

“YET ANOTHER APARTMENT BLOCK...?!” A CRITIQUE OF HOUSING PROVISION IN CITIES, AND QUALITIES THAT MAKE URBAN HOUSES DESIRABLE.

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INTRODUCTION

The repopulation of UK cities over the last three decades has been dramatic, transforming many urban areas beyond recognition; city living has become an ingrained part of our culture. However, with providers building woefully limited choice, opportunities to live in these places are restricted to those whose needs are catered for by a very small range of dwelling types.

Consider the changing profile of Manchester. In 1987 the city centre had a population of three-hundred;¹ by 2001 this had increased to over eleven-thousand,² and in 2011 was almost eighteen-thousand³ – a sixty-fold increase in twenty-four years. This census data also reveals that the city’s central area is, predictably, largely a habitat for the young; the mean age is twenty-seven, and the largest age group is ‘twenty to twenty-four’ (thirty-five percent), with ‘twenty-five to twenty-nine’ next (twenty-two percent).⁴ Crucially, however, consider the range of different dwelling types that accommodate these people. Unsurprisingly, ‘flats, maisonettes and apartments’ account for the largest proportion, but at over ninety-eight percent their pervasive domination is startling.⁵

Manchester City Council (MCC) recognises the need to diversify the housing offered in the city.⁶ Its planning guidance identifies that the pattern of need for dwelling sizes differs greatly from the current mix of housing, and cites a resident survey which finds that fifty percent of households planning to move desire a three-bedroom home or larger.⁷ MCC argue that future provision should recognise such aspirations for larger accommodation, and proposes a shift in the mix which would more than double the proportion of dwellings with three or more bedrooms; a condition arguably more suited to houses than flats. Similarly, following statistical analysis of new housing in London, Rae concludes that the balance of supply is far too skewed towards flats over other dwellings types.⁸

Just as zoning came to be an inappropriate strategy for planning policy – resulting in banal, mono-functional areas – a restricted palette of housing undermines variation in both the built fabric and the demographic profile, and restricts options for those who would like live in cities. Recent research has revealed that age segregation has worsened over the last twenty-five years, both between cities and rural areas, and within cities themselves.⁹ As Purves argues, we need a diverse mixture of inhabitants in cities¹⁰ – and, therefore, the dwellings to accommodate them. When describing a recent Urban Splash development Bloxham highlighted a lack of diversity in new residential stock, describing how their traditional customers – living in apartments – would ultimately move to houses in the suburbs; their *hoUSe* development in New Islington, Manchester aims to provide for people who want to stay in the city.¹¹

The need for houses is not only to provide for diverse demographics, but also so those within the existing demographic can start a family or house-share, or for those who want more outdoor space than a narrow balcony. Apartments are an essential dwelling type; however, cities should have a rich tapestry – and configured appropriately, houses contribute to a more varied and nuanced urban grain.

This paper discusses attributes that contribute to the appropriate design of houses in urban areas. Although Manchester is drawn on to interweave demographic and typology statistics, planning policy and examples – it could equally apply to other UK cities.

WHAT ARE THE CHARACTERISTICS OF URBAN HOUSES?

Towers has argued that if there is to be further revival in urban housing it is essential to gain an understanding of the forms which are likely to succeed.¹² Whilst all dwellings have many common attributes, it is argued here that the following are three principle characteristics which make houses typologically distinct from flats: private outdoor space, such as a yard or garden; an individual, direct threshold to the street; and appropriate form and massing. Each of these characteristics has been analysed in turn, focusing on how their design might contribute to making houses appropriate in urban contexts. There is no claim that these are exhaustive, but within the scope of this paper they constitute a starting point to discuss the contemporary design of houses in cities. The rationale behind choosing these characteristics is also explained, drawing on research conducted into housing needs and expectations, and reference to housing policy.

The discussion is illustrated with examples. Some were chosen for being well-established precedents of urban housing. Others are contemporary projects, which have been carefully selected on the basis that they each embody at least two of the characteristics being explored, and collectively encompass both public and private sector provision. A visit to each of the examples illustrated deepened understanding of their design, following which they were critically dissected to identify how they embody the characteristics. The architects' descriptions of each project on their website provided further understanding of their design ideas.

Private Outdoor Space

The provision of external space in apartment blocks seldom extends beyond slender balconies; occasionally a communal garden. However, a key characteristic to a house is private outdoor space, such as a garden or yard. A survey conducted by Ipsos MORI for the RIBA researched the needs and expectations of housing in the UK public,¹³ and found that most participants reported the importance of outdoor space. A report by the Commission for Architecture and the Built Environment (CABE) studying attitudes among homebuyers highlights preference for private space over shared gardens, and families in particular value gardens or private outdoor space highly so that children can play unsupervised.¹⁴ Significantly, the Ipsos MORI survey found that level of urbanity also has an influence, with outdoor space most important to those who lived in highly urbanised areas, and who did not currently have a garden or outdoor area in their property.¹⁵

The *1 Ellesmere Street* project in Manchester's Castlefield, shown in Figure 1, is a rare example of a contemporary urban townhouse development. Designed by Ollier Smurthwaite, these houses are a notable variation from the plethora of apartment blocks which surround them. Like Corbusier's proposal that flat roofs be utilised as gardens,¹⁶ each townhouse provides its occupants with outdoor space in the form of a roof terrace; a louvred screen creates privacy from the adjacent houses and apartment buildings. Crucially, this project addresses the need for private outdoor space – often perceived as a prerequisite in housing for families – whilst maintaining the rigour and density of the traditional terrace. Because of the urban setting, where light levels are better higher up due to narrower street widths, the accommodation has been inverted; bedrooms and home offices are located on the lower two levels with living accommodation above.¹⁷



Figure 1. Roof gardens provide private outdoor space atop houses at 1 Ellesmere Street. Image by Ollier Smurthwaite, with permission.

The 1996 *Borneo-Sporenburg* project for 2,500 dwellings on derelict docklands in Amsterdam sought to provide a reinterpretation of the traditional canal house; one innovative attribute was the inclusion of private outdoor space for each dwelling. The master-planners West 8 proposed that three-storey houses be oriented toward outdoor space in the form of patios and roof gardens.¹⁸

Designed by the architecture studio FAT for Manchester Methodist Housing Group, the *Islington Square* development provides a traditional garden and patio to the rear of the houses. However, an L-shaped dwelling plan enabled an outdoor yard to also be incorporated – providing private outdoor space both front and rear. As Figure 2 shows, the yard is hidden from the street behind timber doors; these are set into a single-storey wall which ties the front façades into a continuous elevation, thus creating the appearance of an unbroken terrace at street level.



Figure 2. Islington Square, Manchester. External front yards are hidden from view by timber screens, lending the terrace a mews-like quality.

These examples demonstrate that the traditional garden or yard can be ingeniously reinterpreted. Creative thinking has enabled these projects to incorporate private outdoor space, thus providing for

those whose needs are not met in apartment buildings whilst also addressing issues such as high plot density and maintaining continuity of form and street façades.

A Threshold to the Street

In the Ipsos MORI survey of housing needs and expectations the security of a home was an important consideration, and participants talked about security in terms of the design of their homes.¹⁹ The CABE report highlights that the design of the interface between public space and the private space of the home is crucially related to many issues raised in surveys on homebuyers' attitudes, including both privacy and security.²⁰ Similarly, MCC's draft *Residential Quality Guidance* identifies the importance of threshold spaces to protect the privacy of the ground floor and provide necessary separation between residents and the public realm, and highlights that the depth of the threshold is critical.²¹ Clearly the articulation of the threshold between public and private space is key in creating a condition of separation, and thereby a sense of security and privacy.

Most apartments are accessed via communal circulation; these atriums, stairwells and corridors provide a buffer – semi-private space mediating between public and domestic space. Houses are characterised by a direct threshold to the street, and the sense of separation between the public realm and the dwelling cannot be established through such spatial detachment; instead, it must be articulated through the experiential qualities of the threshold crossed between public and private spaces.

In the Georgian terrace – an exemplary precedent of row housing – the dwelling is often both set back from and elevated above street level; this heightens the sense of threshold between public and private realms, illustrated in Figure 3a. In Brooklyn, New York, Brownstone-style townhouses are another comparable precedent (Figure 3b). The elevated ground floor not only establishes a hierarchy of private space over public, it also inhibits sightlines into the dwelling thus increasing privacy.²²



Figure 3a. A Georgian terrace, Liverpool, provides a strong threshold between the street and the dwelling.



Figure 3b. Brownstone-style townhouses, Brooklyn, provide a similar separation between public realm and private space.

The equivalent transitional experience can be interpreted into new housing. At *1 Ellesemere Street*, shown in Figure 1, each front door to a house facing the street is set back from the pavement and accessed via a small flight of steps – similar, but smaller in scale, to the Georgian and Brownstone terraces above. The frontage of each house is also screened at low level by metal railings and planting.²³ This creates a subtle sense of separation between the street and dwelling, adeptly achieved in a dense development on a constricted plot. Given the inverted accommodation, it also provides an important buffer to bedrooms facing the street on the ground floor.

Due to contemporary requirements for accessibility, a change in level between street and dwelling is not always easily replicated. The *hoUse* project in New Islington – designed by ShedKM – has a level entrance that is subtly articulated, resulting in a nuanced threshold between public and private spaces. Each terrace is set back from the pavement or canal-side path, with planting to screen the frontage at low level; the threshold is reinforced by a low-level screen between each house, as shown in Figure 4, and by the first-floor balcony projecting over the front door.



Figure 4. Setting the terrace back from the public realm, and the inclusion of planting, screens and projecting balconies over the entrance, reinforces the sense of threshold for ShedKM's hoUSes.

Appropriate Form and Massing

There is an imperative to ensure appropriate massing, scale and density when designing houses in cities, exemplified by some woefully inappropriate low-rise and low-density projects built near urban centres. Hatherley views swathes of inner-city housing in Liverpool as highly unbecoming, arguing that these semi-detached houses and bungalows in cul-de-sacs signify an undignified attempt to mimic suburbia.²⁴ Clearly such low-rise and low-density models are untenable and undesirable in urban areas for many reasons.

At the other end of the massing debate, Manchester's draft *Residential Quality Guidance* identifies a recent shift toward larger-scale massing due to the numerous apartment blocks; it points to the way that differences in scale interrelate with one another as one of the interesting characteristics of the city,²⁵ highlighting the importance of counterpoint to the larger scale of apartment blocks. Similarly, the recent housing White Paper recognises the desirability of mews houses and terraced streets, and considers that these forms may be preferable over high rise in order to reflect the character of an area and its local housing needs.²⁶

Interestingly, CABE identify changing views on three-storey dwellings in attitudes among homebuyers; earlier surveys reported that townhouses were seen as impractical, whereas a later investigation reported that families saw appeal in the idea of multi-level townhouse living.²⁷ Their research also suggests that whilst higher density housing is often perceived negatively, building higher buildings along wider streets – such as the Georgian housing in Figure 3a – could be effective in producing positive associations with higher densities.²⁸ CABE also point to research that shows buyers increasingly want something other than a standard housing estate, and identify a return to more enduring forms of housing such as streets of townhouses, and addressing density through terraces instead of detached housing and building at three storeys instead of two.²⁹ Hatton also argues that there is much potential for renewal of the terraced row – the pervasive English urban house type.³⁰

There are notable examples of contemporary interpretations of the terraced form in urban areas, such as FAT's *Islington Square*, dMFK's *Guest Street*, and ShedKM's *hoUse*. Hatherley suggests that whilst *Islington Square* and *Guest Street* present much creative thinking, their low-rise form is at odds with the urban fabric that surrounds them.³¹ Perhaps to address this, in many places *Islington Square* appears as three-storey terraces rather than two – as can be seen in Figure 2 – giving the houses more scale. ShedKM's *hoUse* project – sitting between *Islington Square* and new apartment blocks – goes

some way to mitigating against the situation which created Hatherley's consternation, through a mixture of two- and three-storey terraces, with the latter facing a new five-storey apartment block across the canal.

One of the most creative massing solutions looked at here is the *1 Ellesmere Street* project. Its forty-nine three- and four-storey townhouses have been seamlessly integrated with twenty-two apartments. Consequently, the height of the development is comparable with the surrounding old mill buildings and contemporary apartment blocks. This is aided by the louvred privacy screen around the roof gardens, which at a full storey in height makes the four-storey block appear five.

Houses – even terraces – might be considered inevitably less dense than apartments; consequently, it could be argued that they are profligate in land use and therefore less sustainable. However, with a site of less than half a hectare, the *1 Ellesmere Street* project achieves a density of more than 170 dwellings per hectare. Furthermore, the argument being made here is for a variety of dwellings that provide for a wider spectrum of society – also an inherent quality of what should be understood as 'sustainable'.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

There is no single solution to the problems of housing in this time of crisis. It is well established that not enough new housing is being built in the UK, and the issue of where those dwellings are most needed – and can be built – is debated at length. However, a less frequently discussed facet of the conundrum is whether the appropriate types of home are being built. Apartments are a vital part of residential provision in cities, and fulfil the needs of a large proportion of people who desire to live there. However, the pluralism and complexity of cities should not be dulled by repetitious replication of a single typology. Broadening the types of dwelling will create a richer urban grain and more choice for those who want to reside in urban places. Some might argue that as people grow older and start families they will inevitably want to move out of the city; however, whilst that might be true for many, such broad-brush presumption is countered by the projects discussed above.

According to Towers, the provision of apartments versus houses is an issue debated frequently, and it has much to do with established mores and expectations. Encouragingly, he goes on to argue that many European cities show that both forms can achieve good urban qualities and both can be successfully built at relatively high densities.³²

Affordability is invariably an issue, and particularly for houses in cities. Current financial models mean that the land cost per unit would be higher for houses, as apartments provide greater distribution across a larger number of dwellings. This paper focuses primarily on design issues in the provision of different housing types within urban areas, and it is beyond its scope to explore the ramifications of affordability. However, compelling arguments have been made elsewhere that the affordability crisis demands a radical rethink of land procurement, and potential strategies are proposed to address this.³³ The argument for variety and diversity of housing lends weight to these calls for significant rethinking at policy level.

MCC's argument that future provision should at least double the proportion of dwellings with three or more bedrooms, arguably more suited to houses than flats, is seen as especially important in intermediate (delivering affordable home ownership options) and social rented housing.³⁴ It might be thought that houses in urban areas would largely be the preserve of affluent private ownership, however the examples here illustrate that houses in urban locations can be provided across both the public as well as private sector, notably *Islington Square* and *Guest Street* in New Islington.

There are certain attributes that make houses typologically distinct; to provide a credible and appropriate alternative to apartments, houses in urban contexts must embody these. Of course, houses with innovative private outdoor space, thoughtful articulation of thresholds and appropriate massing will not encompass all that is required, but would go a significant way to ensuring that their design embodies qualities that make them appropriate for their context. Exemplary precedents of traditional forms provide a fertile source of inspiration for this, and the projects discussed above eloquently

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demonstrate creative interpretations of these characteristics of the traditional form. They do not provide definitive solutions, but show what is achievable in providing contemporary houses that are appropriate within cities.

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