

Briefing:

Alternative Housing Development in London: practices and possibilities

Friday, 15 July 2016 | 10 – 5PM | PLACE/Ladywell

Background

The UK housing market faces serious challenges. These include a lack of new supply, unaffordability across tenures, overcrowding and unsuitable typologies that are not necessarily meeting the needs of many individuals, communities and neighbourhoods. There is also an inadequate technological and policy response to key environmental concerns in the building process and product.

Compared to the rest of the country, London faces increased pressures on all of these fronts due to its higher population growth, mobility rates and land prices. It is at this critical juncture of supply and demand mismatch that alternative housing development can play a key role in helping to solve the crisis. Demand for these innovative choices is growing. The new Mayor of London has made housing an explicit priority, and we should seize this opportunity. The aim of today's seminar is to explore the potential of alternative development models to address the crisis, and to come up with actionable steps for moving forward at a quicker pace.

Definition

The term 'alternative housing' can refer to several economic, social or physical models of design and production of accommodation. For the purposes of our event, and following on from our HEIF [knowledge exchange project work](#), we categorise this rather large field in two ways (which are not mutually exclusive):

1. Experimental and utopian schemes that respond to intentional lifestyle choices, where residents are motivated by a commitment to community-driven, participative or self-managed forms of housing (e.g., cohousing¹);
2. Material and technological innovations that can improve the form, quality and future sustainability of supply (e.g., 'flat-pack' housing).

Some of these innovations are profit-driven, but at the core of most alternative housing is a commitment to delivering community-driven housing forms or using participative methods in order to foster engagement in planning, mutuality, affordability and sustainability (both social and economic through for instance, shared resources). Many schemes also espouse ecological goals in their design and research shows that cohousing communities, for example, perform better in ecological terms than conventional speculative owner-occupied housing.

¹ Our recent ESRC action research programme on collaborative housing focused on cohousing in the UK today: what works, what are the barriers to wider adoption, and what questions still need to be answered. A final report is available [here](#).

Alternative housing models can offer innovations in planning, design, build and occupation; some of these will eventually become mainstream practice. Today's event has been planned with this in mind, to offer an opportunity to share lessons across and within sectors.

Key questions for consideration during the day:

- What kinds of partnerships appear to maximise the potential for alternative housing developments?
- How can developers interested and experienced in alternative housing types and tenures be brought in more consistently into big sites to contribute to a more diverse and demand-oriented supply?
- What steps need to be taken for alternative housing typologies to be formally (and sustainably) integrated into mainstream housing developments?
- How should practitioner knowledge be captured and used in partnerships to foster more alternative developments?
- How can 'expert' development practitioners connect communities with public and private partners without undermining the autonomy and creativity of groups?
- What knowledge can local authorities share across boroughs? Are more formal sub-regional networks desirable for achieving certain housing goals?
- What support can local authorities or the GLA give to alternative developers and community groups to get off the ground more quickly and successfully?
- What can we learn from community-housing and self-built approaches now in order to make them more available in London into the future?
- How can private owners of small and medium sized sites be incentivised to make land available for alternative housing developments?
- What kinds of incentives could facilitate partnerships between housing associations and alternative developers in the city?
- How important is national government in moving these London-specific developments forward?
- How can best practices be better evidenced in/by local authorities? Is there a way to capture and disseminate knowledge about individual projects, irrespective of the owner and developer?
- Wider adoption of alternative housing is often premised on supportive planning, financial and institutional infrastructures. How can these be better designed to respond to the London housing development environment?