

# The remorseless logic of terraced housing - Lecture by Piers Gough of CZWG 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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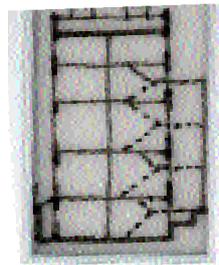
I think I am here because I indulged TV audiences with some praise of the terraced house; indeed I tried to build a whole programme around it. The production company were rather more interested in wonderful neo-classical country houses but we managed to drag it round in the end to being roughly about the subject that I had set out to tell, which is the story of the Georgians making the terraced house as a kind of Ford motor car of their economy, a house for everyman. But then of course I received lots of mail saying: "What do you mean, everyman? Of course the poor never had them," and so on. But the point being that it went from being something that only very rich people had to something that averagely ordinary rich people had, and not only that but they were prepared to move in together, into a terraced form, rather than in separate houses, and this was to do with, of course, the enlightenment and socialisation of society.

If one reads Jane Austen, people were pretty shocked by the amount of money you could spend on a terraced house. You could flog an entire estate in the country and buy one terraced house in Bath. Really the landed gentry were pretty worried about this, thought it was a pretty weird exchange, but of course what they were really exchanging was the opportunity for love and marriage, for a sort of barren life out on some ghastly estate miles from anywhere where the only things were cows and sheep around. You could meet a Mr D'Arcy, of course.

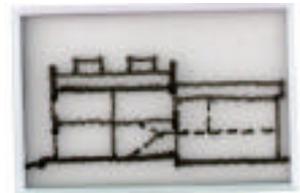
The pleasures and excitements of the City still engage me. So I am really biased – totally biased – I'm hopeless because I do not want to live in an executive home on the outskirts of town so honestly what am I doing here trying to persuade you guys that you should not do it? What do I know about executives? Not much. Therefore I thought I would agonise with you from powerpoint to ballpoint, I would agonise with you about the terraced house, from the architect's point of view, very dull little speech really, about trying to build terraced housing in London, which we used to do in the early 'eighties, before everybody went loft mad, and the medieval house was rediscovered, as my other programme pointed out – much better, really.

But the terraced house is a type which we kind of wrestled with way back in the great days of Kentish Homes. We have wrestled with it, of course, only for commercial developers. Our record of building social housing is not very strong. What we soon discovered was if the amount of money somebody is prepared to pay for a house in, as it was then, Hackney, was not really that great, so they were not going to get much of a house. That is really the poor equation of our modern

society, which does not really see that buildings cost so much per square foot compared with what you earn. Even though we think we are rich, we are not so rich, because we could not afford to have built – Mr Pootah certainly could not afford his terraced house in Kentish Town. That is why of course most middle-class people prefer to live in old buildings, because they are better value for money in the end. This is quite a difficult situation to design in and one that I thought I would just explore briefly with my slide show.



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We do not have these sent very well by E-mail. The E-mail broke up a bit, I am afraid. These were perfect CAD drawings when they left the office. Stefan brought it up. What are we talking about? Because every time Richard Rogers talks about "the bloody terraced house" and refers to its density, he is talking about this.

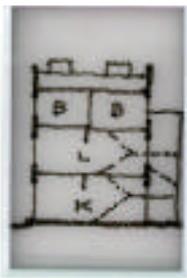
Of course Stefan is too kind to mention that these are in multi-occupation. Of course they were, they were in a servant sandwich (1). Your servants lived there and there (indicating) and did most of the climbing while you occupied the middle floors, you know, in gracious living. You only really had to cope with three, while the other lot had to go up five.

I know this because my grandmother owned a house like this in South Kensington – jolly nice, Thurlow Place. She continued to live in the middle floors, with her dining room, living room and bedroom but her impoverished daughter and her husband, who were actors, had to live up here and cook down here in the old kitchen. They were fit. My aunt and uncle have always been fit and in fact are very well. My granny liked to smoke and all sorts of other things so, she, you know....well, those suited her.

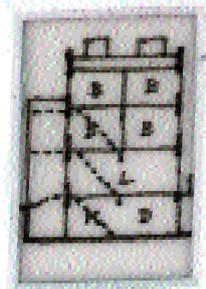
At the other end of the scale, of course, what we are talking about is the two-up/two-down with back extension, that is actually where I live now, in the East End (2). This is the standard type. We all know that the Victorian house is not so bloody wonderful because the distance between any decent room and the garden is for ever. All the good rooms are out on the front, on the street, just where you do not want them, and all the bad rooms like the bathrooms and

the sort of narrow, narrow kitchen and everything are all out at the back, actually ruining the view of the garden from the other major rooms of the house. The stairs are in the wrong place. The back extension anyway is below ground because of having to get under the staircase landing – ha, ha -- so, you know, this is always highly damp and usually has no foundations anyway. So, you know, they are not absolutely fantastic – and what with the valley gutter and all. Hmm, yes, well.... But the two-storey house has the one vital ingredient, which is er – oh well, I will come to that.

Then there is the intermediate people, you know, those people in Kentish Town who have the three storey job, and they really cannot decide where the bedrooms go, because you can have a floor of bedrooms but then again you have a problem in that you have then an awful lot of living space (3). How many of your friends have that living room right through the whole of the main floor and they never go there because the kitchen is downstairs and everybody is in the kitchen? Okay, so then you have four bedrooms and the kitchen is not big enough, and so on and so on.



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Therefore I say the three storey house I think is one of the most difficult architectural problems to deliver because basically you want almost the same amount, roughly, of sleeping room as living room. So how do you sort out that equation without having a sort of poxy middle floor which is kind of like half bedroom, half-useless living room?

The only people I know, really, who have, to my mind, the best houses in London are the ones that were built back to front because most London terraced houses have that back extension, which in this case probably the bathroom is added on, which again is right in the garden, just where you do not really want it. (4)

The best houses, Bristol Gardens being an example, is where the extension is at the front, and the house is reversed mostly because they have built big shared gardens at the back – and incidentally the roadside is always on this side and the garden side is always on this side of these diagrams.

Then you get maybe four bedrooms upstairs in a quite conventional way, and maybe the best bedroom has this big bathroom out here, and you come in

here and they have a gorgeous living room and then the kitchen dining room bit. Thus the balance is better, and the stairs are at the front, where they ought to be, really, because it is less likely that you want rooms heavily overlooking the road, as you do heavily overlooking the garden.

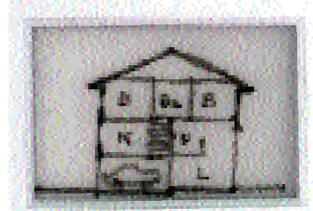
These reverse houses – and you see some around Westbourne Grove, they have some reverse houses, quite ugly on the outside with their back extensions but very strong, very powerful elevations – are all usually predicated on a big shared garden square at the back, which of course is ultimately probably the nicest possible way to live in London.

However, I think that moving of the stair to the front – which is not exactly big news because I think we have probably all done it now – is one of the answers.

We have played with three-storey houses (5). In the days when we were allowed to like motorcars, and they were cherished items of the family – and of course we are now no longer allowed to like them, even – 3.8 per cent out in the street. Actually, I do think you should park in the street because there is a problem, of course, even with parking a car in a



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house, which is that it takes up that street length effectively, and it is in and out, and then no one else can park there while you are away in Mauritius or even off for films, nobody can park in the place that you had. It is a very greedy way of parking in a street to, as it were, steal that edge.

But anyway, be that as it may, when you are doing a mews sometimes you have no option whatsoever. This was a mews house house that we did in Camden (6). However, it does get over one thing, which is that, funnily enough, using the ground floor for the car leaves you with no option but a strange bedroom thing which maybe is living, maybe is bedroom – who knows quite what – and the garden, and then a decent living floor in the middle and bedrooms at the top and maybe a spiral staircase from the living room down to the garden, to make it more accessible.

We did one in Harrogate Road. It was the very first house we ever did. Incidentally, I think all the houses we have ever done have always been – I think all of them – timber framed. This house in Harrogate Road, we sent an assistant down to have a look at it because we only did the 150s and sent them to the builder and the builder got on with it. We sent him

down to have a look to see how the foundations were going. He came back, he was absolutely gobsmacked and said: "They've finished it." We said: "What? It was only a few weeks ago." He said, "Yes, but they've actually built the house." We went, "Oh, shit..." you know.

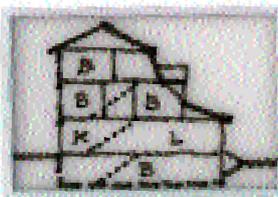
This is a good little street to be in. You can have a double height living room, which is quite fun, and a dining room overlooking the kitchen. This stair is, well, you know, in sections, and the bedrooms upstairs. In fact it is a rather bigger house so you can get three bedrooms on the top floor.

That kind of section is okay but the real problem, and the part of the Building Regs – god knows what part it is now – that should be reviewed, in my view, is self-closing doors, because they are the death of sociability. You know, they really are criminal. I am prepared to take the risk – I do not know about anybody else: probably you are not – and the risk takes the form of putting a rubber bung under the door, or something, to stop it closing. But in my view the Victorians made corridors and kind of cut us all off from ourselves. Then the self-closing door regulations have turned the whole of the house into a kind of hermetic system, which is really not very good for family life, or for any kind of life. There is something really deadly about the kind of

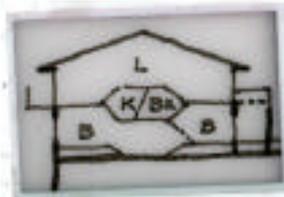
one where there was already some basement space. We have two ideas, really. One is if you have five bedrooms you need more at ground level, you need a bigger living area. We have done the back extension version, which is near Mile End, where the roof just kind of swoops down.

This was north-east facing, so it was not too bad an orientation. The house goes right through to the garden so you have this extra living room at this end. We have tried one in Sutton Square where you get a front extension, this little dining room, which is next to the front door, so it pushes the solid wall of the house out to the street and then it has a little place where you come in the front door, next to the dining room. So this house the thing was extended the other way, forward of the house, a front extension. I still think that is a really interesting piece to be explored in terrace house design, the joys of the front extension, so you do not have anything, as it were, blocking your back view.

Probably a more interesting two-storey job potentially was a scheme we did over the top of some auction rooms, (8) so this is really a cheap maisonette, and we had this great idea to put a kind of kitchen/bathroom wodge in the middle of the



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uptightness and the kind of self-centred 'under the duvet' kind of attitude of the self-closing door and I am not in the slightest bit keen on it. That is really why two-storey houses will rule.

I warn the Government, if you want to warn anybody about anything, that if we insist on going on with terraced housing, we are going to get nothing but two-storey terraced housing, in my view, because of this one rather tough rule that changes from two storeys to three storeys, as I understand it. God knows – do not tell me – you have to do it in two storeys as well? Oh well, there you are. I did not think so; it was not, when I last did it, but anyway it is probably true by now.

Just wait until you see all that Dutch shit that we are going to be absolutely dripping over later, I mean we are going to be drooling over it. Guess what. You know, just check those routes, check those closing doors. Actually we are going to be told what the truth is, later on, which will probably be completely prosaic and I will be totally wrong, but there you are.

We have done three bedrooms (7), where you kind of skew it by just having one bedroom at the top, which is quite fun, of course, you have a kind of super master bedroom at the top of the house. We also did

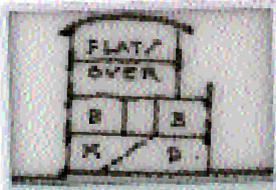
section and have a living room that climbed up over it and down the other side, and bedrooms that went under it.

That was too raunchy for our client; this is an unbuilt special. You know, clever sections, or cleverer sections, are not very prevalent in our work and I apologise for that. I am rather disappointed when I went through and sort of worked out, but they are all sort of developer housing, all in pretty bad areas of London – I mean, you know, not bad really, really, but not ones that are very rich, put it that way round. So we have been tending to build quite cheaply, although this was a better place.

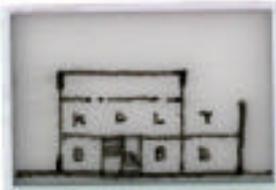
We did do something quite cute with the third bedroom, in this one (9), which was to put a roof light and put a bed deck in it, so the middle bedroom, you can have three bedrooms in a row and have a really nice, deep plan, so you get this deep living room/dining room/kitchen sequence on one floor, and then you can put the three bedrooms kind of plonked along a row if you are prepared to go for a roof light on the middle one, which I thought was quite a strong and useful section that one could bring again.

However, what really seems to have happened in our work, particularly in Glasgow, is that this kind of idea has arisen where you forget the house – the house is not dense enough because no one wants to go above two storeys, really; the house is better off with a couple of flats over the top, and since the house depth is quite likely to be quite a lot deeper than a flat depth, the upper flats – maybe this one (10) should have a balcony drawn on it but basically you have a terrace that sort of vaguely overlooks the garden below but actually does not particularly overlook it, you do not feel especially overlooked, and the garden can remain relatively private to the maisonette on the ground floor.

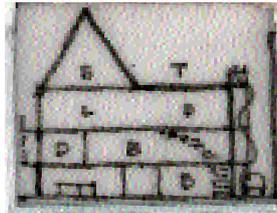
In the Gorbals this has worked really, really well. Loads of families have come back into the Gorbals and they have their private garden and they have their front door and then the flats over are tenement flats, effectively. That seems to be a pattern where the terraced house – and this can be built on a terrace structure. I mean it is only four storeys so you can have cross-wall constructions and all that stuff. You do not have to go into a frame to achieve something which is much more dense, probably more lively and produces the kind of urban scale that often, particularly in London, we are looking for.



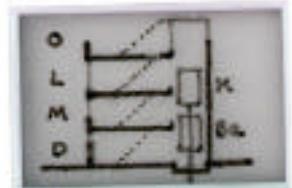
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You know, four modern floors tend to be about the height of three Victorian floors, so to get the scale of the city up, it does not seem like a bad idea to put some of these flats over. Obviously they are more accessible if you put them underneath, but then you have the whole issue about garden access and whose is it anyway and who is looking at whom and bla bla. We quite like the flats over, although it is a longer staircase up.

We have done upside down houses (11). That is a two storey one we did in Lonsdale Place in Islington, where you have the living above the bedrooms. This is a very tight site, so then you have a sort of terrace at the back. But then you get the lovely space up into the roof within your living space, which is very desirable.

Finally our two freaks. These are private houses, not developer houses, one built, one unbuilt. This is Janet Street-Porter's famous house on the market, 1.5 million to you, (12). That has a living room actually on the piano nobile, as it were, on the second floor. Her main bedroom is on the first floor and she has the whole of the one thousand square foot of the first floor as a bedroom, the whole of the next floor as a

living/dining kitchen and the ground floor is given over to billiards and a guest bedroom.

The way in which we got around having an open staircase and the whole thing very fluid was to put an external spiral staircase on the building and the building inspector was persuaded that this would be a suitable means of escape from the building but would allow us much more freedom to open plan without self-closing doors. Thus that may be a strategy for sociability, to have the outside staircase. Of course it does mean that the burglars can get in much more easily from any floor but....(Laughter). Her studio was on the top floor, totally separate, across an open terrace, so this is a real live/work job over here, we are talking serious live/work, where you go up and it is completely separate, there is no interaction between these floors, you just go up onto your own roof and work away in your studio and actually get wet. But the good thing is that visitors can go up the spiral staircase, never enter the house at all and go and visit you at work, so you can keep people who come for work out of your residential hair, as it were.

Finally this one was a mews that we did for a woman called Mary Farin, who did angora wool jerseys in the 'sixties (13). She was from Croydon. She bought a little mews in London and wanted to convert it. We had this quite cute idea that she would have a dark floor, a medium dark floor, and a light floor and an open top roof, and all services would be on lifts, so that the kitchen would have its own lift, the bathroom would have its own lift, she would have a lift and her clothes would be on a lift, so you could cook on the light floor and serve it on the dark floor. You could sleep on the medium floor and then take the lift up and get dressed on the roof terrace.

The notion of the house as a set of very fixed rooms is one that I think, I hope, begins to break down, so that these closed door bedrooms, these empty spaces that nobody uses, will come into more use in the future and be less hermetic, the whole house will be broken down and will be less of a hermetic thing. The trouble with a terraced house is it does tend towards hermeticness, particularly between floors. Thus to return to the Georgians, one of the delightful things that really came out of the research for our programme was that the Georgian house – I had not

realised this at all but people habitually entertained in their bedroom, and the reason why the bedrooms had the panelling and so on was because they expected to greet people and meet people in their bedrooms, so the bedroom was part of the sort of public realm of the house.

Therefore, in a way, to look back to that period, instead of thinking, as a lot of rooms – okay they were separate because of the heating and so on – but they were definitely used beyond the kinds of uses that we put to rooms now. So hopefully there is a guide somewhere in that, as well, towards the new way in which a terraced house could be broken open and made to work harder and more interestingly for a modern lifestyle. Thank you.