



Housing LIN

Connecting people, ideas and resources

NO SPACE LIKE HOME: DECENT HOUSING SPACE STANDARDS

Nine years ago, my wife and I moved to an early Victorian house in Stratford-upon-Avon. We wanted to 'downsize' and soon found that the bedrooms in particular were smaller than we wanted in the houses we looked at. So we looked for another house. Our first thought was to buy one being built in an attractive setting nearby. To our surprise, we found that whilst the ground floor space was adequate although not large, the bedrooms were smaller than the ones we intended to vacate. On measuring the mock fitted furniture in the main bedroom we realised that it had been specially made to give an appearance of greater width. We subsequently met two furniture makers who had been contracted to make such fittings for show homes in other developments.

Since then, I have been involved as a member of the local civic society, in considering planning applications in and around the town. In the case of new housing, this is an exercise primarily aimed at maintaining and/or improving standards of external design and persuading the district council – which for several years, has had no planner appointed as a design adviser – to at least ensure that its own design criteria are upheld. These criteria include no reference to internal space standards which are not discussed with developers. And this lack of control shows.

To take an example: A newly developed estate in Stratford is selling 3 bedroom houses which have an overall area on two storeys of 66 sq m. They have two bathrooms thus ensuring that the configuration of two of the bedrooms will make them very difficult to furnish with even a modest sized bed. And the occupants will be hard pressed to work out how to include a double bed or two singles + wardrobes in the largest bedroom. At the ground floor level, there is basically one main small room to provide both eating and living space. Even one of the larger - 4 bedroom - houses in the same development runs only to 112 sq m overall (c.f. the average sized new house in Germany with around 110 sq m), which includes more circulation space + two bathrooms and a study. A result of this is that two bedroom will be very difficult to use other than as stores or an extra study.

In the context of this discussion, it is worth noting that many of the terraced Victorian houses in the older area of town which have frontages of around 15ft and which were built with two full house width bedrooms and an outside toilet are in some ways more useable (although of course lack the windows sizes). Where these have been extended to the rear, they generally offer total space of around 75 sq m. But these were built for smaller people. It is also worth noting that the Parker Morris standards which were mandatory for New Town and council houses from the mid-1960s until

1980, required a two storey, 2 bedroom terraced house for example, to provide just over 74 sq m of space.

With the introduction in London a couple of years ago of space standards slightly larger than Parker Morris standards and with the Government's recent consultation about similar standards to be applied across authorities in the rest of England, it may be that very small houses will no longer be built. But I would not bet on it given that the standards proposed will not be mandatory, will be a matter for local authorities to adopt and will be exercised through the planning system thus being appealable. The extent to which major builders appeal community infrastructure levies on the grounds that the development in question will not be profitable - quite disregarding their nationwide profitability - does not bode well.

And underlying the whole discussion of course is the problem of the degree to which the UK economy depends on confidence borne of land values which are in part a consequence of planning policies such as designation of green belt and other non-developable areas which in total area add up to more than our total built-up areas. It may be that it will only be by building lots of small houses crammed into and around urban areas, that some measure of stability will be created. But I am out of my depth on that issue.

What I do think is right is that dwellings should provide people with a decent space in which to live, as advocated in the HAPPI report. Indeed, the link with space was first strongly advanced at the end of WWI at that time for reasons of health as much as general well-being. It may be that we are now sufficiently masters of infectious and contagious diseases that physical health is no longer an issue. But emotional health matters as well. People need some internal space. Families want floor space for their young children to scramble around and play. And teenagers and adults sometimes need to sit alone with a bit of peace and quiet. Old people like me also need a bit of space – if you have to sit around a lot, the feeling of being crammed in a small room is not good and houses such as that in my first example simply do not lend themselves to modification.

As a result, if houses such as that quoted in my first example above, continue to be built, I fear that a lot of people are going to be unhappy for many years.

Peter Burgess is a former civil servant at the Department of Environment. He has had a lifelong interest in age-friendly homes and communities.

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