



Housing LIN

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Viewpoint 99

Pioneer Intergenerational Co-Housing - The Cockaigne Houses in Hatfield

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Summary

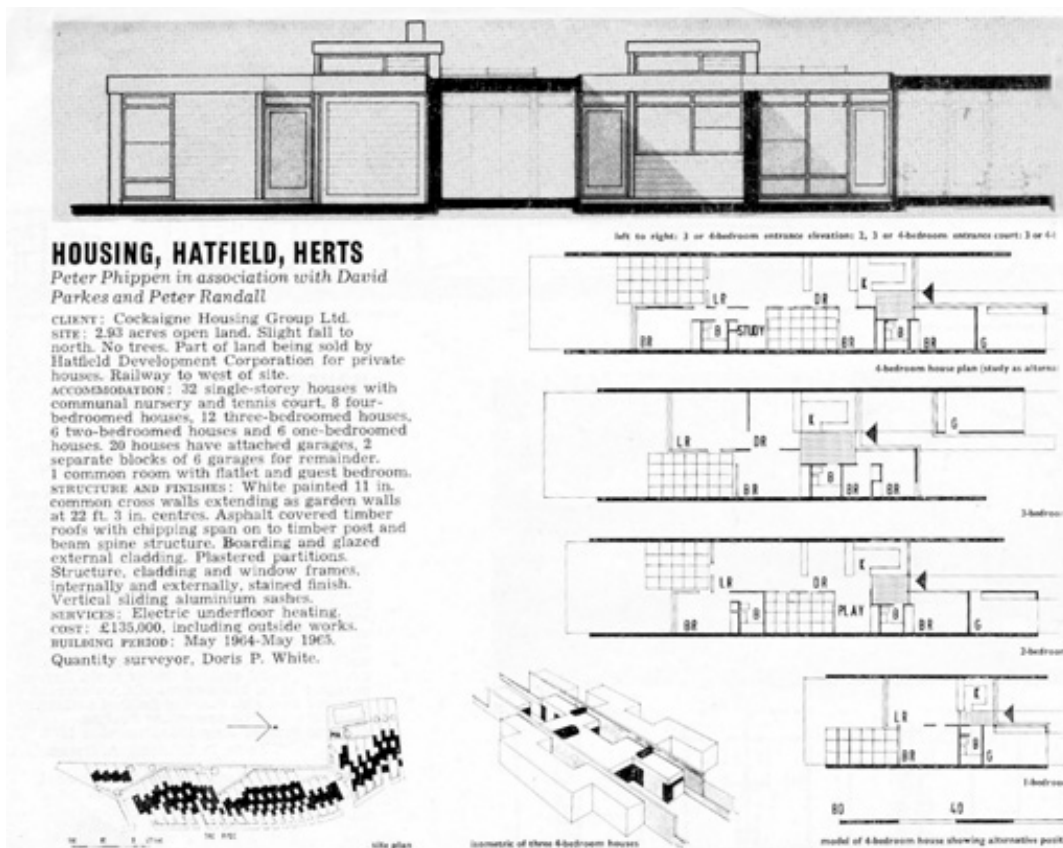
This viewpoint gives a personal account of the development of a pioneering intergenerational co-housing scheme in Hatfield, built over 50 years ago.

As recognised in the APPG on Housing and Care for Older People inquiry in 2016, it is a forerunner to the HAPPI principles and its attractive single storey design and build quality have stood the test of time.

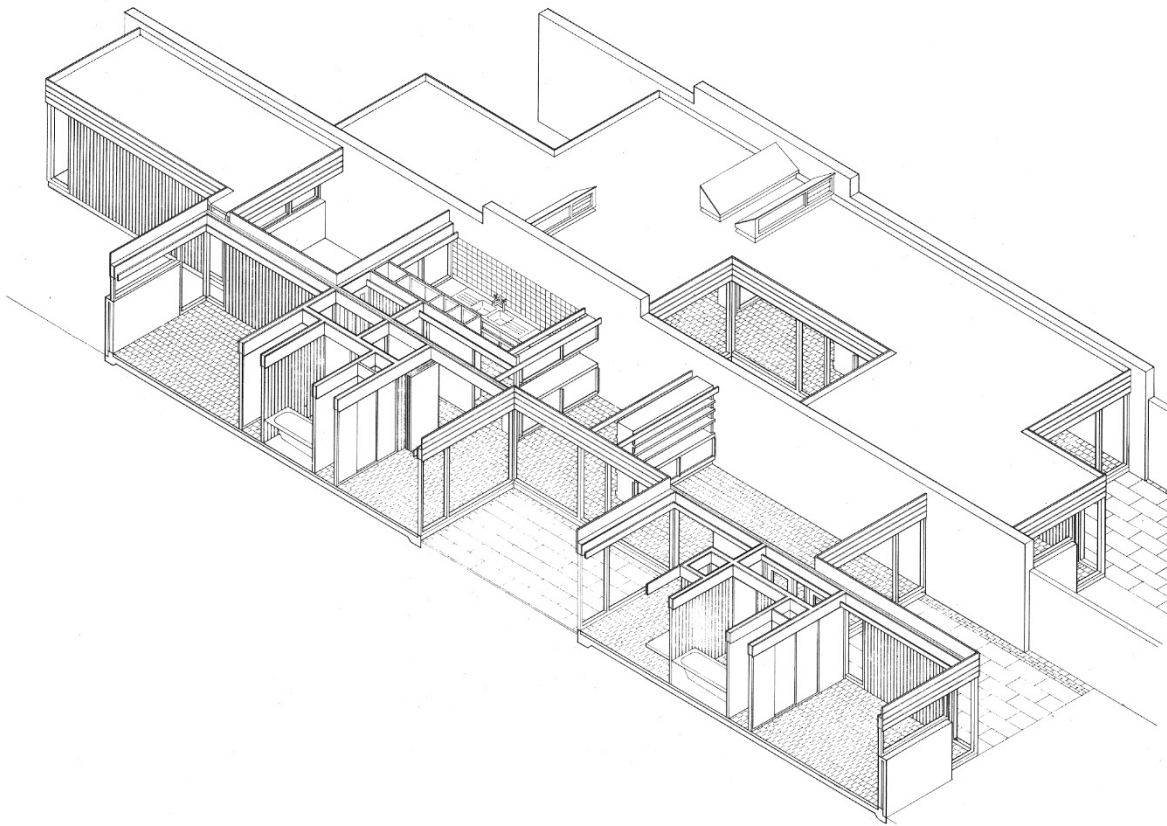
The development was not specifically designed for older people but both the adaptable design and the management are based on cooperative ideals and most of the residents are now of retirement age with 11 of the 28 households being 'downsizers'. Furthermore, the affection for Cockaigne architecturally and the adaptability of the houses to meet a diverse range of ages, lifestyle choices and disability has also ensured a low turnover in ownership.

Introduction

The grade 2 listed Cockaigne housing scheme in the Ryde in Hatfield is well known and well thought of architecturally and I have lived there for over 30 years. Completed in 1966, the scheme predates the invention of the term co-housing and it was not designed specifically for older people, but both the design and the management are based on co-operative ideals and most of the current residents are of retirement age with 11 out of 28 households being 'downsizers'. Cockaigne has been very successful in social and management terms over a long period (much longer than that of any identified 'co-housing' scheme) while at the same time providing a particularly good residential environment for older people.



The Cockaigne Housing Group - named to reflect its utopian aspirations - was formed in 1962, first as a Housing Society - establishing the rules under which we still operate - and was later incorporated as a limited company. It initially had no land and no obvious source of funds, but some officers in the Hatfield Development Corporation and Hatfield RDC were prepared to back the idea. Not only did they make a site available without a down payment, but they were prepared to fund the scheme despite its very unconventional nature, by means of a loan for construction and by offering 100% mortgages.



The social architecture

The other decisive piece of good fortune was finding architects - (Phippen, Randall and Parkes -now PRP) capable of delivering this vision. The idea was 'to work out afresh the needs of the family of today' and it is striking how utterly different the houses are from the standard early '60s products nearby. There was a serious commitment to raise the standard above that of the expensive, poor quality speculative housing then available. The target which evolved from this - to get best value from the site and to meet the original aspirations for the size of the group - was for a relatively high density providing 20-30 units, a number big enough to support a mix of house types with some common amenities, but small enough that everyone would get to know each other and run the scheme in a neighbourly spirit.

Very important to balancing the private and communal dynamics of the scheme, the privacy of each home was high on the list of objectives. Alongside this were other requirements for economy of construction and adaptability and out of all this arose the concept of narrow frontage, deep

plan, single storey terraced houses, with roof lights and internal patios to let the sunshine in. Each house would have its own frontage to the road with a garage but would connect at the rear to a hidden, shared garden running the length of the site with a tennis court at one end and the community house at the other. The designs, though reticent externally, work extraordinarily well inside and achieve an intense relation of indoor to outdoor space which was entirely new for UK housing of this time.



HAPPIstance

The needs of older people would not have been high on the agenda at the outset: indeed the concept of purpose designed houses for older owner occupiers did not really take root until ten years later and the first HAPPI report¹ was more than 40 years in the future. The single storey houses with wide doors nevertheless have an obvious appeal for older residents and the designs anticipate many of what are now established as HAPPI design principles. Notable features, in this respect, are the use of daylight coming from many directions, the extremely efficient way in which circulation routes are all absorbed into the main living areas, and the high level of adaptability. The smaller bedrooms particularly can serve equally well as additional living areas, dining rooms or offices with no change to the fabric at all.

¹ <https://www.housinglin.org.uk/Topics/browse/Design-building/HAPPI/>

A new lease of community life

The managed nature of the scheme with very small, low maintenance private gardens and larger grounds, including a tennis court, all communally maintained, is another big benefit and most important of all is the huge support available within a community such as Cockaigne with plenty of social activity and the close neighbour contact which are vital to alleviate the loneliness of old age.

Turning to legal and managerial matters the Cockaigne Housing Group Limited holds a 999-year head lease on the entire site and is responsible for its management and maintenance. Each house owner has a sub-lease and a share in the company, with a committee, usually of seven members, elected each year. The original Friendly Society rules have been amended a little but still provide the framework under which the committee operates. There is a considerable burden of work which falls on the Secretary and Treasurer, but while the rules provide for paid administrators to be taken on, it has not so far been necessary to go down this route. Service charges tend to run at about £500 per year per house – a remarkably reasonable figure.

The remit of the committee includes finance, maintenance of all the community assets and guardianship of all matters covered by the lease and the individual sub-leases. In practice this means policing the designs of extensions and alterations to the houses to ensure that the original design ethos is maintained. Much of what the committee does is defined by the terms of the head lease and sub leases and it has been an occasional source of frustration that although procedures for change of the Friendly Society rules are well defined, the lease terms can only be changed by unanimous consent. It is hard now to be sure whether the inclusion of what is in effect an individual veto on change was included intentionally as a safeguard or whether, alternatively, it was an unforeseen outcome in the drafting of documents for a totally new type of development. Recently this veto became relevant because, very unusually among managed schemes, Cockaigne had no sinking fund arrangement. Getting all the agreements in place to establish such a fund was a long and arduous business.

Another flaw in the management structure which became apparent very early on was that eligibility for the management committee was restricted to shareholders, which in the sixties, when joint ownership of houses was less common than now, effectively meant men. A solution here was to set up a parallel social committee, much less constrained in its operations, dedicated to fund raising and the organization of social events and largely run by female members.

A thriving community

Unsurprisingly, the original residents were predominantly young professionals. 24 houses out of the 28 were taken by couples who already had, or were soon to have, young families and this first generation were fired by the cooperative concept. The group's original aspirations were many and varied with talk of swimming pools, shared boats, and even a shared holiday home. Even without these the community life in the early days was a defining feature of Cockaigne but was not pursued dogmatically and suggestions that the group would be able to blackball subsequent purchasers or take a levy on enhanced resale values were firmly put aside.

It would have been in about 1970 that Cockaigne reached its peak in terms of population (about 90 including children) and of its cooperative character. Parties were frequent and lively involving many friends from the surrounding area, the nursery school flourished, tennis and volleyball tournaments brightened the weekends and much of the maintenance was done by in-house working parties. Shared meals and joint excursions were regular events facilitated by a well-organized babysitting circle. The strength of the personal bonds developing from all of this are well attested by the large numbers of former residents who still attend social functions.

This affection for Cockaigne and the remarkable adaptability of the houses have also ensured a very low turnover in ownership. After more than 50 years there are still 3 original owners in place with up to a dozen others who have been owners for more than 25 years. Not so long ago it looked likely that what was originally a utopia for young families would become a de-facto retirement community, but this shift has reversed, and recent incomers have all been younger couples. Currently we have 18 pensioner households and 10 of working age - some with small children - and the management of the scheme has also passed from the old guard to the younger generation.

The social life also still thrives with the community house in regular use for quizzes, management meetings, U3A events, parties, yoga classes, a gardening club, informal lunches and shared dinners. About half of the current owners participate on a regular basis. The community house was originally designed so that it could easily be sold off as a dwelling if things didn't work out but in fact it became necessary fairly early on to extend it and it is still regularly filled when groups of forty or so share an evening meal.

Two formerly important uses have disappeared. The nursery school moved out in 1993 and through process of time the function of the house as an informal youth club where the teenage children could 'hang out' and play table tennis, has also gone but the small guest flat (it has a bedroom, bathroom and kitchen) continues to be very well used as a facility for residents and provides a good source of community income from long term lets.



Personal reflections

Looking back now on the elements which have contributed to the long-term success of Cockaigne, there are a few things which stand out.

The balance achieved both architecturally and managerially between community ideals and the needs for individual family privacy is about right and has contributed hugely to the on-going success of the scheme. The size of the scheme helps here; small enough to engender a real feeling of community but large enough that personal frictions can be absorbed.

The decision to allow complete freedom in the onward sale of houses was also important. The character of any housing scheme will change and develop over time and trying to prevent or influence this would I think have been a mistake. Over the life of the scheme the average age of residents has gone up by at least 30 years, but this hasn't been a problem.

The architectural quality of the scheme has been a huge factor and the extraordinary adaptability of the houses have been of vital importance providing for the changing needs of the older owners but also attracting newer, younger purchasers more recently.

The administrative set up, drafted from first principles, has worked well on the whole and the light-touch approach has meant that the management can be handled by volunteers. The drafting of the lease to give an individual veto on any change was, in my view at least, a matter for regret. Perhaps it was simply an oversight.

The community life is another vital ingredient but, importantly, it has never been over-assertive.

Maybe in another fifty years the community house will have been sold and the management will be carried out by commercial agents but all the signs at the moment are that Cockaigne, because its original aspirations and design were inclusive and well balanced, is in excellent health. It is a remarkable pioneer of co-housing and intergenerational design.

Note

The views expressed in this paper are those of the author and not necessarily those of the Housing Learning and Improvement Network.

About the Housing LIN

The Housing LIN is a sophisticated network bringing together over 25,000 housing, health and social care professionals in England, Wales and Scotland to exemplify innovative housing solutions for an ageing population.

Recognised by government and industry as a leading 'ideas lab' on specialist/supported housing, our online and regional networked activities, and consultancy services:

- connect people, ideas and resources to inform and improve the range of housing that enables older and disabled people live independently in a home of their choice
- provide insight and intelligence on latest funding, research, policy and practice to support sector learning and improvement
- showcase what's best in specialist/supported housing and feature innovative projects and services that demonstrate how lives of people have been transformed, and
- support commissioners and providers to review their existing provision and develop, test out and deliver solutions so that they are best placed to respond to their customers' changing needs and aspirations

To access a selection of related resources on co-housing, visit our dedicated pages at:

<https://www.housinglin.org.uk/Topics/browse/Housing/HousingforOlderPeople/Cohousing/>

And for more information about how the Housing LIN can advise and support your organisation on community-led approaches to shaping your 'offer' for an ageing population, go to:

<https://www.housinglin.org.uk/consultancy/consultancy-services/>

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