basis. What this does is give people a real say in how they