



Smart Hamlets: Putting people and communities at the heart of development

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Initiative Homes is a Schumacher Institute company that has been set up in response to not only the all too evident housing shortage, but also the fact those houses that we do build are often completely inappropriate. So Initiative Homes was set up to bring accessible, affordable, and sustainable homes into the mainstream. Along with our colleagues in pumpco we have developed the 'Smart Hamlets' concept.

'Smart Hamlets' is a new approach to building, growing and supporting communities. It aims to put people at the heart of the design process, meeting their needs and aspirations, rather than just dropping a bunch of inappropriate 'standard boxes' onto an unwilling community.

To really understand 'Smart Hamlets' we need to think about the motivations behind the idea. Well for me it has to be frustration... As a disabled person I have faced the out dated but embedded prejudice of a by gone era, namely, the awful built environment. Let me give you a simple example. A few years ago I was made redundant. So I did what many say an unemployed person should do. Go and find a job. So I did or tried to.

The thing is I was about to come up against something I had somehow managed to avoid to this point, my disability getting seriously in the way of my life. You see I found a company online that was working in an area I had some experience in and was interested in and they were recruiting! What luck! So I put on my best suit and with CV in hand went around to their offices to introduce myself, and that's when it went wrong. I could not even get into the building! Why? Steps! In the end I half crawled on all fours to knock on the door!!

Steps are a major issue for me; obviously, they are what I know about. They are also a very visible example of the potential impact of a poorly thought through built environment. There are many other issues in the built environment. Echoes and reverberations that make it extremely difficult for people with hearing loss – even with hearing aids; poor building and road layouts that make route finding difficult for partially sighted or blind individuals. Not only can the built environment exclude people from participating in the social and economic activities of our society it can impact on our health and wellbeing as well. These are some of the very accessibility issues that Initiative Homes has been set up to address.

We have all heard about bed-blocking, particularly in the context of the NHS coping with an ageing population. This is often down to the fact the patient can no longer effectively operate independently in their current circumstances, that there is a heightened vulnerability that could easily see them quickly returning to hospital. This will come as a shock to almost anyone who experiences such a change, especially if they have previously been highly independent.

This is often seen as a physical environment issue, and indeed this can be true; for example, if the house has a damp problem causing illness, but it can also be the case that a person may be isolated from their local community meaning that they may be vulnerable in other ways as well.

One of the issues that we face when thinking about how to support vulnerable people, is the assumption that we need to find out who is responsible. This is to miss the point, because in reality in a genuinely caring and inclusive community surely we are all responsible? pumpco recognised the need to cut across organisational boundaries to bring together public and community service providers to develop tailored support networks that best suited local needs. They are running schemes with local NHS trusts in Leeds and elsewhere in which they work with local communities to identify vulnerable people and their support networks. They then work with those people and networks to put in place appropriate technology that can breakdown social isolation and reconnect people to their communities in a way that supports safe independent living. For example, connecting people with each other and everything else they need to get things done - from personal devices and apps to professional systems and services. This in turn keeps those people out of hospital and the social care system for longer saving considerable sums for local services, but also greatly improving local wellbeing and community spirit.

Initiative Homes approach to inclusive design helps to remove physical blocks to independence and introduce the potential to get out and about for those who would otherwise find it difficult. Simply opening the door does not mean that someone will walk through it. Developing a good support network to encourage someone to walk through the door as well, greatly improves the chances that the opportunity will be taken.

'Smart Hamlets' pulls these two key elements together into one package. Good design of the built environment to create the physical opportunity and technology supported local networks to provide the social support to step through the door.

For more about Smart Hamlets, visit: <http://www.initiativehomes.co.uk/smart-hamlets>

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