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Saturday
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The Guardian

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Review



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Eco-friendly of Tunbridge

Yet another journalist aims cheap shots at Tunbridge Wells (Tension builds at millennium village, June 30), suggesting that it's universally reactionary rather than possibly a bit revolutionary.

Jonathan Glancey should have done his homework: Tunbridge Wells has the UK's most lauded eco-friendly house. Michael Winter's Boundary House won the 1996 Riba house of the year competition and is a best-practice magnet for architects, planners and environmentalists.

The Boundary House, designed to respect its urban fringe location, uses strategically located piles to minimise site damage, wood from both sustainable resources and preused, and recycled newspaper insulation, while nearly 100% of its grey water is filtered, treated and reused. Triple-glazed windows and heat-exchangers complete its cost-effective and attractive construction.

Much of the building materials had to be sourced abroad, as Britain lags far be-

hind in environmentally and socially aware housing. But then what can you expect from decision-makers who predicted that Thamesmead would be the envy of Europe?

C A Tyrrell

Tunbridge Wells, Kent

● Two-thirds of my garbage is food or paper and feeds a warm compost heap between layers of dry grass or straw that disappears quickly into the local insects' diet; my local wildlife park has a compost pile that I can feed. We don't need to burn rubbish (Money's burning, Society, June 30). Natural methods, with more encouragement, could halt inner city blight.

A local artist in Islington made a bid for the £18,000 spent on gardening in his estate and used the money to foster organic plots. His ideas are spreading into other estates. One in the Midlands grows so much that they sell their organic vegetables in a self-managed grocery store.

Faith Kenrick

London

guidewednesday Eight pages of the best television, cinema and entertainment listings in G2

45p

Wednesday

June 30 1999

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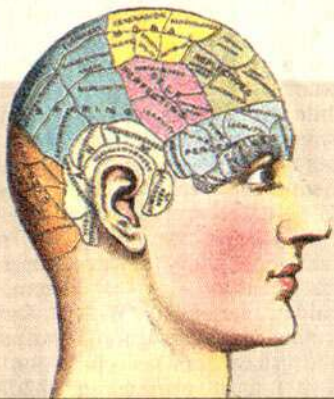
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Newspaper

of the Year

The **Guardian**

**Are you
worth
your IQ?
In G2**



**Myjet ski
holiday
nightmare
In G2**



**Alan
Ayckbourn
In G2**



and in
society
71 pages
of jobs

Architect quits £250m showpiece project amid accusations of 'dumbing down'

Tension builds at millennium village

Peter Hetherington
Regional Affairs
Correspondent

The government's showpiece millennium village project at Greenwich in south-east London was thrown into chaos yesterday when the main architect resigned, claiming his designs had been undermined by disagreements and conservative forces in the building industry.

Developers and architects clashed over claims that the £250m scheme next to the millennium dome had in effect been "dumbed down" and bore no relation to the original concept.

With the project already well behind schedule, the firm which won an architecture competition from 400 entries only 18 months ago claimed there had been a "steady process of attrition, whittling away every aspect of the winning scheme."

The 30-acre village, on a former gasworks site, was meant to pioneer fast-track building techniques in Britain with prefabricated, energy-efficient homes.

The site was cleared and prepared by a government regeneration agency, English Partnerships, at a cost of around £30m then handed to developers - with the agency confident of recovering its costs when houses were sold and a hotel was completed alongside a large Sainsbury's Homebase store.

At the heart of the dispute is a disagreement between traditional and modern architecture. The London-based Hunt Thompson Associates (HTA) strenuously pushed the case for steel and prefabricated concrete construction - a modern system-building technique that is widely used on the continent.

This eliminates the need for bricks, regarded as old-fashioned and environmentally unfriendly because building clay comes from quarries which disfigure the countryside. Ben Derbyshire, a director of HTA, said that, to his horror, bricks were now being used at Greenwich, making buildings appear dated.

But there appears to be wider disagreement over the social mix of the housing. While modern housing architects want private and rented housing to appear indistinguishable - with owners and tenants mixed together - developers argue that houses are difficult to sell alongside rented homes.

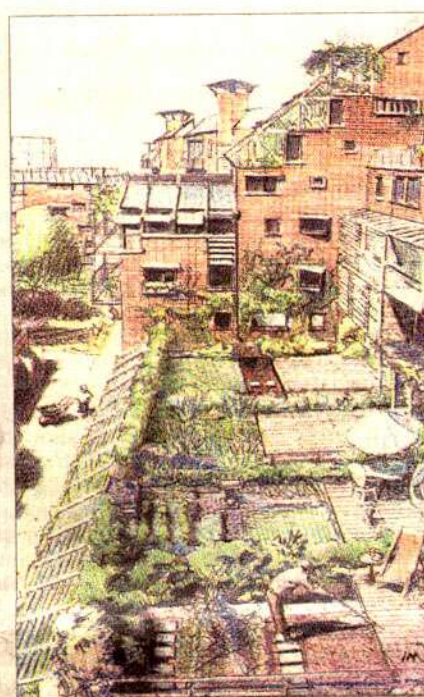
Crucially, the village is meant to incorporate a "social mix" with high-earners in expensive houses living alongside lower-paid families in rented homes. It is a concept championed by the veteran Anglo-Swedish architect, Ralph Erskine, who has produced a master plan for the Greenwich site. Last year he told the magazine *Building Design*: "It's not all plain sailing. It's slipped quite a bit."

Mr Derbyshire claims the social mix concept has been all but abandoned. "They plan to cluster the poor well away from the rich," he said.

This charge is strongly de-



The original designs for the village, as envisaged by architects Hunt Thompson Associates, which used steel and prefabricated concrete to create energy efficient homes for the 21st century



nied. The developers say that more than 200 out of 1,400 homes will go to lower income families.

In a resignation letter to the chairman of the panel which ran the design competition, Mr Derbyshire said the project had been dogged by disagreements between architects and developers. This had resulted in it becoming "a routine residential development following established housebuilder practice."

'It is now a routine development following established practice'

Little remained of the original proposal to form an integrated joint venture company "to carry through the vision ... conventional house building norms have been followed, with separate sites ... separate teams, and the left hand not knowing what the right hand is doing."

Alan Cherry, head of the Brentford-based house-builders, Countryside Properties, who chairs a joint company overseeing the Greenwich village site, said HTA's position was terminated after they received a resignation letter from Mr Derbyshire.

While he had great respect for the architect, others in the development team found relationships difficult. "The compatibility of people is important and they were not getting on."

Nevertheless, Mr Cherry - a member of the government's urban task force - said he had every confidence that the project would provide an excellent example of how to regenerate old industrial areas. Yesterday, launching the final report of the urban task force - chaired by Lord Rogers of Riverside, architect of the millennium dome - Mr Prescott said: "This shows how we can bring together for the 21st century communities that can live in modern, energy-efficient houses with access to schools, shops and other services."

But Mr Derbyshire claimed: "It is massively behind schedule. There was supposed to be a number of buildings on the site for the start of the [millennium] celebrations."

Leader comment, page 17

Goodbye future, hello toytown

Jonathan Glancey

News that Hunt Thompson Associates, executive architects of the millennium village at Greenwich, has thrown in the towel and left the project to developers should come as little surprise.

Without the architects, the much-vaunted project - nothing less than a revolution in urban housing - will go pretty much the way of most new medium-to-low-cost housing in Britain: decent but dull and about as revolutionary as a retired major pruning roses in a mock-Tudor cottage in Tunbridge Wells.

There is no cause for Schadenfreude; the village was a brave and noble idea that has been whittled down by the developers, Countryside Properties and Taywood Homes (a subsidiary of Taylor Woodrow) to the point where there was nothing for the architects to do but resign.

This is doubly sad because Hunt Thompson Associates, which teamed up with veteran housing designer, Ralph Erskine (the Swedish architect responsible for the much respected Byker Wall housing scheme on the edge of Newcastle upon Tyne), won the millennium village project through an international competition that attracted more than 400 entries, many of them by distinguished architects.

The scheme as it now stands is bereft of the three key elements that would have made it stand out from the crowd of tweedy, pitched-roof, toytown British housing. These are the use of new materials and building technology; the provision in every one of the 1,400 new homes with the latest in information technology; and the creation of a community in which well-off and poor, private buyers and those

renting social housing would live cheek by jowl.

In the rush, the developers have retreated into their shell and are hoping to build what they know how to build most effectively (ie quickly and relatively cheaply) - the sort of average London docklands housing that is about as exciting as an edge-of-town superstore.

Hunt Thompson is also upset because its partners feel it is wrong for the developers to have been handed 35 acres of south London on a plate (the land, admittedly polluted, was sold for little more than a pittance) to make what should be a handsome profit without meeting the brief for radical housing.

The real problem is that the scheme has had no one to champion it. As deputy prime minister, John Prescott has been too busy. All innovative housing schemes in Britain have had their champions, whether the elected members of London county council at the turn of the century, Ebenezer Howard with his garden cities (Letchworth and Welwyn) or local authorities on their best behaviour (Byker Wall). Housing designed to turn a profit will always steer to tried and tested solutions which tend to be pastiches of earlier homes or architectural clichés.

Only if the government is embarrassed by its failure at Greenwich might it come to the rescue. If not, it will be faced with the absurdity of having its millennium dome barking away about the future and all its possibilities brooding alongside a boring, later-flowering yuppie "village" without a breath of futuristic thinking rattling its roof tiles or chasing down its chimneys.

Jonathan Glancey is the Guardian's Architecture Correspondent