

Living Better

Home-working, sustainability, community and the war on noise were among the themes emerging from a round-table discussion on improving residential development, hosted by Architecture Today in partnership with Geberit. Ruth Slavid reports.



Participants

- Elliot Thiele-Smith**
Development manager, Argent Estates
- Angharad Palmer**
Head of design, Pocket Living
- Murray Levinson**
Partner, Squire & Partners
- Simon Appleby**
Design director, Berkeley St Edward
- Julian Tollast**
Head of masterplanning and design, Quintain
- Doriano Chiarparin**
Associate, Stanton Williams
- Hazel Joseph**
Associate director, AHMM
- Martin Murray**
National specification manager, Geberit
- Alex Isaac**
Director, EcoWorld London
- James Dilley**
Director, Jestico & Whiles
- John McElgunn**
Partner, Rogers Stirk Harbour & Partners
- Ruth Slavid**
Chair

It is easy to underestimate the impact that building homes to rent is having on the residential market. This is not just because rental tenants may have different needs. More important is the fact that they are so much more mobile than purchasers — and can vote with their feet. Whereas somebody who buys a property, probably at the limit of their borrowing capacity, will put up with a lot. And, when they ultimately move, the developer will know little about it.

In contrast, said Elliot Thiele-Smith, development manager at Argent Estates, “if people aren’t happy they can move”. He was talking at an Architecture Today round table discussion on residential projects, organised in association with Geberit. The participants, a mix of architects and developers (many of the latter with a background in architecture) agreed that different groups want different things, but that there are some common themes.

For example, Angharad Palmer, head of design at Pocket Living which provides relatively inexpensive homes for mainly young people, said that her purchasers are concerned about sustainability. This extends beyond energy usage to include the carbon footprint of the materials that are used. As a result of these findings, said Palmer, Pocket Living is looking not only at starting its own modular factory but also at creating a design passport for the homes, showing from where all the materials have been sourced.

But Murray Levinson, partner at Squire & Partners, thinks that Pocket Living is an exception. “Most developers don’t value this”, he said. “There is a difference if you are designing for 30-year-olds or oligarchs.”

For Simon Appleby, design director at Berkeley St Edward, “sustainability is a big driver”. His clients, he says, are interested in energy use. The developer does try to reduce overheating, and minimise water use. One problem that arises, however, from all-inclusive rental developments, said Julian Tollast, head of masterplanning and design at Quintain, is that there is no incentive for the tenants to be resource-efficient, because they are not paying for the water and energy that they use.

He also said that his company came up with the “best scheme ever” for managing energy use, when it was running student accommodation. The group of residents that used the least energy in a month got free beer and pizza!

Striving for community
Even more important than sustainability is the elusive concept of ‘community’ which, said Murray Levinson, “everybody is striving for in everything below the very top of the market”. It is a particularly important concept for small apartments, where communal spaces can provide some of the facilities that may conventionally have been within homes. Or, at least, where the existence of communal facilities makes people feel that their homes are more expansive than they are physically.

Simon Appleby stressed that such shared facilities are not just for those within the development, but for the wider community as well. For instance, he said, working in Hounslow, the developer has learnt that there are “lots of big parks, but few places to sit”. It is addressing this. “Our customers are everybody”, he said.

Doriano Chiarparin, associate with Stanton Williams, agreed. “Too often we see community as a place where people within a building meet”, he said. “But I think it happens outside, between one building and the next”.

Hazel Joseph, associate director at AHMM, reminded everybody that a physical space is not enough. “There is a difference between facilities and community”, she said. “It’s about more than just providing space. It’s about action, not just provision”. And, she added, “the point about design investment is that it’s not just about management but also atmosphere”.





“You want usability and longevity in whatever you supply; everything you touch, everything you see matters”



Working from home

Sometimes the spaces that people appreciate can be a surprise. Simon Appleby said that Berkeley St Edward created a space for people who were working from home. They enjoyed getting out from their flats to a kind of co-working space where they either put their heads down or chatted to others. But, he warned, “you have to manage the space”.

Julian Tollast said that the most successful communal space that Quintain designed was also the simplest. On its first build-for-rent building, the developer simply converted two planned apartments into lounges, which proved to be its most popular feature. The reason, Tollast believes, is because “it has a really nice garden”. He also talked about the importance of having communal spaces that can cater to a range of personalities. “Some people want to huddle together around a big table”, he said. “Others want a bar stool. And others want to book a room for a big meal”.

While instinct is helpful, it is important to get things right. As Elliott Thiele-Smith noted, “You have to be agile around the spaces that you create. Some may not work. You need to think ahead”. Heat mapping will become increasingly helpful for this, said Alex Isaac, director of developer EcoWorld London.

James Dilley, director of Jestico & Whiles, talked about the importance of getting design right if communal spaces are to work. “Culturally there is a sense of threshold anxiety”, he said. “People need to see a space that is safe”. He also talked about how well spaces with more than one function can work, for instance a lobby to a residential building that doubles as a cinema lobby. But, he said, “use classes don’t recognise hybrid uses. The whole planning process is 15 years behind”.

And of course not all developments value communal space. Murray Levinson talked about developments at the very highest end where “the buildings are about discreet entry and extra high levels of security”. Even if the buildings have shared amenities, such as a cinema, many residents will only use them if they are positive that they will have them to themselves.

Generous height

For less elevated individuals, communal spaces are important but the living spaces themselves are even more so. What makes a good space in which to live? One answer, on which the attendees were unanimous, is height. Murray Levinson first raised this issue, saying that “at King’s Cross the developer allowed us to split the section: they accepted us pushing boundaries”.

The developer for that scheme is Argent. Elliot Thiele-Smith explained that, while this approach may result in a smaller number of properties overall, they will sell faster, making the decision worthwhile. It is much more difficult, he added, to be this flexible in an area where property values are lower, such as in Argent’s ongoing development at Brent Cross on the edge of London.

Hazel Joseph agreed with the desire for ceiling height. “My worry is that some projects are too constrained, with low ceilings. They are just a place to sleep”.

A bit of hush

Alex Isaac talked about the importance of acoustics, which rise in significance as apartments become more open-plan. Argent, said Elliott Thiele-Smith, tends to design flats that are dumbbell-shaped, with bedrooms at either end of the living space, to provide more acoustic separation between them.

John McElgunn, partner in Rogers Stirk Harbour & Partners, said that “in social housing, breakout sound is most important. In some of our buildings, the acoustic separation is twice what Building Regulations require”. Murray Levinson agreed: “We are in an acoustic betterment war”. The practice frequently mocks up buildings, he said, to ensure that they behave as predicted.

It is essential, said Simon Appleby, to get the basic arrangement right. For example, bathrooms must be stacked. Otherwise, there will be water travelling across a ceiling and people will hear it.

And some people, he said, can hear anything. “We have people who have very acute hearing. They will say that they hear a train outside just because they can see it”.

Another important aspect, Appleby said, is getting the lighting control right, so that it doesn’t flicker. It should be clever, but not too clever. Elliott Thiele-Smith noted that “switches and automation must be simple. We have revisited access controls to make them easier”.

Reflecting on the aspirations that architects and developers have for residential projects, such as improvements in sustainability and acoustics, Geberit’s Martin Murray observed that “all too often they are trying to reach these high standards, but without any real guidance. If we look at acoustics and drainage there simply aren’t any up-to-date standards available in the UK. Standards for drainage, which dictate water usage, have been completely surpassed by product innovation and technology. There is a European standard for acoustics inside a building that all of Geberit’s products adhere to; no equivalent exists in the UK. We need to revisit the UK standards, and outline hard values that enable developers to work with manufacturers, to not only reach but exceed the baseline. Importantly, this would of course have a direct effect on the saleability and rentability of properties.”

Storage space

James Dilley commented that “you should have a place to put your bike. And you want a shower that pins you to the wall”. This, of course, contradicts people’s concern with saving water, although aerating showers can help. And not everybody uses spaces as intended. For example, said Dilley, people often put their laundry in winter gardens. This, though, is likely to be a failure of design.

Similarly, Elliott Thiele-Smith pointed out that if bike stores are a nuisance to get to, people will continue to put their bikes on balconies. Angharad Palmer said that the purchasers of apartments from Pocket Living are generally young and don’t have a lot of possessions. Nevertheless, she said, “they are demanding space for seasonal clothing and sports equipment. We will provide storage in future developments”. The developer is also looking at schemes to allow financially stretched residents to rent curtains and blinds. Dilley questioned another piece of conventional wisdom: most people use their ovens once a month — do they actually need them? There was also concern about bathrooms, with some attendees worrying that prefabricated bathrooms may be too difficult to update.

Attention was given to every room but this, Doriano Chiarparin warned, may mean that designers are losing touch with the real objectives. “There’s a perception that we must max out on all these things”, he said. “They can detract from the living room. It’s not about space but about quality. Space is best placed in central living areas”.

Simon Appleby summed up the feelings of many attendees by saying, “you want usability and longevity in whatever you supply. Everything you touch, everything you see matters. The client, at the end of the day, doesn’t see the effort you have put in”. ↗