

Sharsted Self-Build

The first shared ownership self-build in London

Prior to urbanisation people built houses that arose organically from the materials of the locality. Britain is particularly rich in diverse styles of vernacular housing because of its diverse geology. The interiors may have been a bit Spartan but the house forms were, and still are, tremendously attractive, resonating with a sense of place.

As we were urbanised this central part of our culture was removed from our control. Housing became a matter of 'provision', the style of which was decided by municipal authorities or philanthropic gentlemen. House style expressed social division.

In the 20s and 30s, when proletarians had gained a modicum of leisure, there was a movement of shanty or chalet self-build, in which townies bought a tiny cheap plot out in the country and would gradually build up a homestead at weekends with whatever they could get their hands on. This autonomous movement, a contemporary proletarian vernacular in the making, was crushed by the 1947 Town and Country Planning Act with no defence from the Labour party or workers movement, who seemed to have no sense of its significance. The capital intensive mortgage system then moved in. Control of housing self-provision and its architectural expression was recouped by the state for the benefit of the bankers.

Getting ourselves a home of any sort is still a major undertaking in most of our lives. This area of culture probably takes up more time and energy than any other. Our choice of house and interior design is fundamental to the expression of our identity. The importance of self-build in cities is the hope they hold out towards regaining the vernacular. A move out of the mind frame of public housing provision, whether by government or mortgage companies, and towards an idea of democratic housing expression.

I'd been obsessed with the idea of building my own house all my life. Two previous attempts, which had each taken a year or so, had for various reasons failed. So, when I heard of the Sharsted Street Self-build Shared Ownership scheme, which was cranking itself up just around the corner from me in Kennington, South London, I was determined to get onto it.

The scheme had been set up by South London Family Housing Association who had negotiated a very beautiful little site, just behind Kennington tube, from Southwark Council. It had been the site of an old factory and had a high wall on two sides with a school kitchen and a nature garden on a third side.

It was for ten local families who needed two or three bed housing but who did not have the combination of capital and/or income to afford mortgages, or enough 'points' to be re-housed by the Council. The commitment required was that each family did 20 hours work each weekend for a year and a half. If you were short on your hours at the end of the month there was a fine of £10 per hour. This was a tough commitment for parents and especially single parents.

In the end we earned £9,000 per family in sweat equity: the value our labour produced, so we came out of it alright. But this figure is dependent on the houses' market value being greater than the other building costs, so there was a disconcerting element of risk. There were times in the scheme when it seemed that we might end up getting next to nothing for our Herculean efforts.

The group formed from people who turned up one way or another to our monthly meetings. It was quite difficult to find people who filled the criteria and were willing and able to make this commitment. This random process resulted in a wide cross-section of hardy Londoners with people of Irish, Italian, Caribbean, African and Polish backgrounds making up about half the group. There were 3 single parents (including myself) and 17 young people. But only two people had building skills!

How could we hope to build 10 houses without building skills? The plan was that we should do this partly by sub-contracting the skilled work (plumbing, bricklaying and plastering) and partly by being trained as we went.

Difficulties dogged the scheme from the start. The site had been cleared and foundations laid by a contractor, another supplier had erected basic timber frames. Our first job, in a very wet November 1993, was to felt, batten and tile the roofs. The 'training' quickly exposed itself as a myth. Our supervisor turned out to have never laid a roof himself. With our motley unskilled workforce, a foreman who hadn't done a roof before and an architect who—we gradually realised—hadn't worked through the details, the process was extremely frustrating. The architect had been pretending to do work which he simply was not doing. After a few months and a series of increasingly tense meetings, he was sacked. From then on the job was run by the

Quantity Surveyor who, however, worked from Chichester! This saved money, but resulted in an almost complete lack of on-site supervision of sub-contracted work.

The stress of all this was, of course, absorbed by the group. We organised the work as best we could and plodded on making use of sub-contractors whenever we got stuck or too far behind schedule. There were a few bleak weekends when very few people seemed to be turning up—but overall, the group hung on in there. Looking back now, I can only admire how people weathered the chaos and finally produced houses fit to live in.

The external design had been decided at the planning permission stage, 2 years before I joined. However, it is surprising how much satisfaction can be gained from having control over relatively invisible architectural elements. We changed and improved the design of things like the ground floor structure, the dormers and the patio doors. We also had a choice, within tight cost limits, of front doors, garden fencing, kitchens, bathrooms, lighting design and the exact arrangement of internal partitions.

In spite of a complete lack of support to help people design their interiors, each house is quite unique inside, with a style that has been the result of each families' thinking and choice. This increased control adds up to a connection with your house which has quite a different quality to one obtained through municipal provision or purchase.

After the group building period when the basic shells were finished, each household was then responsible for decorating, laying floors, fitting wardrobes, landscaping gardens and putting in any special finishes and fittings to their own dwellings. One person did their whole ground floor in reclaimed maple. Two of the two-bed houses have added conservatories: these were not luxuries, the architect's plans had provided no space for a dining table! I spent some money I had on swanky materials like Italian glass mosaics in the bathroom, whilst my son and friends helped me decorate, which saved money. Other people paid decorators.

Self-build seems to hold an overly romantic attachment to the idea that there is intrinsic value in self-builders doing all the physical work themselves. In practice unskilled people will often work so slowly that it really makes more sense to hire a skilled person with specialised tools. Especially when you realise that the scheme had to have a loan of £250,000 for the construction costs, and that we were paying something like £2,500 per month in interest charges! Each weekly delay cost us £650. In this situation at least design work, supervision, canny tendering and other such 'head work', can often produce better results in terms of time and money than slogging on dutifully.

Clearly this is no magic solution to getting a house. You do need a decent wage or a bit of money in the bank to pay for carpets at the very least. But in the last two years of hard work, I've at least saved the equivalent of nearly £10,000 and got a house which has an indefinable quality which comes from such close engagement with making it happen. Beyond that, there are neighbours who are a known factor... warts and all! There is a sort of community. Because we experienced 18 months and something like 1500 hours of close contact in meetings and on site, we know each other very well in comparison to most London neighbours. This has already resulted in some very easy going impromptu events at times of seasonal festivals.

More broadly, I think self-build has a symbolic value in a modern society, which has had this core of culture, building your own house, taken from it by the process of urbanisation. Home-making is a central part of most if not all cultures. Often the reaction of people when you mention you have just built your own house is one of disbelief, based on a simplistic idea of one person doing everything alone. Our houses were built by hundreds of people. But the point is that we were at the centre of this process, even if we were screaming and shouting with frustration at times.

Housing Association self-build can never challenge the harsh financial strictures of modern life in the same way that the widespread 'plotland chalet' movement of the 20s and 30s did. This is not to say it could not play a useful role for a few people and have a symbolic role more widely.

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