

SPRINGHILL COHOUSING – A BRIEF CASE STUDY

12.12.08

Springhill cohousing in Stroud, Gloucestershire is currently the only new-build cohousing project in the UK, based on the original Danish principles. It was the brainchild of David Michael, whose offer for the site – 2 acres on a south-slope and within 5 minutes walk of the High Street – was accepted in the summer of 2000. He then went about gathering a group around him who all became Directors and shareholders in the limited company that was to own the site. By September that year, when Contracts were exchanged, some 15 households had signed up, each paying £5,000 for 5,000 £1 shares.

At this point, architects Architype were engaged to work with the group in laying out the site and designing the homes – 3, 4 and 5 bedroom houses and 1 and 2 bedroom flats. During this process it was decided to add 12 studio units to the mix. Once the site layout was agreed – positioning the Common House in relation to everything else was crucial – everyone chose their plot on a “first come first served” basis and paid their plot fee. In the case of the 5 bed houses this was £36,000, for 1 bedroom flats it came to £18,000. The money thus raised paid back David’s deposit of £150,000 and completed the purchase of the site (£550,000) as well as establishing a fund to cover professional fees and admin costs.

While more households joined the group over the winter of 2000-2001 (28 by end of March) a planning application was submitted to Stroud District Council. It had the full support of Stroud Town Council and the Chamber of Trade, who saw this as another feather in the town’s cap. However, although the planning officers recommended approval, a group of Councillors decided to oppose the application on the grounds that we “were going to eat together, would be bulk purchasing and dragging our furniture across the park at night”! The application was thrown out and the officers then had the task of dreaming up “genuine” reasons for refusal. The group appealed and simultaneously re-applied and in September 2001 we had our permission.

Meanwhile we worked closely with Architype in designing each individual house and flat type. Once a generic design had been agreed, individual households were able to customize their homes, resulting in big variations in layout and accommodation in all the homes.

At the same time we realized that we couldn’t get “self-build” type mortgages on leasehold homes (ours were all to be on 999 year leases, with each household having a share and being a Director of the freehold-owning company, a legal device that is well tried and tested), so David began negotiations with Triodos Bank for a commercial loan to cover the build cost – estimated then at £3.4M on the basis of £70/ft². Despite their excellent reputation, we found the Triodos negotiations cumbersome and eventually turned to the Co-op Bank, who could not have been more helpful. A facility was agreed and once we drew down the first monies, we all started sharing the interest payments – those who were to be living in the biggest homes paid the most interest – around £300/month.

Finding a contractor was a challenge. What we hadn't realized, and were not told by our cost consultants, was that the housing market was overheated and builders were really only interested in nice flat sites, traditional noddly-box houses and a conventional developer client (ex-accountants in smart suits!). Naturally, a difficult site with unconventional homes (we were probably the first triple-glazed housing development in Gloucestershire) and a "dead weirdy"* client, was not very attractive to contractors intent on making as much hay as they could while the boom still shone. We went through partnering, design-build and, after a frustrating year during which we almost gave up (silly quotes of £6.7M and £7.2M from two builders) we settled on a Management contract (cost-plus) with a local builder, John Hodson. The contract suffered delays and significant price hikes (from our somewhat naïve £70/ft² to £120/ft²) but, eventually, in September 2003, the first phase of cohousers moved in; by the Spring of 2005, the project was complete, with the Common House built last, contrary to our original intentions. Final build cost was around £4.2M.

Now, three years on, it all seems very normal to us but we have regular – and increasing – groups of visitors on our open days, most intent on replicating what we have achieved.

A few stats:

- 34 units on two acres; 6X5 bed houses, 6X4 bed houses, 8X3 bed houses, 4X2 bed flats, 4X1 bed flats and 12 studio units, some of which have been amalgamated to form maisonettes.
- 75 people approx, including 25 children, ranging in age from 3 days to late 70s.
- A mix of single men and women, couples without children, single parent families and families with up to 4 children.
- 1 dog and 14 cats (7 per acre quota)
- Parking is to one side of the site (1 per household in our planning approval) with the rest of the site fully pedestrianised.
- All houses and flats are timber frame with 150mm Warmcell insulation, and triple glazed. All houses have photovoltaic tiles which were monitored by the DTI, who gave us a £321,000 grant.
- We have SUDS (sustainable urban drainage system) which worked perfectly in the dreadful floods of July 2007.
- We eat together (if we wish) every Wednesday, Thursday and Friday evening, with a "pot-luck" on Saturday. We all have to cook at least once a month. Meals are vegetarian despite a majority of meat and fish eaters (it's easier that way) and cost us £2.60.
- All homes are completely self-contained and there is no compulsion to "join in"; however, the Common House is treated as an extension of our living rooms and we have 24/7 access to it.
- We are required to do 20 hours community work a year, consisting of deep-cleaning the Common House, looking after the boundaries, and other maintenance tasks.
- We have a very low turnover (4 units in 3 years), with most movements occurring within the community; only one home made it onto the open market. If we wish to sell, we have to give 28 days notice to the freehold-

- owning company of our intention to do so at a certain price (which we choose) and they have the right to put forward people from the waiting list to make an offer, which we are not obliged to accept, however.
- When homes change hands, they do so at around 15% to 20% premium over similar properties in Stroud. By being our own developer, we have gained from the notional 20% developer's profit and the value of our homes significantly exceeds the build cost.

Lessons learnt:

- Pick the professional team very carefully: we experienced difficulties in that some of the professionals didn't respect us and this, in our experience, led to less than full service in some cases.
- Don't beat the professionals down too much on their fees – you need them to be loyal enough to come out at weekends.
- Use an architectural practice to do the design but consider a seasoned surveyor to run the project on site.
- Don't use internal project managers but do use an external one.
- Don't individualise the homes – it's too much for the professionals to cope with and probably puts the price up.
- Get good advice on realistic build costs before you begin detailed planning.
- Spend time on growing the group – it doesn't work to do the build first and tip the people in at the end, despite what the Americans will tell you,
- Get the "storming" bit of forming, storming and norming over as soon as possible.
- Expect endless meetings and having to make major decisions in a hurry with very little information.
- It needs a strong, bloody-minded and very, very determined individual or small group to get cohousing going in this country, but there are now individuals and companies out there who are experienced in cohousing and are supporting would-be cohousers, working closely with developers, local authorities, carefully selected professionals and land-owners.

* Quoted from one of the opposing District Councillors

Max Comfort, Springhill, December 12th 2008