

The Colin Wiles blog

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Striking Gold

Last week a new council scheme in Norwich was judged to be the UK's "best new building", winning the RIBA's prestigious [Stirling Prize](#), and beating off competition from London Bridge Station and an opera house, among others. This is a remarkable achievement: not only is it the first-time social housing has won the prize, but it reflects a (perhaps short-lived?) renaissance of council house building across the country.

If you missed it, Goldsmith Street comprises almost 100 Passivhaus homes designed by Mikhail Riches, a mix of two storey houses bookended by flats with private balconies, all at social rent. There is generous space for bikes and prams, and it is car free with play spaces dotted throughout the site. The judges described it as:

"A modest masterpiece. It is high-quality architecture in its purest, most environmentally and socially conscious form...This is proper social housing, over ten years in the making, delivered by an ambitious and thoughtful council. These desirable, spacious, low-energy properties should be the norm for all council housing."

Hear, hear to that.

The Passivhaus standard means that the homes are cheap to run, costing no more than £150 a year to heat.

One resident said: *"The ceilings are really high and there's loads of storage...The boys share a bedroom but it's so big it could be two bedrooms. There's so much space that honestly you don't know what to do with it."* Residents are already reporting improvements to their mental and physical health. That is what good, affordable social housing can do.

The scheme has faced some criticism for its cost – £1,875 per square metre, excluding fees. But I have always taken the view that quality will out, and that it makes sense to take a very long-term view of social housing.

We should pride ourselves on adopting different values and principles to speculative housebuilders, who move from site to site often without much care for the long-term impact of their schemes.

I think the Goldsmith Street homes will still be standing a century from now, unlike some of the shoddy places that have been built over the past fifty years by private house builders, and, dare I say it, housing associations.

To illustrate the point, I refer back to a [blog](#) I wrote in 2015, just before the Homes for Britain rally, about the Boundary Estate in Shoreditch. It was the first big estate built by the London County Council – 1,044 flats – and cleared away a slum area called the Old Nichol, immortalised in the 1896 novel [“A Child of the Jago”](#) by Arthur Morrison.

If you haven't been to The Boundary, I suggest you take the trouble to visit. It's just a short walk north from Liverpool Street station. It consists of a number of tall mansion blocks radiating around Arnold Circus, a raised “park” that was created out of the rubble of the slums. It included a nursery, workshops, shops, a laundry and communal rooms. The quality of the brickwork and finishing is outstanding.

In my blog I went back to the original costs of the scheme and calculated that the original investment had been paid back many times over. The Boundary Estate is still going strong, 119 years later, providing decent homes for thousands of Londoners. Investing in high quality bricks and mortar makes sense in the long term.

Quality will out.

For a moment, I thought that the government had heard this message and that a genuine renaissance of council house building was underway. Consider the numbers. Back in 1953 (under a one nation Conservative government) 198,000 council homes were built in England. When I started at Camden in 1978 they were building 3,000 council homes a year, out of a total 93,000 across England as a whole. By 2013 only 840 council homes were built in England. A shocking decline.

But the removal of the borrowing cap on the Housing Revenue Account has prompted councils to come up with a range of innovative solutions to build new homes. A recent [investigation](#) by Inside Housing showed that there have been 18,999 net additions to council housing stock over the past four years and that the councils in their survey were planning to build almost 80,000 homes over the next five years.

But this could all come to an end with the shock news last week that The Treasury (who else?) has increased the cost of borrowing for public loans by 1% with immediate effect. According to the Local Government Association this could add £70m a year to the borrowing costs of councils that build new homes. Another own goal by the government, putting short-term concerns before the long-term needs of the country. In my blog I made the point that any surplus from the Boundary Estate had been reinvested in new homes and wrote:

“That is the beauty of social rented housing – tenants and taxpayers of the past pay for current schemes, and inflation wipes away historic debts. It is truly a communal enterprise that benefits everyone – the tenant, the taxpayer and wider society... There is no more profitable form of public investment than investment in real estate... The history lesson is as clear as it could be. Social rented housing works. It eases pressure on the private rented sector, it helps to reduce the housing benefit bill...and it rescues people from bad housing conditions, providing decent homes at rents people can afford. Most importantly, it pays for itself over time and becomes a valuable public asset that produces “profits” for the public good.”

A century from now I think Goldsmith Street will be proving these points, just as The Boundary Estate does today.

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.

