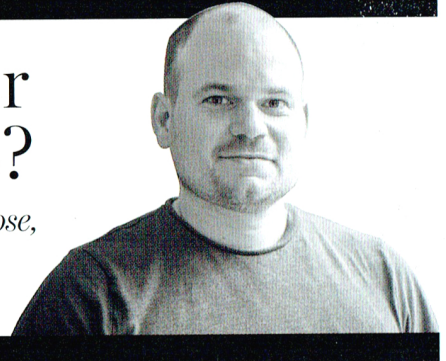


OPINION

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Isn't it Time We Turned Our Backs on Developer Homes?

With stories in the press of developer homes proving unfit for purpose, why, asks architect Paul Testa, aren't more of us self-building?



This piece was formulated on a recent train journey — as we sped towards the destination, I'd seen yet another depressing large housebuilder development loom on the horizon. The houses out of the window looked mean-spirited with tiny windows and no acknowledgement of orientation or context. The 'place' they inhabited was un-designed and clearly unloved.

The laws regarding the sale of land enable the stranglehold that the large housebuilders have on the market. Land intended for housing can be sold at the value of 'hope' — its value should it become housing — rather than its current use value. This keeps the housebuilders in control and also goes a long way to explain such high prices to the consumer.

I read recently that housing can be described as 'part commodity, part product'. The obsession in this country with house prices and with eking maximum profit out of plots of land suggests the commodity aspect is alive and kicking.

However, the development of the product itself has been left behind. No other product so central to our comfort, health and wellbeing has seen so little development, innovation or even refinement over the last 50 years than the developer home.

The UK housing market behaves so differently to almost any other; whereas elsewhere we're savvy consumers looking out for the best new phone, television or car, the new housing market leaves us with little choice and therefore, it appears, little aspiration beyond what the housebuilders churn out year in, year out.

Building Regulations haven't driven innovation either in this market. They are, of course, the minimum standards we should be building to, and they aren't moving quickly enough to push change — certainly when it comes to comfort and health. They must be better and get there quicker than the current rate of change. But when internet speed is a higher priority than energy performance among homebuyers, perhaps consumers aren't so bothered either?

You would think the quality of delivery and build would have been slowly improving year on year as housebuilders

perfect this basic product that has innovated — and therefore changed — at a glacial pace. This appears to be the opposite of reality, with repeated stories in the press of poor build quality and serious faults rendering some new homes unfit for habitation or sometimes plainly unsafe.

This all begs the question: why don't more people self-build? The biggest obstacle we come across time and time again is land. This goes back to the earlier issues with housing as commodity. Land suitable for housing is so expensive and those single plots that do become available, particularly in cities and towns, are often as expensive as land with an existing house on them.

This is why we end up looking at so many green belt homes where clients are hoping beyond hope that they can turn their low cost piece of land into somewhere they can eventually build a home. If land was less of a barrier, the

other perceived risks of self-build would be less onerous and I think we'd see many more self-builders.

The biggest thing that could be done to increase self-build take up is a change to the law on land sales. Even giving local authorities the powers to purchase land at current use rates would ensure a supply of lower cost housing land into the

market. This could be used to increase the rate of council house building but could also be released to self-builders at a more reasonable rate. This diversification of the market might even encourage housebuilders to up their own game.

Architects also have more of a role to play than they, perhaps, acknowledge. Self-build is generally seen as requiring high-end, bespoke design, but what if we started to develop simple, energy-efficient, customisable and highly refined house types that potential clients could access at a reasonable cost and could build easily and with minimal risk. How might this change the housebuilding landscape? **H**

Paul Testa

Paul Testa is an architect and university lecturer. He is an advocate of low energy design and the Passivhaus standard.

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