

# Reinventing the terrace for multicultural Birmingham - Lecture by Wendy Shillam of Shillam + Smith, given at the Design for Homes Joined-up Housing conference, Nov 2000

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

Good afternoon, everybody. While we are dealing with the technicalities here, which I am sure we can sort out quite easily, it is quite interesting when you are talking about aesthetics and when you are talking to people and consulting with people about how you discuss aesthetics, and it is a real problem for architects, and I think it is a real problem for us who are involved with poorer areas with housing estates, with areas where people's choices have been incredibly limited, and how do you widen those choices? Before I went to Barcelona I thought that Gaudi's buildings looked really strange, but when you go there you discover that actually the whole of Barcelona is like that and it is not really strange at all. That started me thinking about how we have our own view about what we expect of places and apartments. New York is the obvious one and if you live in New York, you expect to live in an apartment. If you live in a block, well that is possibly a bit more European. A house: some people might think a terraced house is a quintessentially English model, and a cottage, well you are going up to Scotland or Wales or somewhere like that.

But in the project I am going to tell you about, which was Saltley and Smallheath in Birmingham, we really had to ask ourselves the question what is quintessentially English today. That is because we were working with a community who were all English but whose ancestors had come from all over the world, and particularly in the area of Saltley and Smallheath in Birmingham, had come from Assad, Kashmir, which is an autonomous region of Pakistan. Really, the way we answered that question comes back to the way that I feel about places that I know well. Therefore the story actually starts in London. Our offices are in central London, an area that we particularly love because of the richness of the Edwardian architecture and because of the richness of uses that happens in those sorts of buildings. One thing that I think is incredibly useful for the terraced model is that in fact it works for all kinds of different functions. Our office building may look relatively domestic in character, but it was built as a factory, it was tailor's workrooms before we took it over.

However, the other thing that you notice in that part of London – it is what we poshly call 'Fitzrovia', it is north of Oxford Street – is that it was actually where professional people worked and it was, I think, one of the first examples of live-work. Like Audley Chambers, which is just a little further south on Great Titchfield Street. It is again basically a terraced model, you go in and you go up, but there are flats on each level, a big room at the front, smaller room at the back; one is a living room, the other is a bedroom. There are no kitchens because your servants would live in the basement. I always imagine it is the kind of place where Bertie Worcester would have

lived with Jeeves, bringing up things on a silver salver.

What interests me about that area is the richness of uses. We have now loads of hi-tech companies and dot.com companies who find those smaller buildings just about the right size to contain 20 to 60 people, which is the larger size of these hi-tech firms today.

Back to Birmingham. Saltley and Smallheath is an area of Victorian terraced housing, mostly two-storey. It becomes really quite exciting when it gets to three-storey. It is actually terribly uniform, slightly dull, and what we noticed when we started to work there a few years ago was the mismatch between the housing and the people who lived there, a south Asian population. The colour in the things that people wore, in the way that they decorated the market stalls that they worked on, the Bollywood movies that people watched in their homes and what the cinema showed. It was totally alien to this rather gentle terraced Victorian culture. Nobody had tried to design buildings which somehow responded to those very different cultural influences.

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That is the kind of housing that we found when we started doing our work. I should say we had a two year commission as community architects, literally just to look at the area, to consult with people and talk to people and find out what was required. It was amazing to have that opportunity to do it for so long; normally you have to do it in a month.

We found that these new housing estates, which had only just been built, were already failing, for all sorts of reasons, to do with the fact that they were suburban in nature, they relied upon your owning a car and an awful lot of people who had been put in these new estates did not own a car.

However, the thing that I find really worrying is this sort of in-built nookiness that you get in this style of housing, and you can see it with the two different porches on the left, this sort of replica of the English village, where things have happened naturally over time. When you put two houses next to each other and one has a porch like that and one has a porch like that, it just shouts to me as if it is not real. We wanted to find a way where there could be variety in the housing without resorting to that kind of unreality, which here is done very crassly, which sometimes is done in a very much more sophisticated way. But first we had the problem of how do you discuss aesthetics with the community, and how do you discuss aesthetics in a community where the women are generally not involved in civic affairs at all, and how do you discuss aesthetics with children, with people who are not articulate in English, it is not their first language? Thus we decided to work with artists. We had a budget of £40,000 to spend on environmental improvements. This is a very large SRB area. It had a population of 55 million(sic) people, it was about four miles that way and two miles that way. How can you possibly spend £40,000 on any environmental improvement which is going to make any fundamental difference to that number of people? Therefore we persuaded the local authority to spend that money on temporary works of public art. They had to be temporary because this was part of our public consultation process; we did not want to be imposing things. They also had to be temporary because we did not want to get into that problem of will it last, will it be vandalised. In fact nothing was vandalised on this project, and several of the installations were considered to stay longer.

We chose six artists and we gave them our interim report as a starter, where we had looked at the areas, we had looked at the problems, we had looked at the issues, and we told them that we wanted to consult about the sort of housing that people wanted, the sort of public space that people wanted.

I will just very quickly tell you a little about two of those pieces. This is by David Cotterall, a student who had just left college. He decided to take one of the public parks and create a geyser in the park (2). He worked with local schoolchildren and they decided to see what would happen if the unexpected were to happen in your local park, if a geyser like Old Faithful in Yellowstone National Park, suddenly erupted in the park, if the unexpected were to happen?

Would the television cameras come? Would your mother let you go out to look at it? Would the police come and cordon it off?

Then with these children he set about constructing a geyser in the local park. It was a jet of water. We went down 11 metres into the ground and once a day, all during the summer, this geyser was let off and it was the highest fountain in England. As it happened, it only lasted for five minutes and the television cameras did come and their mothers did let them come and they did not mind that of course they had not thought that as soon as you have all that water on a hot summer's day, the children go straight underneath it and get absolutely soaking wet.

The whole point of this was just to set the question about the unexpected, about the possibility that urban regeneration might actually bring to your neighbourhood something which you could never imagine happening. It had an immense effect of giving people the thought that they could actually make changes.

Another piece by Nicola Morris looked at the colour of the clothes that the women wear in the area (they wear silk) and she created houses made out of silk and she put little fans underneath them so they wobbled (3). We put these models in the local Asda superstore and with them we put children's drawings of the kind of housing that they wanted. Again this to me was one of the points where I realised that colour was one of the things that was missing from this area. The way people responded to this, and people of all nationalities responded very warmly to those different colours.

We also started to think about who should have aesthetic control over their housing, and we were very influenced by N J Habranchan's book on The Structure of the Ordinary. That is because we had started looking at what housing was like back in Pakistan and in Moslem countries, where a lot of these people came from and where their aesthetic sensibilities had been honed.



I went on holiday to Syria that summer and was very interested to see the concrete frame construction – really simple, really cheap; this happens all over the third world – and how people lived in it (this particular housing is very modest housing) but how people had taken it of their own. I suppose at the back of my mind also were those pictures we were shown as students, of Pesac and how people had ruined, as our tutors told us, the houses in Pesac by adding little bits and pieces to it. Someone also lent us an architecture book from Pakistan, one of the native people, and this concrete frame housing is the sort of housing you get and this is the sort of thing that people do with it.

Actually if you go to Saltney and Smallheath, you will see that people try to do that with Victorian houses. They put façades up, they put stone facing, they build walls and they put grand lions by the entrances and things like that. This wish to make one's home greater, to engrandise one's home was a very powerful wish.

Therefore we started to look at whether some sort of prefabricated framed structure could actually be built in England today cheaply and give us some of the opportunities we wanted.

The other thing about the Asian community is that they bring with them a lot of ways of living from Pakistan and India and Bangladesh as well, which we do not know how long that will last.

When you talk of the young children, their aspirations are very different from those of their parents, so we felt we could not predict what was going to happen in the future, and what we thought might happen was that there would be a fusing of cultures. You see it in Bangra music and you see it in the way we eat, the fact that curry is becoming a quintessentially English dish and Vindaloo is a football song. But there is this crossing of cultures and I think that is a very vibrant time to look at things.

Thus the basic structure we went for in the end was concrete beam and post. That is because when you get to concrete beam and post you know you have got to something seriously structural. If you have ever tried to put up curtains on concrete lintels, it is extremely difficult. We wanted a structure that was something that people would realise they could not mess about with and it was quite difficult to mess about with. But within that structure lightweight panels and in-fills that we would positively want to encourage people to change over time.

There was also the cost implication. Most of these houses were owned but people had bought them at quite low cost and did not really have the wherewithal to maintain them. Therefore these houses are to be designed for sale. The basic cost is £42,000. I do not think architects talk enough about costs, but it was very important that these should be affordable. We also very much thought about the sort of loft idea: you sell an open space and then someone comes and does what they want with it; or the way I

bought my first home, I bought a Victorian wreck and I did it up, and it did not even have a kitchen or bathroom when we moved into it. We felt that that was too little, that we should put in a basic kitchen and a basic bathroom, but not to put in any more petitions, the basic space here.

On the ground floor is one big open space, and on the top floor as well. There is a flat roof here, just begging for you put an extension on the roof, and we are applying for planning permission for three storeys so that when you buy this you will have an automatic planning permission to build the top storey.

When talking to the planners, we realise because you are sort of half building a home, that automatic planning permission stays for ever, not like the five years that a normal planning permission stays.

The aim was to get somewhere that was 20% larger for the price and 20% less finishes, so saving on items like kitchen units and the kind of things that you would find in those developer houses I showed you before. No fancy porches, that comes later. It is allowing people, in the first instance, to say where they wanted those petitions and later on build and extend the houses as they wish. This is on quite a small scale so you probably will not be able to interrogate this in any detail, but it shows how the houses can be built in on: single storey lean-to extensions at front and back, going up onto the roof where the structure is already there. In fact in the first stage we plan to put a drying area on the flat roof, under a sloping roof, which gives you more clues as to the easy ways you can build this.

We do not use extensions to the basic structural frame at second stages. The idea is that it can all be done DIY or within the realms of local builders. People in this area had already done those sorts of extensions, done new windows and things like that. The other matter, when you are designing houses, is that we design houses ostensibly for 60 years but when you look around there are a lot of houses that have lasted a lot longer than 60 years. The one thing you can predict about the future is that things will change.



The other aspect that we thought was quite important is that these may not remain as purely houses. I thought the title of this conference "Joined-up Housing", was quite interesting because we all thought about joined-up housing as being terraces but I also think it is about joining up housing to the other functions that happen in the urban realm, particularly to working. The way we work is changing; I am sure everyone in this room at some stage or another has worked from home. I am sure those trends will continue, and those trends are already very strong in this community – so providing a front room that can be extended in the way you can actually work from home.

I will show you this plan (1). Here are some of the advantages of this kind of layout. These buildings actually turned a corner, we did actually design special corner units, because the standard terraced house, as has already been said, does not turn a corner very well, so there were special units to turn the corner, and L-shaped units to create courtyard housing in the back lands.

That again very much responds to the way that a large Asian family group traditionally would live in somewhere like Pakistan or India, in a family group with a shared courtyard. These are semi-private courtyards and we designed them so the houses could be individually owned or could be owned by family groups. I have one person in this area who wants to buy seven of these houses: they have big families.

That is some of the earlier sketches (4) of how we imagined the design of the housing might develop – not artificially, actually developed because the people who lived in them have some effect on the aesthetics that they have. They have rendered façades so that they are very easily repainted, so that we can get some of the colour.

The next slide (5) shows the detail and you are probably all too far away to see it, but lightweight in-fill, high installation, intermediate floors being timber rather than solid, so that in the future you might actually be able to link two floors together and get in an extra staircase, things like that. We also had to design it so that this basic unit would meet all the aspirations of lifetime homes and Building Regulations, so where we put the soil stacks, how we dealt with the staircase and enclosing the staircase, part of that basic unit.

We had a lot of discussion with Birmingham Council who, even though their housing department is not going to build these houses, they wanted to be sure. As soon as we said concrete frame, they were terrified, they said: "We're pulling down concrete frame all over the place and you want more." But slowly we have managed to persuade people these do not have cavity walls, they are solid walls and when we did that, we said: "Well, you cannot get the insulation levels you need with cavity walls," "Now that is the Building Regulations." So I am very pleased.

I think it begs the question. We all assume that people want to live in Victorian style housing. We found

that the people in Saltley and Small Heath positively did not, that they actually wanted to get away from that Victorian style and they were not at all frightened by something which was very different, which was very modern and which I am proud, as an architect. I would love one of those. People felt that Victorian meant Imperialist and had all sorts of ramifications that they did not want to buy into.

I do not think we could have achieved that with the confidence we did and with the backing of the community if we had not done that consultation process with artists first, to get people out of the box of thinking about their area in that particular way.

The irony is, of course, that when this was published in The Guardian a little while ago, we had telephone calls from Glasgow to Penzance asking: "When are you going to be building some in our area?" I think there are an awful lot more people who want that sort of flexibility than that very particular community that we were designing for in Birmingham.

