

The redevelopment of Winterton Hospital near Sedgefield village - Lecture by Peter Spoons of Miller Homes 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

I think at the start, to make sense of why I am here, I need to take you on a trip up to County Durham, because the densities and the innovation that is spoken of in your programme, in my scheme looks quite pale in comparison both to some of the things that are outside here, in terms of the densities within London, and some of the things we have spoken of at this seminar so far. I think we will start off with a trip up north, as they say.

As a developer, it will not surprise you at all to learn that my aim, in the talk this afternoon, is to attempt to speak to you for around about 20 minutes, without the use whatsoever of any facts. I do not want to get involved in any detail. If you want to try to pin me down with questions at the end, you can have a try and we will have a dance around about the answers, but if you really want any kind of facts you really need to talk to Nicky Watson at Jane Derbyshire, who obviously has the knowledge and the facts at her disposal.

Again, to give you a sense of context of where we are coming from and how we got to Sedgefield, and some of the thoughts, we are not a specialist builder we are the real bad guys, we are a kind of general purpose builder, we build on about 30 sites in the north-east. I was desperately worried this morning when I thought I saw one of our sites featured in one of the 'before' shots of the earlier presenter but then it occurred to me that nobody would know anyway, really, because they all look the same.

But we have a fairly long history in the north-east, particularly with Cussins, who we purchased last year, who were a builder. The core of our business is ex-Cussins building. We sell about 575 houses in the course of a year. Our average sales price would be around about £90,000 this year, I guess. As I say, we sell those off a vast range of sites, about 30 odd in the north-east, ranging from the centre of Newcastle out into the depths of County Durham and beyond. That is the quality that we are talking about. That is Cussins and this is County Durham. We have gone up market occasionally, the company has built larger examples of the same thing and some fairly spectacular things. In my part of the world this is executive housing, this is probably around the £175/£185,000 mark (1). There is a huge shortage of that, identified within Newcastle City Council's going for growth strategy, identified within regional planning guidance, executive housing, quality housing of that sort of value rather than that design is in short supply within the north-east.

The term "terraced housing", I was going to try to use the line that someone else has used this morning to say that I live in a terraced house, because, in County



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Durham, amongst a group of architects, I would get quite a lot of street cred with a line like that. I mean here, it is completely lost, is it not, really? But still, I do.

Yes, same development: apartments, same sort of marketplace. I am trying to flick through these reasonably quickly. (2)

We have delved into the occasional special project in our past, we are not quite as bad as I make out there. This was a bakery in Stockton-on-Tees (3), which we refurbished and we did some new build round the back and this, although it is a computer model in that particular form, we built some quayside properties (4, 5), both in Newcastle and in North Shields, with some quite modern design. The same scheme. That is one of our tweaked standard house types. (6) You cannot tell that it is a standard house type there because it is so sensitively tweaked to the local... (laughter) don't you think?

This is a not a scheme that Miller Homes built, incidentally. Unfortunately, looking down the programme, none of you built it either. So the only person that can claim anything to this is Nicky.

When we started to think about Winterton – and you will see later, as I show you some overhead projections, it came out as a competition from the NHS and marketed through DTZ. Once we started to think about Winterton we had, I think, all along, the idea that we wanted to do something a little different and that we needed to see whether we could push densities up, that we had to come in with a very keen land value there because it was going to be largely financially orientated, as these matters usually are. But we wanted to have a look at a different approach. We thought that it offered clean slate within a particular part of County Durham and we should start looking at a different way of doing things. The practicalities that were mentioned this morning, of traffic engineers, those lovely folk, begin to click into one's mind very quickly. We needed a way of maintaining values, and within the north-east, terraced housing is not associated with values. We are looking at a preconception in the marketplace that says, "If I have £150,000 to spend, I want a detached house for that, I want my garden, I want to be able to go out there and cut the grass, I want to be able to park my two, three, four or five cars around the place." All those things are strongly represented within the buying public. Therefore we need to solve those problems. We can try and ignore them, we can try to give people what it is that we think they ought to have. It says "managing director", not "pioneer", though – I am not into that, I have to work with what I have got. So we needed to see if we could not solve some of the issues.

Jane had done two particular schemes in my part of the world, that had begun to work together the concepts of large, high value properties and terracing and solving some of the car parking (1-6): no cars in the street, the cars all go through the hole in the wall and you have garaging at the back, so you are associating with people's values of: "I want a garage": yes you have a garage, yes, you have private car parking, but you still have the lovely street scene, you have still some of the things that we want out of it. Similarly here are shown ways of bolting together, if you like, large houses, and solving some of the car problems. It is not perhaps particularly obvious there but on that one, for instance, the garage goes in on the end. Thus you begin to get away from the domination of cars in the street but you are not moving too far away from people's aspirations, you are just getting them to take a little step, when they are coming to buy your houses, rather than some kind of quantum leap

It was a dark day. The second scheme that I mentioned had done the same kind of thing in a more urban setting (7-10). This is North Shields, not far from the Meadowell Estate, not the Meadowell Estate but not far from it. Not the hugest of values, a very sort of pioneering scheme when it was originally done. I think the builder went bust as well, but I cannot believe that the two matters are connected, really.



1-6



7-10

However, the piece that we were interested in here was again the way in which cars are taken out of the street and pushed into the back. There you have a shared access, nicely looked after, car parking on both sides, gardens to the houses at the front, a tidy looking situation. Certainly one could see ways in which that might be abused.

Interestingly, North Shields is not a clever area, it is not a great location in the north-east. This scheme is absolutely immaculate, it sort of shines out from you when you walk around. About two seconds after I pressed the button to take this picture, the chap on this side was out asking me what I was doing, what I was up to, in the nicest possible way but he wanted to know who I was and why I was on his piece of

space. Although I picked that particular opening, I could have picked an awful lot more to show you the same kind of thing.

So we thought we had some ideas there, some ways forward that we could start to use some building blocks, if you like, that we could start to use as we approached Sedgefield.

Now we will move to the OHPs. This is not really an advert, it is to try to show you where Sedgefield is, if I can find it on there before you can! There it is (indicating). I am trying again to accentuate the point that we build all over the place.

The scheme that we were looking at in Sedgefield has to fit in, within a business strategy, within our region. I am not interested in doing things for the fun of it: it has to make money, it has to turn over and pass at the same rate as the rest of the deals that we do, the rest of the projects that we do.

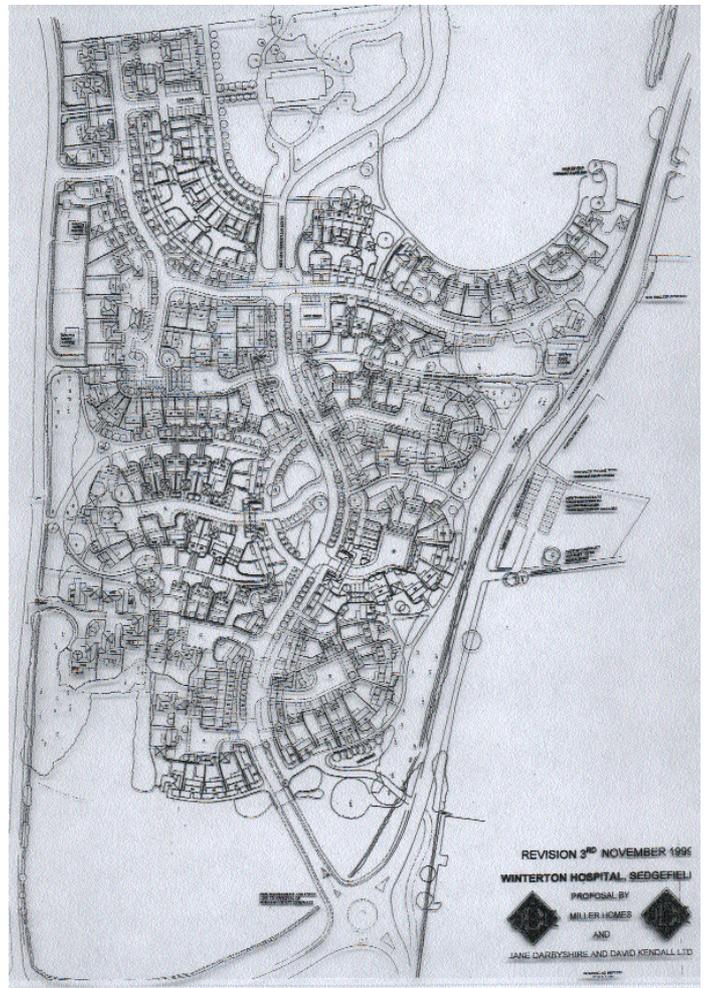
There is not an awful lot of special housing within that, there are some lovely schemes that, in my view, meet a whole range of needs, but we are not, by any means, a niche builder.

The Winterton scheme came out about two years ago. It was marketed by Debenham Thorpe DTZ. Along with the scheme details came a development brief. The concept of the site that was shown in the development brief was that (indicating the slide). The site is the site of an old hospital which was built, the majority of it was built at the turn of the Century, the northern part of it was built 50 years before that. It was a lunatic asylum, an extremely well known lunatic asylum, which is having a remarkable effect on our marketing at the moment. I had not realised just exactly how well known it was but even 150 years' worth of time does not seem to have removed its name from the minds of many people in Country Durham.

The planners had a dream of a garden village and came out with that within the presentation, I guess in their mind, playing to the commercial world of, "Oh, well, let's divide it up into little plots, put a spine road through the middle of it, and will go the way of executive housing."

Three places within the development brief – I was reading it on the train last night, I could not believe it; I do not think it is the first time I have read it but it was the first time it rang a bell. Three times in the brief it says the aim is to develop "high-quality-low-density" housing: the two things connected together with a hyphen and never split. I guess it comes back to the north-eastern market and the perceived lack of quality housing. This is one of several similar artists' impressions that were shown within the brief (12), I guess to give you an idea of where they thought we were going to be coming from.

We looked at it slightly differently. We did not think we should worry them too much and we thought the introduction should have a nice picture of a detached house and there it is (13), and that is about as close



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as we got, I think, really. From there, things went downhill pretty fast.

Our vision statement talked of creating a village street and looking towards the more traditional village appeal of some of the Country Durham villages. Sedgefield is a particularly lovely village, it is a well known and well liked village within the county and it consists of a typical county village, a mixture of small and large houses, terraced together with corner shops around the place and green spaces at the front and very often at the back.

That was the strategy we decided we would go for. That was the plan for the site (11), which differs significantly from what was in the brief. We were worried to death by that. It is such a good site that we did not want to lose it by getting it wrong right at the very beginning. Jane had spent a lot of time talking to the planners in the first place, without being able to show them what we were doing but just talking in concept terms about what might work and what might not, trying to sort of soften the blow, if you like, of where we were.

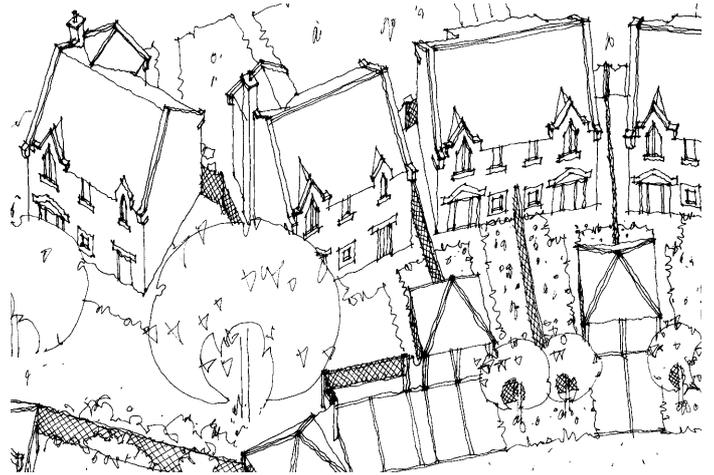
The perception was that on a site of this size, around about 180 new houses would be expected by the planning department. We were getting 230 on the site, out of this layout, with a mix of square footage that was exactly what our sales director at the time wanted: the right sized houses and lots and lots of them. Therefore you can imagine we were reasonably pleased at how things were going. We had a deadline at, I seem to recall, the end of November of that year, where we had to make the submission. We were very nervous of how the planners would receive that. The planning department were obviously one of the key contributors in terms of judging the scheme and the planning consultants that were employed by DTZ or employed by the NHS were going to have a strong input in what was going on as well.

We were fairly sure that we could swing it through with the planning consultants, we were not so sure with the planners. Jane took my land manager down to a meeting with the planners just before Christmas, immediately before the submission, and the line that I think is often quoted since then was that the director of planning said: "Oh, this is the best Christmas present that anybody could ever give me," which we quickly wrote down, put it into our submission and sent it off.

It went very well. We were fortunate enough to be short-listed. We did the usual song and dance routine a couple of times on this one, I seem to recall, and at the end of the day had a successful conclusion

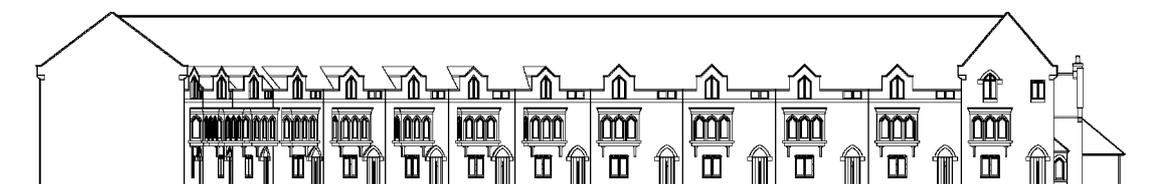


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to those negotiations. We were told in the fairest sense that we were not the highest offerer – but I think they always tell you that, do they not (laughter), it is part of the scene – and at the end of the day we managed to get to a contract.

The house types that we have developed – again, I would stress if you really want to know the detail of this, you talk to Nicky – but we developed strong external elevations and style that was relevant to this particular site. That carried a lot of weight with the planning department, who were very pleased with that, and a lot of weight with the NHS indirectly, through their planning consultants, at the end of the day, and it just kind of confirmed that we were thinking through things. I could flick through some more of those but I think it would bore you. This shows the mix of accommodation we have managed to achieve on site. They range from two-bedroomed apartments of 60 square meters through to five bedroomed houses at 200 square metres, a remarkable achievement to be able to get that up effectively and being able to deliver that product within the north-east, find an acceptable land value in the first place and be accepted within the marketplace: a tribute to the architect.



There were lots and lots of section 106 issues – all we need, is it not, really? But we managed to get through them one way or another.

We have set to on site now. We have been on site about five months or so. I was going to bring you some completed photographs. I set out about six weeks ago to take the photographs and it started to rain and it just has not stopped raining since (laughter). So unfortunately there is nothing I can show you, you will just have to take my word for it there. They are selling well. We have put in the roundabout, we are in on the road down the bottom. I guess the sort of key issues that have come out of it from my point of view are these. We have achieved 40,000 square feet to the acre – I am sorry, I am in old money, I cannot relate that to metres and hectares and things – but we have achieved 40,000 square feet to the acre, on an executive housing scheme. We are selling houses there at about £105 to £115 per square foot, which is in the top 25% of houses sold within the north-east, I guess, at the moment. It is top quality stuff within the context of a north-eastern market.

At the moment we are selling them at the rate of about one a week – we cannot beat them off with a stick, it works that way. We have not been able to build a show home as yet; we are selling out of a cabin on the site until the show home is completed. The demand has proved to be tremendous.

I guess more seriously, almost than that, is the fact that we have been able to sell land under another developer. It was always our intention to go with a second developer. It is a large site, 200 odd units. It would take us probably five years to go through it. It was always our intention to bring another developer along with us.

We have brought another house builder in, sold them a portion at the top end of the site. There is a design guide which was created as part of our 106 agreement, which guarantees design quality across the site and that was done very much by Derbyshires. That has been passed on, as it were, through to the landowner, and we have seen an appreciation of land value instantly upon planning. I think there is something quoted in the Estates Gazette that said the value had gone up to £80,000 an acre; I hope to god that is not true. It had gone up by £80,000 an acre, certainly.

Having got through the hard work, in my mind, we have begun to see the industry accepting some of the issues that we have presented here. It is not a sort of quantum leap, I am not looking for a pat on the back, but it is a kind of step forward, it is a reasonably practical way forward. To relate the layout to the type of the presentation, we are seeking a layout of terraced housing all the way through that central spine road, terraced housing around the church at the top and the building at the top there is a church which was built around about 1850/1860. It is a listed church which remains and will become part of the community buildings.

So we have linked terraced properties through to give that sort of core feeling to the centre of the

village, if you like, but at the same time, as I say, we are not pioneers, we have developed some rather more traditional detached housing and semi-detached housing, in the back of those areas. We are trying to get away from the problems of car parking by putting some of the garaging at the front and by tucking some of the garaging round the side.

It is a fairly fine detailed approach, and you really need to sit down and have a look through it, if you are interested. You need to look through it in some detail to see how we have tackled it.

I think someone made the point this morning that there is not a model and I think that is absolutely right: terraced housing will not provide, certainly in the north-east, a model for housing development within the future but it will act as one tool, and in some areas it will surprise you by being a more appropriate tool than you thought it might be. That is what I guess we are trying to illustrate and to sell on the back of it.

Richard Feilden (conference chair): Thank you very much. That sounds to me like a demonstration of how a good relationship between a developer and an architect can add value, while achieving a range of wider objectives. I think that is an encouraging message for the conference today.