



## Designing for an Autonomous Community - Bruyn's Court, South Ockendon, Essex

Part funded with a grant from Phase One of the Department of Health's Care and Support Specialised Housing Fund, this multi-award winning scheme heralds the beginning of a major new programme to transform the housing offer for older residents in Thurrock. The council's programme will produce a range of housing, designed in line with the recommendations of the HAPPI report.



Written by **Tim Bell**, Director, Bell Phillips Architects, for the Housing Learning and Improvement Network

January 2018

## Introduction

Thurrock Council has explored the impact of its ageing population; there will be significant ageing of the older care groups – 50 to 85+ all of which will increase as a proportion of the population. By 2033, the population group aged 50-64 is projected to increase by 50%, and the population group aged 85 plus is projected to double. The number of people living with dementia is predicted to rise from 1507 to 2623 in Thurrock in the coming two decades.

After careful analysis of a number of sites within the Council's ownership, this site was prioritised for the provision of new housing thanks to its excellent location, particularly its proximity to the South Ockendon Centre (the new Community Hub run by a community interest company/social enterprise) which is part of the Council's wider strategy to promote community leadership and resilience, and South Ockendon's main shopping street which is only 100 metres away.

The site was originally an under-used town centre car park, which was a wasted opportunity in its central urban location, and was a poorly overlooked open area with the risk of attracting anti-social behaviour. The location of the development places the new residents into an already existing urban location, reducing their need to leave the area and providing further financial security to local businesses.

The development helps resolve the housing need for this age-group, while at the same time improving the urban fabric of South Ockenden. Bell Phillips Architects was appointed by the Council via the Scape framework, from concept design stage through to detailed planning application, and then the appointment switched to D&B contractor Willmott Dixon for the technical design and construction phases of the project.

## Design Brief

For a target age group of 55+, the brief required five 1-bed flats, seventeen 2-bed 3-person flats, and three 2-bed 4-person flats, plus a common room at ground floor, but no other communal functions or services such as concierge or on-site staff, and residents are expected to be autonomous. Design of the 25 homes therefore starts from a typology of general needs housing, but manipulates it to ensure more flexibility for accommodating people's future needs as they grow older, and the design has a particular focus on social interaction and community. Otherwise, the Council required the development potential of the site to be maximised, and parking provided at a ratio of one space per dwelling (there is very little public transport in the area) plus re-provision of as many town centre parking spaces as possible.



*Bruyn's Court Site Plan*

The proposed development benefits from a generous, usable and accessible communal garden which pre-existed behind the original car park, and which was surrounded by existing homes on three sides, and has potential to complete the enclosure of this garden by forming a fourth side, thereby making it more secure, better used, and encouraging it to become a focus for community life, for all the existing and new residents who surround it.

## Consultation during the Design Process

In terms of public consultation during the design phase, the development was particularly sensitive given that it required removal of an existing town centre car park and the site's close proximity to a number of existing dwellings.

An initial public consultation was undertaken in February 2013 once preliminary design concepts had been prepared. Particular concern was voiced regarding the loss of car parking and the impact on town centre businesses. A second consultation was carried out in September 2013 with a revised design that addressed the concerns raised and sought to mitigate the loss of the car park with additional parking elsewhere in the town centre.

In December 2012, an informal meeting was held with planning officers to discuss preliminary concepts and planning constraints, and a pre-application submission in May 2013. Following this process the design was amended, notably by reducing the roof height at each end of the building and by breaking the building into three connected 'pavilions' linked by glazed corridors, to help reduce the impact on the adjacent one and two-storey houses. These pavilions were articulated with a series of alternating pitched roofs and angled balconies which helps to reduce the perceived mass of the building. The glazed links also allow views through the building which was important in avoiding the perception that the building is a long barrier in the townscape; when approaching the building from the front, the glazed links give welcome glimpses of the trees and garden beyond. Council officers also requested that balconies on the rear elevation which are nearest to existing homes and gardens, should have screens to reduce any loss of privacy, and these were introduced as part of the vertical cladding design. The detailed planning application was submitted on 16th October 2013 and granted consent on 2nd December 2013.

## Plan Typology

Since the building is oriented north-south, the principal elevations face either east (towards the town centre) or west (towards the communal garden). The typical floor plan comprises a central corridor with single aspect dwellings on each side; this is not the ideal typology since double aspect flats would provide better variety of aspect and better cross ventilation, but on this site the double-loaded corridor and single main core (there is also an escape stair at the opposite end of the building) was the most efficient.

However, this typology was advantageous in terms of creating a community, since instead of people distributing via a number of different cores, it ensures that all residents use the same stair and lifts, where there are increased opportunities for social interaction. There is a communal garden room at ground floor; this multi-functional space is oriented to give views over and access to the adjacent garden, making productive use of an existing public asset and crafting a relationship between residents and the wider community.

Interaction is also encouraged by the informal sitting areas on each of the upper floors; these areas are located in the glazed links between each segment of the building; they are bright, light-filled spaces with aspect in both directions, and the intention is that residents use these areas as an extension to their own living rooms. These links allow more variety of views and sunlight than the single aspect apartments, and they anticipate that each space might be occupied and appropriated by residents on that floor, therefore creating a series of more intimate sub-communities within the building.



*Bruyn's Court typical floor plan (top) and ground floor plan (bottom)*

At an individual scale, careful design of each flat entrance door provides residents with an opportunity to personalise their own threshold, giving a more human and personal quality to the communal spaces; this comprises shelving and seating placed adjacent to flat entrances, naturally developing variation within the communal hallways.

Encouraging social cohesion amongst residents is obviously a desirable aim, since people feel happier and better connected. But this aim is also based on research which suggests that loneliness can be a killer which can shorten people's lives by 2 years on average, when compared with people living in a caring and sociable environment. The social connection also has potential to be a genuine physical benefit and financial benefit to the state; neighbours and friends can help each other with shopping, or manual tasks in the home, or driving someone to a doctor's appointment, and this has the potential to reduce the burden on public services when such assistance might otherwise have been provided by the public sector. The intention is that all these social connections will be self-generated by the new community of occupants, and no permanent staffing is required in the building.

## **Accessibility**

In recognising the needs of people with impaired vision, the colour scheme used in communal areas ensures that sufficient contrast is used between walls and doors, and the monotony of a long corridor is relieved by the pockets of bright daylight at the glazed links, helping people to judge distances whilst walking down the corridor, as well as making an otherwise internal route much more attractive and less institutional. And in recognising the challenges of

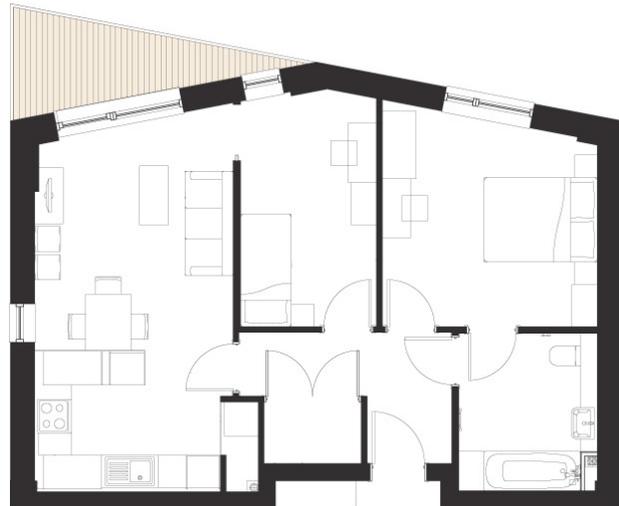
people struggling with wayfinding and orientation, the corridors on each level are painted in a different colour to ensure that each floor is distinguished from the others, and the glazed links with views either to the town centre or to the garden also assist orientation when walking in a certain direction down the corridor. People are encouraged to be physically active as much as possible; walking the short distance to the shops is a key component of this, but cycling is also encouraged via the large secure cycle store at ground floor, but in addition there is also a dedicated store for mobility scooters.

## Apartment Interiors

Apartments are flexible and adapt to the changing needs of residents. Each room in the development is spacious and designed to be wheelchair accessible. The design accepts that people moving here will have a lifetime of belongings, so rooms are large enough to accommodate a variety of furniture and there is a large amount of internal storage. There is space for a wheelchair charging point inside the apartment lobby.

A sliding screen can be opened between the living room and a second bedroom, allowing for either an extension to the living space, work room, guest bedroom, or

bedroom for a live-in carer if this becomes necessary later in life. The walls and ceilings are also reinforced for the specific needs of the residents, allowing for ceiling hoists and grab rails. In terms of private external space, each flat has been provided with a generous balcony (or terrace for ground floor units), the north-south orientation of the building ensures that all apartments receive direct sunlight at some time during the day.



*Plan of Two-Bedroom Apartment*

## Materials and Servicing

The building is clad in buff brick on the lower floors to ensure a robust and fireproof finish to the areas which are more exposed, while the upper floors are clad in a pre-treated vertical timber boarding. This boarding is also articulated as privacy screens to some of the balconies where overlooking to neighbouring gardens needs to be controlled. The pitched roof is very visible from various locations around the building, due to its faceted



*Street View of Front Elevation*



*Balcony Design*

form, and it was therefore important that the roof should comprise a good looking finish; it comprises a tinted zinc standing seam roof with a red/ grey colour which complements the warm tones of the timber and brick elevations.

The superstructure of the building is an in situ concrete frame which is robust, fireproof and good for acoustic separation between dwellings. The central portion of the roof has applied photovoltaic panels which provide power to communal areas. The development was deemed too small for Centralised Heat and Power (CHP) and instead each apartment has heating and hot water provided by a standard combi boiler, which most residents should be familiar with and helps ensure that people know how to control the services in their home. Ventilation is natural via opening windows, plus Mechanical Ventilation and Heat Recovery (MVHR). As far as possible, systems were employed with which people are familiar, since if they are too complex or too automated, they often do not get used as intended.

## Conclusion

This is a design which uses general needs housing as a template, but with a particular emphasis on creating community and catering for the physical needs of people in this age group. It is intended that the building will require minimal management from the council, thereby reducing the ongoing financial burden on the council, whilst empowering the residents to live an autonomous and sociable life.



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## Note

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And if you found this of interest, the Housing LIN has previously published a case study (no.72) entitled, Building Positive Futures in Thurrock. One of the objectives of this programme was to broaden the housing choices for older people across all tenures by ensuring planning guidance takes full account of the needs of older people, and creating opportunities to improve or remodel existing housing for older people so that it better meets their needs as they age.

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