

# The Modern Timber House in the UK

## New Paradigms and Technologies

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# Chapter 5

## The Affordable Timber House

The provision—or perhaps more accurately, the current deficiency—of affordable housing in the UK has become one of the hot potatoes of our time, a major challenge affecting not only the economic, planning and welfare policies of the government and exercising political minds, as well as those in a wide range of industries including architecture, construction and manufacturing as to the possible solutions that can be delivered at speed. To do so however, requires some clarity as to what ‘affordable’ actually means when related to housing.

Over the years the term has been subject to multiple interpretations and, according to ‘What is Affordable Housing?’ (a House of Commons Briefing Paper from November 2016), ‘affordable housing’ tended historically *“to be interchangeable with references to social housing, i.e. housing developed with an element of government subsidy (grant) and let at sub-market rents by local authorities or housing associations.”* This was certainly the case when councils were significant providers of low-rent housing for, by 1980, the proportion of all British housing in state hands was *“large ... by international standards...almost one in three households.”* The Housing Act introduced in that same year by Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher radically changed this state of affairs: henceforth, tenants of local authorities were given the ‘right to buy’ their homes at substantial discounts. The Act envisaged a revolution in how a large section of the British population lived but, whilst this has unquestionably been the case, the impetus underlying it neglected to anticipate any significant population growth (it was presumed at that time to be stable) and the thorny question of what would happen when the UK ran out of cheap housing was one to be addressed another day.



**Narford Road,  
London Borough of Hackney  
(2012)**

Fraser Brown MacKenna  
Photographer: Tim Crocker

To all intents and purposes, that day arrived some time ago: Shelter estimates there are now 1.4 million households—more than three million people—currently on council house waiting lists, with over 60,000 households in temporary accommodation—a 21% increase since 2010. Five interconnected reasons underlie the huge housing challenge that now exists and the urgent need for more affordable housing to be made available:

1. the UK's population has grown substantially since its 1980s base of 56.31 million to 65,517,525 (as of Saturday, July 8, 2017, based on United Nations estimates): put simply, more homes are required;
2. Demographic changes—we now have more single people and single parent households looking for homes as well as more elderly people looking to downsize from their existing accommodation and there is little flexibility in housing supply to address these altered requirements;
3. housebuilding numbers over this period have been at historic lows and, following the economic crash in 2008, have still to recover to the levels seen before that date;
4. house prices and rents—especially in London, the South East and South West—have risen exponentially, with people on low or average wages priced out of the property purchase and private sector rental markets;
5. under the UK government's austerity programme, wages and salaries in many sectors have been capped since 2010 whilst other costs including property and utility charges have continued to rise.

What then might be done to respond effectively to the urgency of the situation? The UK Government's current definition of 'affordable housing' is *"social rented, affordable rented, and intermediate housing provided to specified eligible households whose needs are not met by the market."* The Scottish Government, by contrast, more broadly interprets it as *"housing of a reasonable (sic) quality that is affordable to people on modest incomes....affordable housing may be in the form of social rented accommodation, mid-market rented accommodation, shared ownership, shared equity, discounted low-cost housing for sale including plots for self-build and low-cost housing without subsidy."* Whilst the UK Government introduced a new Housing Act in 2016 to encourage self- and custom-build housing (see Chapter 6—the Self Build Timber House), this is not primarily focused on affordable housing provision. The Scottish Government, conversely possibly provides more options on how the huge deficit in affordable housing provision might be addressed, but both administrations' definitions are fundamentally focused on matters of tenure and not on how the quality bar for affordable housing might be raised. In this respect, neither can be viewed as especially aspirational: politically, the debate remains all-too grounded in the world of target numbers.

Outside of the UK's parliaments, others have recognised the deficit is not only in the amount of affordable housing that is available, but also in the quality of life offered to residents by many of the homes currently being delivered under this catch-all banner. The following projects demonstrate that other approaches to the provision of affordable housing are possible: approaches where care and consideration at the design stage and in the selection of materials have had a profound and positive impact on the lives of their residents and which have been achieved within the financial constraints currently attached to this category of accommodation.

An overlooked, landlocked plot of land at **Narford Road** (2012) in the Stoke Newington area of the London Borough of Hackney that had formerly been used for light industrial purposes provided the unprepossessing location for an affordable housing development by Fraser Brown MacKenna Architects. The brief from One Housing Group was to maximise the number of high quality, affordable homes that could be fitted onto the awkwardly-shaped site, as well as accommodation for residents with mild learning disabilities. The resulting, timber-framed

**Narford Road,  
London Borough of Hackney  
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Fraser Brown MacKenna  
Photographer: Tim Crocker







scheme is comprised of 44 apartments, plus an 18-bedroom facility that is part of a discrete Care and Support scheme. Designed meet the needs of local people, the 62 homes are a mixture of family housing and single person flats and are organised as four separate buildings, ranging in height from one- to four-storeys and planned to ensure minimum impact on the pre-existing homes that surround the site. Two of these blocks contain the bulk of the apartments and are arranged around two courtyards: Saxony Court is accessed from Geldeston Road to the west and the larger Hazlitt Court is entered from Northwold Road through a brick-built gatehouse that also provides vehicular access for the two wheelchair-accessible apartments in the, otherwise car-free, development. The 18-bedroom care and support facility is entered from Narford Road on the east side of the plot.

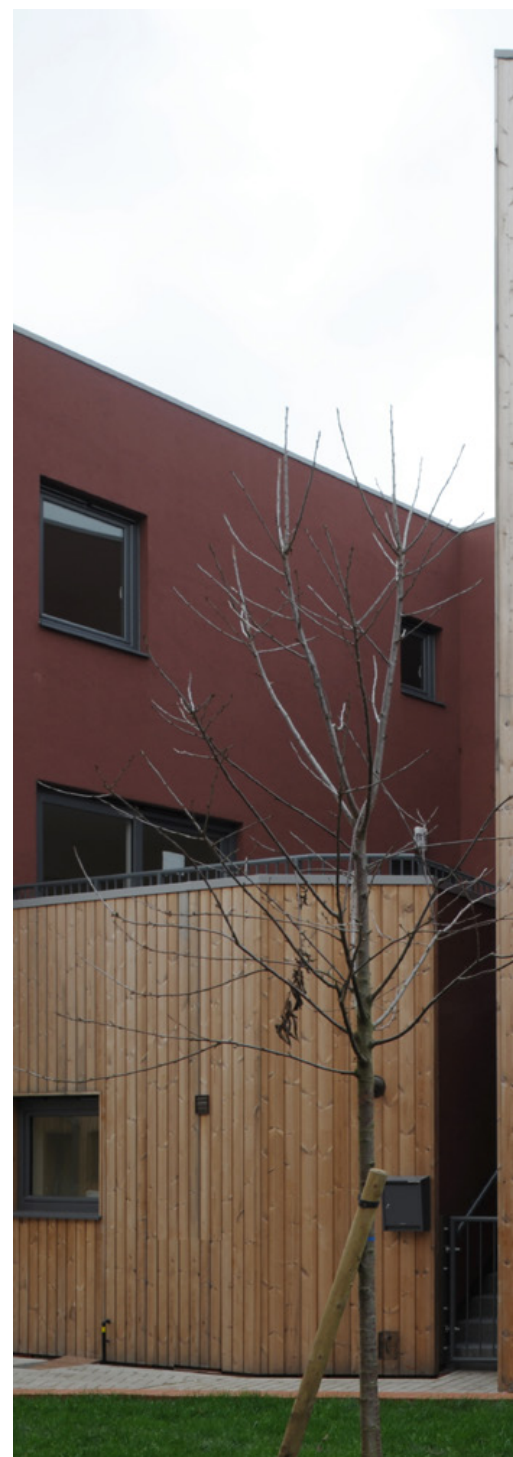
The underlying design principle at Narford Road has been to respect and replicate the scale of the existing buildings that surround it and to use materials that are not only warm and tactile, but which also provide an elegant response to site security issues and the need to avoid overlooking and overshadowing of the neighbouring residential gardens. At the higher levels, carefully orientated windows have therefore been employed to prevent overlooking, whilst the lower buildings have been strategically positioned to provide solar and privacy shading.

Narford Road is principally distinguished from other affordable housing projects by the extensive use of vertical timber cladding and screening used on its exterior faces and which effectively unifies the three main blocks into one coherent development. The continuous cladding boards on the main elevations emphasise the project's massing and neatly embrace the dark-grey, aluminium-framed deep-set windows. The screens to the external stair and balconies of the Saxony Court block, in particular, are meticulously detailed, with the boards forming their inside and outside faces fixed back to the concealed metal balustrade on battens that, being visible through the precisely-spaced gaps between the timbers, are horizontally aligned with the cills, frame heads and transoms of the windows.

Superficially, this project may seem quite simple in appearance, but the development at Narford Road is a sophisticated response to an especially challenging brief that demanded affordable housing of high-quality.

Also timber framed and clad, the affordable housing development at **Effra Road** (2012) in the south London district of Brixton, by Inglis Badrashi Lodd Architects has been built on a similar, heavily constrained site to that at Narford Road. Again, the land had formerly been used for light industrial purposes but the dearth of more obvious residential sites in every part of London has pushed the search for plots suited to affordable housing into more difficult brownfield locations that are generally of less interest to large private sector developers. This of course means that the strictly limited budgets in this sector can often struggle to match the cost of dealing with the complex issues presented by difficult ground conditions, party wall agreements and planning stipulations. These, and the fact that many housing associations are precluded by their charters from purchasing sites that do not yet have planning permission in place, can often restrict purchase of these plots to smaller, private sector developers willing to accept the combination of risks involved.

At Effra Road, however, another solution was found to allow construction on the site to be considered. The Kitewood Group, a specialist developer in the delivery of affordable housing in London, bought the land on the basis of a partnership with the London and Quadrant Housing Trust in which the latter would become the ultimate client, with the former bearing the financial risk involved in securing planning permission and other necessary approvals. Two significant planning issues made this process especially fraught, the first being that the London Borough of Lambeth's unitary development plan would only allow a change of use for land that had formerly supported industry if a prescribed period of vacancy had elapsed and only if any housing to be built on the land was 100% affordable. The second issue was no less challenging:



**Effra Road, Brixton** (2012)

Inglis Badrashi Lodd Architects

Photographer: David Grandorge