

Homes from housing: a study of residential change and aspirations

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Designers of housing in both the public and private sectors have traditionally been isolated from the users of the buildings. This paper describes a project which encouraged students of architecture and housing to learn something of the attitudes and aspirations of users by studying the changes made over a 15–20 year period to three housing estates. The paper outlines the approach used to gather information and includes a summary of the key findings about resident satisfaction, however, the main value of the project is considered to be the attempt to heighten student sensitivity towards the perspectives and priorities of housing users.

Keywords: residential change, user needs, architectural education

INTRODUCTION

One of the criticisms commonly levelled at architects has been their isolation from the people who will use their buildings. This is particularly true for housing in both the public and private sectors, where the client is rarely the user of the dwelling. Indeed for many architects a more detailed understanding of how people live has been regarded as an irrelevance as they believed they knew everything necessary and considered themselves to be the arbiters of good taste. Some critics went further to suggest that:

... architects maintain a collective self-image which stresses their social value to society, their role of creating 'communities' by design and their desire to serve their clients. In practice, however, most architects are more concerned to impress their fellow architects than to satisfy

the users of their buildings. For example, in designing public housing they will use their own intuition about user needs rather than making any attempt to talk to potential users or even reading relevant research findings.¹

the architect ... frequently seemed to believe that his special training and capabilities equipped him to understand user needs better than the user himself.²

The limitations and dangers of these attitudes have become apparent and during the 1980s there has been an increasing interest in a series of different approaches which can be loosely identified as 'community architecture.' Wates and Knevit³ suggest three characteristics of this new approach: firstly the need for users of the built environment to be involved in its creation and management; that the emphasis should be on the process of design rather than the end product; and that this



Figure 1. Kenton Bar Estate. Public sector housing built for renting

requires a fundamental change in the role of professionals so that they can become enablers for the people and communities they are working for.

How can we train future professionals for these new roles? New attitudes and skills, particularly social skills⁴, are required, and these can be complemented by studies of existing projects to learn how present users are responding to the design decisions taken by professionals many years earlier. The 'fit' between dwellings and the occupants will vary with factors which are changing: family needs as well as aspirations inevitably change with time, but many dwellings have limitations on their adaptability. Flexibility within the built structure is an idea which has been raised as a way of coping with this⁵, but few projects have been built using these principles. A related aspect is the personalization of dwellings in response to individual needs and desires for a home which reflects something of their own values and status^{6,7}. Observing what people do to make their houses more like home is endlessly fascinating and should offer highly instructive lessons to designers. If they change things, what do they change and with what motivation? In short in an affluent, mobile society with a relatively small housing shortage do people change their dwellings or do they move, in order to achieve a dwelling which more closely reflects their image and interpretation of the ideal home?

CHANGES IN TENURE

In Britain the situation is more complex. In 1971 only half of all households were owner occupiers with the possibility to initiate change in the dwelling as well as to be able to move and have choice in the type and location of the house. The other half of the population were rent payers, approximately 20% in private accommodation and 30% in purpose-built housing estates in dwellings rented from the local authority, which took all the key housing decisions⁸. Since the 'Right to buy' legislation was introduced in 1980, 1.2 million council dwellings have been sold to their former tenants, and now 66.6% of the total housing stock is owner occupied⁹.

This paper is an account of a short project undertaken

at the School of Architecture at Newcastle University to explore some of these issues by documenting in a comparative way the changes made over a 15–20 year period to three housing estates, and to discover something of the present residents' attitudes to their homes. A starting point for the work described here is a belief that it could be valuable to encourage students to listen and learn before they draw, and to hear directly what building users think about design decisions taken by architects.

The study was planned as a combined project involving fourth year architecture students on a 'Community architecture' option¹⁰ and a group of overseas postgraduate students (mostly architects) on a one year MA course in Housing Studies. They were joined by several architecture students from the Politecnico di Torino on the Erasmus student exchange programme making a total of 14 students from nine countries. An additional objective of the programme was to enable overseas students to learn first hand about certain aspects of the housing situation in Britain.

THREE HOUSING SCHEMES

The three projects selected for study were notable in different ways and all were constructed in the late sixties and early seventies when different circumstances and attitudes prevailed. This was a time of optimism and faith in a prosperous future where professionals aided by technology were believed to have the answers for creating a high quality built environment. The situation has changed radically over the last twenty years, but how have the ideas of designers and architects changed?

Public sector housing for rent

Kenton Bar Estate was designed by a local firm of architects well-known for their unashamedly modernist approach, and is an austere cubist design faced entirely in white. It was commissioned by the local authority as public housing for rent and was visualized as the prestigious gateway to the city from the newly built airport. Capped by a long three storey terrace surmounted by triangular dormers the estate is a distinctive local landmark (see Figure 1).

Private sector for sale

The Kingston Park estate of two storey houses dates from the early 1970s and is notable for being the first private housing in the country by a volume builder to utilize the 'Mixercourt' with shared pedestrian/vehicular access. In every other way it is an orthodox private sector estate using standard house types designed before the energy crisis: large picture windows and low standards of thermal insulation (see Figure 2).

This estate typifies housing which is generally under-



Figure 2. Kingston Park Estate. Private sector housing built for sale

stood as being popular with the general public, but looked down upon by architects as being too conventional and lacking any design flair, taste or imagination: it is safe housing. Is this type of housing as popular as the private developers tell us, or is it simply that there are few alternatives? Architects have rarely taken notice of this type of housing even though it is believed that resident satisfaction is high; our task was to test this. Can the fact that houses in these private sector estates are easily bought and sold be a real measure of resident satisfaction? What lessons can be learnt from the private developers? Do they really know what people want?

Development corporation for rent

The third group of housing was designed in 1973 by fourth year students working under supervision in the live Project Office of the School of Architecture. It was commissioned by the Washington New Town Development Corporation as the first energy conscious housing project in the region following the oil crisis of the same year. The scheme expresses its energy consciousness with tile hung mansards enveloping the front elevation to first floor level and with small windows piercing the dark timber clad walls (see Figure 3). The high thermal insulations standards have since been adopted by the Building Regulations. An additional intention of the design was to offer internal adaptability and easy extendability for residents.

DESIGNING THE METHODOLOGY

One of the objectives of the programme was to raise students understanding of research methodology by encouraging them to think through the issues and propose approaches, rather than for the staff to dictate a particular method from the outset. Despite their considerable experience and qualifications there was an initial reluctance among the students to be forthcoming in the group discussions and it proved necessary for staff to intervene more than had been hoped.

This type of participatory educational approach was a new experience for the majority of students, and perhaps as staff we had unrealistically high expectations about student motivation and commitment. However, it would have been inconsistent to have adopted an authoritarian approach on a programme aiming to explore new relationships between professionals and people, and by implication between staff and students.

Procedures for recording internal and external changes to the dwellings were agreed quickly; no doubt this aspect of the study is closer to the experience of most architects. Decisions about what sort of information should be collected from residents and how this was to be done proved much more difficult. After debating the merits of various types of approach including rigid questionnaires, the Italian students led the group into considering more sensitive as well as more selectively targeted approaches.

After discussion it was decided to concentrate on a qualitative research approach with students working in pairs to conduct semi-structured interviews on an agreed agenda of common topics. There was a consensus that it was more important to try and learn in detail from a limited number of residents rather than attempt to collect statistically rigorous data from a larger and more representative sample, particularly given the time limitations¹¹. In evaluating the programme it was felt that this decision was correct in that it certainly proved educationally more beneficial for the students to learn first hand about personal housing priorities and preferences, although in terms of generating hard research data it proved much weaker. In circumstances where a longer time frame were possible an approach which adopted both levels of data collection in a complementary way would be preferable.

ROLE PLAY

Stress was laid on developing 'listening skills' in contact with residents, and in order to allay the apprehension of those unfamiliar with this type of experience a role play



Figure 3. Glebe Village, Washington New Town. Development Corporation housing built for rent

session was introduced. This was not only about testing out the topics and how to approach them, but also about door-step etiquette, particularly as the majority of the students were from overseas countries with sometimes dramatically different social conventions. The British students made an invaluable contribution here, and some hilarious social gaffes were corrected in these rehearsals before going out to begin the fieldwork.

THE SURVEY

First results were encouraging, and much of the apprehension about making contact with residents was forgotten in the face of local friendliness. In particular the women were welcomed by women residents: 'Let the women design the houses – they'll get it right.' (Washington resident). However, unexpectedly bad weather, illness and other course commitments reduced the number of planned visits made by each group to the estates. On the Kingston Park estate few residents were local and even fewer had time for the students. In addition the times when students could visit seemed to correspond to times when residents were out or unwilling to spend time answering detailed questions. Only 27 interviews were conducted, and most of those on week day afternoons. Therefore the strategy planned to increase the reliability and representativeness of the survey results was undermined and consequently the range and quality of much of the data collected was disappointingly weak.

THE FINDINGS: RESIDENT SATISFACTION

Despite the limitations of the data clear patterns emerged regarding resident satisfaction. At the methodology stage possible resident responses were discussed and it was anticipated that the Kingston Park estate would be well liked by residents given its conventional image of middle-class housing. Conversely it was predicted that the Kenton Bar cubist council estate would be least liked, with Washington somewhere in between.

The results surprised us. In spite of its uncompromising purist 1960s appearance, the residents interviewed in Kenton Bar were proud of their housing, apparently for its distinctiveness and uniqueness. Most of those interviewed had been there since the estate was built, and had been specially selected at that time as the first occupants of this prestigious 'executive council estate.' Few had taken the opportunity of buying their homes at discounted prices, largely because of their financial position rather than their attitude to the houses. The shared open space in front of houses was frequently enclosed by a variety of fences and hedges and changes to the entrance door and lobby were common. The complaints focused on the 'quality' of the people now being housed on the estate (such as one parent families) and several physical problems: the car park courts, the frequency of repairs to

the flat roofs and the run down state of the local shopping centre. In common with the residents of the other two housing schemes, they found the kitchens too small.

The residents in Washington New Town were most enthusiastic about their dwellings. Built originally as rented housing, all had bought except where unemployment had made this impossible. Like Kenton Bar, many residents had been in the houses since they were built and similarly they identified with the appearance which was distinctive and different from the contemporaneous New Town housing alongside and the volume builders' housing behind. There was also evidence of community affinity within the small estate, with residents offering information about neighbours with whom they clearly enjoyed a good relationship.

An unsuccessful feature of the design had been electric heating specified as an important conceptual feature of the original energy saving design. Here as elsewhere this is not how it was perceived by the residents and all had been replaced by gas. In response to a commonly voiced criticism of other housing built at the time, the original design included generous areas for storage. Interestingly many of these were removed to make larger living and bedrooms (see Figure 4). Similarly there was no evidence of residents making use of the designed flexibility, indeed most were unaware of the possibilities. Otherwise apart from refitting of kitchens and bathrooms and some replacement of windows there was little evidence of other alterations, although one house had been extended in a sensitive way with matching materials to fit in with the original building. A recently arrived resident who had made considerable internal alterations before moving in remarked: 'If I can't get the house right I'll move—you know what I mean: I won't settle for anything less than perfect.'

The Kingston Park housing was the least thoroughly documented but the sample indicated that it was a place where people did not stay long. All were fairly recent purchasers and none were local people though one resident had moved within the estate to gain more room and was contemplating another intra-estate move. None of those interviewed had carried out alterations, but all complained about the small size of the houses especially the bedrooms which had no cupboard space. The respondents said they would prefer to move rather than try to tailor the house to their evolving needs. Several commented about the parked cars blocking the mixer court and it was clear from observation that the design was not working as intended.

Here as in the other estates the fear of house-breaking was uppermost in many residents minds and a frequently recurring topic in discussions. This obsession with the increasing crime rate was commented upon by several of the overseas students who felt that the issue was being grossly overplayed in the media and as a consequence many residents were suffering from a threat which was more imagined than real. The possible interrelationships between housing design and crime is a contentious issue and is certainly one which could be explored further in this type of programme.

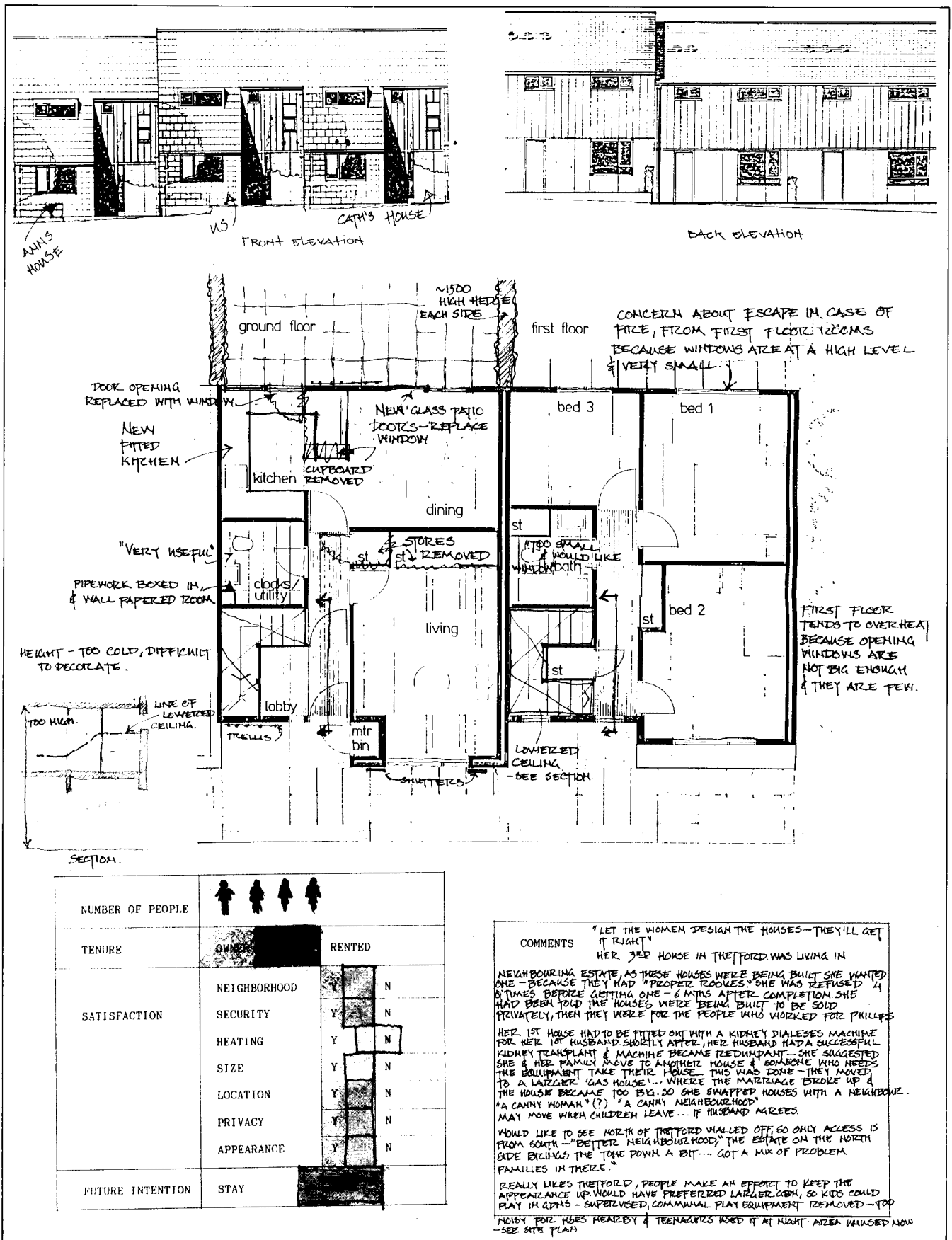


Figure 4. Washington New Town: an example of survey data of one household

There was an allegiance to the Kenton and Washington housing that had not been anticipated. Additionally the residents' responses reflected the fact that these two

estates had incorporated the more generous Parker Morris space recommendations whereas the Kingston Park housing had not. In short the distinctively different



Figure 5. Kenton Bar Housing: top, as existing (photograph); bottom, changes as proposed by student (drawing)

architect designed housing of the first two schemes seemed to be generally more acceptable to their residents than the third one. However, few of the Washington houses have been put to the test as a market commodity as most of the residents who have bought have chosen to remain.

THE DESIGNS

As a final stage of the programme the architecture students selected a design task and produced sketch proposals. These were mostly generated from specific weaknesses and problems identified by the residents and included proposals for redesigning the local shopping

and community centre and rethinking the unsuccessful car parking arrangements on the Kenton estate. Others looked at how to improve some of the design shortcomings of the Kingston Park housing.

Perhaps the most notable presentation was one which proposed completely transforming the cubist housing in Kenton with steeply pitched roofs, conservatories and vernacular windows etc. (see Figure 5). This was prompted by residents complaints about the frequency of repairs to the flat roofs, although the survey indicated that residents were attached to the overall appearance of the housing. It would appear that the student was following his own judgement and taste in radically changing the character of the housing and that these preconceptions had not been influenced by the close

contact with residents. This might suggest that one of the key objectives of heightening student sensitivity towards the perspective and priority of the users had not been achieved. Feedback from other students was more encouraging, but it must be recognized that these issues cannot be convincingly tackled in short one-off projects. Accounts by many students of their individual experiences with residents were rich in fascinating anecdotes which suggests that for some it provided a welcome opportunity for insight and fresh perspectives on issues which should be central to education in architecture and housing.

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