

The Colin Wiles blog

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Homes of the Future?

In 1945, in his regular Tribune [column](#), George Orwell wrote about the “time-wasting drudgery” – washing up, mopping floors – that blighted the domestic life of ordinary people in Britain. He went on to speculate about the homes of the future:

“If one thinks simply in terms of saving trouble and plans one’s home as ruthlessly as one would plan a machine, it is possible to imagine houses and flats which would be comfortable and would entail very little work. Central heating, rubbish chutes, proper consumption of smoke, cornerless rooms, electrically warmed beds and elimination of carpets would make a lot of difference. But as for washing-up, I see no solution except to do it communally, like a laundry. Every morning the municipal van will stop at your door and carry off a box of dirty crocks, handing you a box of clean ones (marked with your initial of course) in return...”

“And though it would mean that some people would have to be full-time washers-up, as some people are now full-time laundry-workers, the all-over saving in labour and fuel would be enormous. The alternatives are to continue fumbling about with greasy dishmops, or to eat out of paper containers.”

Some of that has come to pass, but most rooms still have corners and councils have so far resisted the temptations of a communal washing-up service – dishwashers have come along instead. So predicting the future has always been tricky, but this was what HQN’s [Rethinking Social Housing](#) event in London last week, tried to do.

The day’s main purpose was for attendees to take time out from the office and do some creative thinking about the forces that’ll shape the UK’s housing over the next 50 years – one of which will be climate change, the topic of HQN’s annual conference a few weeks ago, where it was pointed out that the UK housing sector is not as geared up as it needs to be to respond to our changing climate.

But last week’s conference also considered other changes that’ll shape our future. What will households look like 50 years from now? How will a more diverse and ageing population affect us? How will technology change the way we build and retrofit our homes?

To begin with, L&Q's Matthew Gardiner offered a doomsday scenario where sea levels could rise by up to 65 metres if all the planet's ice melts. In this event most of our housing stock will disappear. But the room was generally optimistic about the ability of Homo Sapiens to come up with solutions to the challenge of climate change. A case in point was the recent invention of [nose guards](#) for cattle which can absorb their methane (a key greenhouse gas) and convert it into carbon dioxide and water vapour.

Matthew pointed out that 8% of global carbon dioxide emissions come from the manufacture of concrete and that shifting to sustainable timber framed construction will be essential in the future. The UK housing sector will need to eliminate greenhouse gas emissions entirely by 2050, and become more water efficient and climate resilient, so that homes are able to withstand stronger winds and heavier downpours. All new homes off gas grid by 2025.

David Ireland, a housing veteran now at World Habitat, shared some inspiring stories from around the world of communities responding to climate change. In particular he described the Danish island of [Samsø](#) whose 4,000 inhabitants have become energy-positive over the past decade, producing more energy from wind and biomass than they consume. Yet another example of the ability of mankind to adapt to the future.

Zoe Collins and Ewelina Sorbjan described the journey taken by Hackney Council to re-start a major programme of council house building, and Julian Hart explained a similar process in Camden. In Hackney, homes had been built for the orthodox Haredi Jewish community that were larger and featured flexible walls and plumbing in hallways to allow for religious washing – a good example of the way that the sector will need to cater for a more diverse population.

Kevin Hartshorn from Vivid Homes painted a vivid (!) picture of how “smart” homes could transform management and maintenance in the future. Temperature sensors can be fitted to hot and cold water feeds and send notifications to repair centres if temperatures are too high or too low. Components that were about to break down would send a warning, and boilers and other parts of a home could “fix” themselves.

Likewise, emergency lighting, smoke alarms and legionella could be automatically monitored and become self-fixing to ensure regulatory compliance. With this level of monitoring within the home, questions were raised about data protection and the dangers of a dystopian future where tenants could be remotely monitored in terms of their habits, proclivities and whereabouts.

Which brings me neatly to the alternative, dystopian housing future sketched by George Orwell in *1984*, where a screen in the corner of your home would monitor your words, deeds and thoughts and allow an all-powerful state to eliminate any dissidents. It was pointed out that the smart homes of the future will be harvesting huge amounts of data about us, and that, in the wrong hands, this could become a dangerous tool of state control.

It will be up to everyone in the UK housing sector to ensure that the homes we build and retrofit are not only fit for a changing world – that they are affordable, dry, secure and safe – but that the technologies we introduce into them comply with our founding principles and allow everyone to live a life free from fear, insecurity and coercion.

About the author

Colin Wiles has worked in affordable housing for almost forty years, for local authorities and housing associations. For the past eight years he has worked as a consultant, working on a range of projects for dozens of clients across the sector. He specialises in governance, service reviews, research and policy work. Colin has written extensively on housing and planning issues for Inside Housing, 24 Housing and The Guardian. He is a co-founder of SHOUT, the Campaign for Social Housing.

