

3 Comments

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# About Alternative Housing

London's housing—of all tenures—is widely considered to be a sphere of growing inequality and unaffordability: it is the most expensive in the country, an increasing number of potential households cannot form because of the extent of housing pressure and there is far more overcrowding than elsewhere. The increased cost of home ownership and private renting has put them out of reach for many, while social housing and other accommodation options for the most vulnerable are either largely inaccessible or penalized.

This is the setting in which alternative housing logics, models and practices have developed. 'Alternative' housing includes

- experimental and utopian schemes including co-housing and self-build, as well as
- technical solutions like live/work units, so-called 'flat-pack' housing and conversions (the Mayor's Housing Strategy Report states that conversions from industrial or commercial to residential uses have contributed more than new-build to the net increase in London's dwelling stock).

While some of these innovations are profit-driven, 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, affordability and sustainability (both social and economic). Many schemes also espouse environmental goals.

of community groups, which could motivate the development of alternative physical, social and financial structures for housing. In 2012, the GLA proposed a new 'Build Your Own Home – the London Way' grant that would facilitate seed-funding for custom and self-build homes in the capital. The HCA has been particularly supportive of community-led developments and self-build initiatives through investment funds that seek to incentivise larger-scale production of custom-build projects. Its 'Community Right to Build' programme, implemented in phases, has combined financial support and planning flexibility for community groups with funding and legal obligations for local councils. At a national level DCLG has made some funding available for community self-builders; has issued guidance to councils which is intended to increase land availability; and has somewhat modified the tax regime. Most recently, DCLG has been making use of use of prefabricated off-site construction techniques, building modular passive houses for single people in housing need at affordable prices without requiring capital grant. Importantly the new Housing Zone prospectus emphasises the use of innovative techniques to speed up and diversify construction using off site construction and custom build approaches

### **What are the issues?**

Existing alternative housing practices can contribute to addressing London's supply crisis, but their role is marginal in relation to mainstream market models. We need a better understanding of what makes for success if these models are to be scaled up.

The major issue for developers of (socially) alternative housing, particularly in London, is finding a site. Alternative providers are often unable to compete with commercial developers, who will pay a price that reflects the value of standard residential development on a particular site.

'Community Right to Build' and other government initiatives are steps in the right direction. It seeks to increase the supply of alternative housing by giving local authorities incentives to bypass strictly profit-making developers in favour of community groups. But while the investment and support it provides are welcome, it raises questions regarding the way in which planning processes deal with short-

**Proposed solutions include:**

- Improving access to finance for both developers and final purchasers of alternative housing
- Identifying and removing barriers with respect to tax, partnership working and building regulations
- Creating a body of empirical knowledge about what works and what doesn't
- Making land available to self-builders and other alternative housing providers
- Educating planners about the particular characteristics and needs of alternative development types
- Including social participation and social return on investment in the valuation of housing

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