Ike Ijeh IBP 2020 Entry

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ENTRIES:

1. **Why I, an architect, stood as a Brexit Party candidate in the election**
   PUBLISHED: *Architects Journal*
   DATE: 08.01.20
   TYPE: Comment

2. **The Verdict: Ike Ijeh on the Stirling Prize Winner**
   PUBLISHED: *BD Online*
   DATE: 08.10.19
   TYPE: Comment

3. **Building Study: Marmalade Lane, Cambridge, by Mole Architects**
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Why I, an architect, stood as a Brexit Party candidate in the election

8 JANUARY 2020 BY IKE IJEH

Architect and critic *Ike Ijeh* explains why his running for parliament last month had nothing to do with hating foreigners and everything to do with democracy

In the weeks running up to Christmas (typically my favourite time of year) I was called a racist, a bigot, a Nazi, a xenophobe, a nationalist, a Little Englander (whatever that means) and an idiot. No, this was not a planning meeting gone awry but it was some of the everyday invective that I was forced to politely endure while on the campaign trail standing as a Brexit Party candidate during the general election.

It would appear that my candidacy provoked some surprise in sections of the architecture community. Presumably it's fashionable for architects to support the regressive 'progressiveness' of the Labour or Green parties or the electoral extremism of the Liberal Anti-Democrats but indicative of some sort of moral collapse to support a party that actually, shockingly, advocates implementing a democratic vote? It is no secret that as a profession architecture has treated Brexit as complete anathema. That is fine. We are, nominally at least, a democracy and consensus is not compulsory.

I too have spent many an afternoon pondering on how exactly a British architect won the Pompidou

commission two years before we joined the European Community

But consent from the losing minority is. And not only has this losing remain minority, enthusiastically populated by architects, spent the last three years refusing to confer consent on a result they disagreed with, but most damagingly, they have constructed the most noxious and grotesque caricature of leave voters as bigoted gargoyles intent on turning Britain into an angry Aryan fortress.

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And yet, what exactly is racist about giving an architect from Angola exactly the same rights to work in a UK practice as an architect from Austria? Or is discrimination fine as long Europeans are the ones being favoured? Is Canada a racist country for refusing to establish freedom of movement with the U.S. and Greenland? Is controlling (never cancelling) immigration in a manner similar to that employed by the vast majority of countries outside the EU a racist act?

And what too is racist about pursuing an immigration policy that treats all foreign visitors as equal regardless of where they are from? Despite the smug derision of the liberal elite, the simple truth is that Brexit – best summarised as a periodic realignment of trading arrangements – is no more a symptom of nationalism than was Denmark choosing not to join the euro in 2000.

Arrant nonsense has also been written about how Brexit will threaten UK arts and creativity, an area of obvious concern to architects. I too have spent many an afternoon pondering on how exactly – without EU Directive 2004/38/EC – German-born Handel came to compose his *Messiah* in Mayfair, how the Liverpudlian Beatles found fame in 1960s Hamburg or how a British architect won the commission for the Paris Pompidou Centre two years before we joined the European Community. I have come to the conclusion that British artistic internationalism is safe.
More credible is the threat leaving the single market potentially poses to construction and procurement. The 168 countries outside the EU might offer clues to how these issues could be resolved and it is difficult for architects to swoon over just-in-time supply chains while preaching about sustainability and ignoring the severe carbon and transportation ramifications just-in-time imposes.

To conclude, there are three principal reasons why I stood for the Brexit Party and none of them, surprisingly, include hatred of foreigners. First, I feel the government's current negotiated deal is not good enough. Secondly, if architects are serious about improving people's lives, then I believe more of us should be in Parliament and involved in politics and directly shaping the policies that will impact those lives.

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Architects constantly claim we are for the people, yet most architects dismissed the referendum result and pilloried the voters

And thirdly, the main reason is simply because I believe – passionately – in democracy. And because I believe in democracy even more than I believe in Brexit, I have accepted my loss last month and have not called for a second election or lambasted those who voted against me as thick, poor, racist, old, ignorant, uneducated or Northern.

Ultimately Brexit is and always has been about democracy and the people. Architects constantly claim we are for the people. We love talking about 'public' realm; we pride ourselves on our efforts engaging with 'public' consultation, we constantly fight for 'public' housing; we sprinkle our masterplans with 'public' space.

And yet, when the majority of the public voted in 2016, most architects dismissed the result and pilloried the voters. The almost universal animosity with which Brexit has been treated by the architecture profession has neatly exposed how many architects treat the people with the same avuncular condescension we might apply to wayward pets or children.
We 'do' things to them because we know best, but don't wish to ask them too many difficult questions for fear they give the wrong answer or force us to engage more closely in societal complications from which we'd prefer to keep a more safe elitist distance. Architects either believe in democracy or we don't; we cannot champion and silence the public at the same time.

Of course, I acknowledge and regret the disruption Brexit will bring. But all change is disruptive; joining the EC was disruptive but we still persevered. Brexit is not about ostracising Europe; it is about treating the EU with exactly the same level of openness and inclusivity that we treat the rest of the world and not discriminating between the two. With our innate internationalist instincts and Britain's historic global links, this should be an agenda that architects should be at the forefront of embracing.

Ike Ijeh is a director at London Architecture Works and a freelance architectural critic. He was Brexit Party candidate for the Enfield North constituency in last month's general election

The verdict: Ike Ijeh on the 2019 Stirling Prize winner

By Ike Ijeh | 8 October 2019

BD's architecture critic suggests the judges allowed populism to influence their decision more than architecture

Though celebrated Irish playwright George Bernard Shaw was a committed vegetarian, upon declining an invitation to a vegetarian gala dinner he once wryly observed that, "the thought of 2,000 people crunching celery at the same time horrified me." Shaw's point was not to decry the renowned gastrointestinal benefits of celery but to recoil from the regimented, cult-like celebration of a single ideology, no matter how worthy that ideology happened to be.

- **Read: Mikhail Riches' Goldsmith Street wins Stirling Prize**

One wonders then what Shaw might have made of this year's 2019 RIBA Stirling Prize win. No one can doubt that Goldsmith Street is an accomplished work of architecture that has set a new benchmark for sustainability. The 100-unit social housing scheme is the UK's largest Passivhaus

development, an achievement rendered all the more extraordinary for the fact that it has been built by the local council and therefore marks one of the most ambitious examples of new-generation council housing emerging across the country.

In design terms too Goldsmith Street has unquestionable merit. Inspired by the tradition of Victorian terraced housing in adjacent conservation areas, the scheme is based on the concept of streets as much as it is on buildings and it expertly stiches a new network of crisp residential terraces into the historic city fabric. The terraces too are masterfully detailed with warm, perforated yellow brickwork and steeply angled pantile roofs forming a subtle contemporary reinterpretation of local historic precedents in terms of both character and density.

The sustainability ambitions are also skilfully embedded into the scheme and are harnessed as an opportunity to enrich rather than constrain the architecture, an impediment that is sadly all too prevalent on schemes with high sustainability ambitions. Gone are the tiny Passivhaus windows cowed in terror at the threat of sunlight and overheating. Instead we have roofs methodically angled to maximise sunlight into the streets below and meticulous attention to detail that even saw letterboxes banished from front doors and embedded into slick external porches so as to minimise internal draughts.

Goldsmith Street therefore does all the right things and ticks all the right boxes in today's febrile political arena. Not only is it council housing but it is ultra-sustainable council housing and it provides all the worthy, nourishing benefits that we all need in order to lead to happier healthier lives.

1/6 SHOW CAPTION

But so does tofu. Of course there is nothing inherently wrong with tofu and like Goldsmith Street it is good for you and should form part of every healthy civic diet. But life should be about inspiration as well as instruction and for all its dutiful worthiness, Goldsmith Street lacks that special spark and magic that separates good architecture from great architecture.

Not all architecture need be great but generally award-winning architecture, particularly the Stirling Prize, should be. The triumph of Goldsmith Smith is all the more perplexing for the fact that there were at least two other contenders on this year's shortlist worthy of the accolade. The Macallan Distillery may not be RHSP's best work but in its inventive, industrial reinterpretation of a traditional typology and its fulsome deployment of the expressive structural choreography that is Rogers' buoyant trademark, it was sprinkled with significantly more winning stardust than either of the two RSHP nominated schemes that have preceded it in recent years (Neo Bankside and the British Museum World Conservation and Exhibition Centre).

But the building which, in my own opinion, was most deserving of this year's Stirling Prize was Grimshaw's heroic overhaul of London Bridge Station. The station's transformation from dingy subterranean rat-run to a soaring, light-filled, cathedral-like vault surmounted by a magnificent wooden ceiling has been nothing short of miraculous and arguably marks London's finest addition of public transport infrastructure since the seminal Jubilee Line Extension stations of the late 1990s. Also, in recognising a major transport terminus, its Stirling recognition might have offered a rare opportunity for architecture to achieve a populist relevance to millions of normal, everyday lives.

But it was not to be. Which begs the question, why did Goldsmith Street win? Could it perhaps have anything to do with the fact that sustainability is the zeitgeist of the moment and its victory is as much to do with messaging as with merit? It cannot have escaped the RIBA's attention that, as we speak, just yards from its central London HQ massed hordes of disgruntled climate activists are gathering in indignant outrage at the environmental catastrophe they believe is about to befall us. Though their tactics may jar with most, few doubt the sincerity of their convictions and what better way for the avuncular RIBA to display woke affinity with another populist movement by recognising a project that so enthusiastically shares these same pronounced environmental sympathies?

Of course there can be few more worthy pursuits than healing our planet and architecture must be at the forefront of a drive to create a more sustainable future. But, particularly in our increasingly polarised and binary political arena where the one thing that appears to be universally tolerated is intolerance itself, it is important that no agenda, no matter how worthy, is allowed to establish itself as a new tyranny from which dissention is outlawed and on to which adulation is automatically conferred.

All credit to Goldsmith Street for its win. But no issue – not even sustainably – is above intellectual debate and architecture, of all disciplines, should be about the interrogation not indoctrination of ideas. But when this core principle falls away, whether it be from the Stirling Prize or from any

architectural pursuit, all we are left with is Shaw's existential nightmare of 2,000 people robotically munching celery in unison in an otherwise empty room.

Building Study: Marmalade Lane, Cambridge, by Mole Architects

By Ike Ijeh | 14 October 2019

How does this housing development that was instigated and managed by residents work in practice?

Source: David Butler

Marmalade Lane, Cambridge

Co-housing is one of those terms that feels distinctly un-British. Exactly the opposite, in fact, to the word "marmalade".

Co-housing refers to a form of housing that is instigated and managed by residents. According to the UK Cohousing Network, the official definition is an "intentional community, created and run by its residents, where each household has a self-contained, private home as well as shared community spaces and facilities."

The world's first co-housing project was built in Denmark in 1972 and while the practice has since rapidly grown in popularity in countries like Sweden, Germany, the Netherlands, Australia, Canada and the United States, it has yet to make a significant foothold in the UK. Today there are around 20 established cohousing "communities" in the UK. Yet in Berlin alone there are almost 500.

Nonetheless the UK co-housing market is tentatively growing and in recent times the sector has produced some significant examples. In 2015, Henley Halebrown Architects completed London's first co-housing development of six houses and the following year architect Pollard Thomas Edwards' 25-unit New Ground scheme in north London opened as the UK's first co-housing development for older women.

But now, the stakes have been raised significantly with the completion of one of the UK's largest co-housing projects to date. Marmalade Lane is an £8.3m development of 42 units in the suburban Orchard Park district of north Cambridge. It is the first co-housing scheme in the city of Cambridge and it contains a mixture of two- to five-bed terraced houses as well as two-bed flats. The project has been designed by Cambridge-based Mole Architects for a joint venture development team led by new developer Town and Swedish subcontractor Trivselhus, suppliers of the closed-panel timber frame system used for the construction of the houses.

In keeping with the cohousing ethos Marmalade Lane also incorporates a number of shared facilities. These are extensive and include a shared garden, a workshop, gym and large common house which houses a play room, guest bedrooms, laundry facilities, meeting rooms and a large hall and kitchen for shared meals and parties.

But there are three significant features that are not necessarily typical to the co-housing typology that make Marmalade Lane unique. The first is that the scheme was commissioned and enabled by the local authority on formerly public land. In so doing it represents an interesting example of how co-housing, traditionally a private enterprise, can be facilitated and perhaps expanded by local authority input.

Secondly, Marmalade Lane includes several custom-build elements. In some instances, residents were able to select internal layouts and elevational finishes. Custom-build may seem like a natural extension of a housing typology already driven by end-user input but as yet in the UK it has rarely been tested in the co-housing format. Its use here makes Marmalade Lane an experimental enterprise of note.

And finally, as Marmalade Lane is one of the first UK co-housing schemes of a significant scale, it forms a unique design response that for the first time, attempts to develop a specific co-housing architectural language that deals with wider urban design principles such as streets, permeability and the interaction between public and private realm.

Source: David Butler

The Marmalade Lane project began in 2000

Local authority influence

The Marmalade Lane project began back in 2000 when Cambridge council began redeveloping the Orchard Park district in the north of the city. Around 900 homes have now been built but at the start, the Marmalade Lane plot was known as plot K1, the name eventually adopted by the group of residents who collaborated to turn their co-housing vision into a reality.

Initially the council planned to sell the plot, which it owned, to a housebuilder. But the sale fell through in the 2008 crash leaving the council open to exploring other development opportunities it was in a position to support, of which co-housing emerged as paramount. The K1 group already had a brief which outlined their ambitions for the site, and then formed the basis of a two-stage open developer competition, which was eventually won by Town and Trivselhus in 2015. The joint venture then purchased the site from the council and submitted a planning application at the end of the year with construction starting in 2016.

For Town founding director Neil Murphy, the involvement of the local authority was central to making the co-housing venture work. “We acquired the land with a fixed land purchase price based on full market value, which was agreed with Cambridge council. However, this price also took into account

the K1 co-housing brief. Also, as the council was committed to making a co-housing development work, we were able to defer payment of the land price, which was to be paid out of sales revenue. This aided development cash-flow significantly."

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Neil Murphy, TOWN

The council's willingness to be flexible with regard to the commercial arrangements for the land purchase enabled the realisation of a venture that a private developer may otherwise have deemed too risky. While Murphy concedes that the absence of such municipal cooperation might present commercial challenges for other schemes, he maintains that it proves that "co-housing doesn't need a rich benefactor" in order to become a reality.

For Town co-founding director Jonny Anstead, the council's visionary approach is also indicative of wider changes other councils could make to render co-housing a more feasible proposition. "It's understandable why councils would wish to maximise their financial returns when selling public land in order to get best value for the public purse. But if we were to redefine value as a 'triple-lock' that includes social and environmental returns and not just financial ones, then that could unlock development opportunities for co-housing on council-owned land up and down the country."

Source: David Butler

The scheme offers a choice of brickwork

Custom-build

It wasn't just in the area of land purchase where local authority influence was felt but design and aesthetics too. Part of Marmalade Lane's marketing appeal to residents was the fact that part of the units were custom-build. Each co-housing household was able to select one of five shell houses or flat types which could then be individually configured through a floor-by-floor selection of internal layouts, kitchen and bathroom fittings and external brick specifications. Houses come in a wide or narrow width but they, as well as the flat shells, all conform to a 7.8m-deep plan which allows them to be distributed in any sequence along a terrace – an arrangement that was determined by resident choice.

By and large, internal variations had no external ramifications and were consequently not a planning concern. But clearly the brick specifications and terrace 'sequencing' very much were. This presented a challenge with the planning application. How could the design team create planning drawings that depicted elevational scenarios which residents might not yet have chosen?

Initially, the developer had hoped that as the planners had a strategic interest in developing the site as a co-housing scheme they might be minded to relax traditional planning requirements and accept

something akin to an elevational options schedule depicting various configurations possible from the materials palette selected. This would have given the planning authority oversight of materials and composition but ultimately permit further changes at a later stage driven by residents' choices.

But in the end the planners insisted on the more conventional fixed elevation drawings depicting final configurations. However, as Mole Architects founder Meredith Bowles explains, this was not necessarily the obstacle it might have been.

"Luckily we had residents engaged in the process right from the start so we were able to bring forward the process of them choosing brickwork and elevations and then incorporate this into the planning application. However, this only worked because the residents were involved in the co-housing process right from the start. If we're serious about growing the co-housing custom-build market, then this is something the planning system is definitely going to have to flexibly adapt to or else it could stop other similar schemes of this kind in their tracks."

Source: David Butler

The scheme includes significant communal space outdoors

Design

In total, Marmalade Lane incorporates four separate blocks arranged around a communal garden and a new street. The first two blocks are rows of terraced housing overlooking the street and the third block is another row of terraced houses set at right angle to the previous two. The final block contains the common hall and communal facilities.

All four blocks feature a mix of exterior brickwork of various colours and shades. Externally there is no evidence of the timber frame from which the houses are built or the CLT frame that provides the structure for the flats and common areas.

With their pitched roofs and subtle undulations in tone and texture, the terraces in particular evoke a contemporary reinterpretation of traditional residential motifs and vernacular that is reminiscent of Cambridge's other stellar reinventive housing scheme, the Stirling prize-winning Accordia. But what is surprising here is how it is almost impossible to tell that this is a co-housing.

But there are of course giveaways, as Bowles points out. "There's the shared garden, the shared common house facilities and the new street, which has been deliberately kept car free as per our and the residents' intentions. The street also reveals the unifying effect the co-housing model has on public realm and private space."

The street also reveals the unifying effect the co-housing model has on public realm and private space

Meredith Bowles, Mole Architects

The street is indeed the nucleus of the development and it exposes a number of interesting urban co-housing consequences. Oddly, the street is lined by entrance frontages on one side and rear gardens on the other, something that would probably be undesirable in a conventional development. But it works here because the co-housing model encourages openness, here expressed by the lack of defensive space to the front of the houses and the virtual omission of private fences around the back gardens.

Privacy is instead more subtly implied by a discreet landscaping strategy comprising low hedges and knee walls, which double as seating for the street itself. Thus we see the co-housing model blurring the boundaries between public and private realm by using private activity to bolster the level of animation the street offers to both the development and the surrounding public realm. Crucially, it also ensures that the street, though privately owned, is able to tacitly invite non-residents to use it as a public through-route while ensuring that it always maintains its intimate, residential and notionally private character.

Source: David Butler

Marmalade Lane's communal facilities can be used by all residents

Community

Of course what is central to the co-housing model is not just the design or funding model but the community it maintains. Elaine Brewis was part of the original K1 group and moved from London purposefully to live in a co-housing development. "Some of my friends still ask me if I actually have my own house! Some people see it as a commune rather than a community but the truth is you're able to determine the level of communal engagement you want. But I love living here, it's like a village, everybody knows everybody else."

I love living here, it's like a village, everybody knows everybody else

Elaine Brewis, Marmalade Lane resident

Of course this is not a format that is likely to appeal to everybody. In the UK, co-housing is also still primarily perceived as something of a New Age, middle-class pursuit, something its affordability mix and management structure does little to dispel.

There is no affordable housing on Marmalade Lane, although both the design team and council maintain this is offset by generous affordable housing provision in the wider Orchard Park development. They also point out that by older couples downsizing into the development, large family houses in the surrounding area are being released to younger buyers and tenants.

Nonetheless, prices are relatively reasonable for a city that almost rivals London in terms of property values, with one-beds starting at £195,000 and going up to around £500,000 for four- and five-beds. Properties are also either purchased freehold or on a 999-year lease, with an annual service charge that varies from approximately £400 to £800 depending on the size of the property.

Communal areas are run by a common parts management company to which each household is allocated one director and which is jointly owned by all residents. Should someone wish to move out, the company has six weeks to find a new buyer willing to share in the co-housing ethos before the property is put on the open market.

It is perhaps when the next tranche of residents who were not involved in its creation move into Marmalade Lane that the durability of the co-housing model will be truly tested. But what is perhaps most interesting about Marmalade Lane is that it offers a formally structured expression of many of the qualities everyone aspires to deliver in housing. For before co-housing was invented, there was a term for residential developments that incorporated good design, close communities, communal gathering, shared gardens, active streets, municipal support and user choice: it was simply called housing.

Source: David Butler

Marmalade Lane is one of the UK's largest co-housing projects to date

Project team

- **Client:** Town / Trivselhus AB / Cambridge City Council / K1 Cohousing
- **Architect:** Mole Architects
- **Main Contractor:** Coulson Building Group
- **Structural Engineer:** Elliott Wood
- **Services Engineer:** Hoare Lea
- **Quantity Surveyor:** Monaghans
- **Project Manager:** Monaghans
- **Landscape Architect:** Jamie Buchanan