

Modern approach

According to Liz Champion, the construction industry has to embrace modern techniques.

Social housing in this country may be thrown further into crisis unless the construction industry responds to demands to introduce modern methods of construction as an alternative to the traditional brick-and-block process.

Despite Sir John Egan's Rethinking Construction report in 1998, which identified off site construction as being imperative to the future success of housebuilding, the industry remains hesitant and modern development has been slow.

The report suggested that in order to alleviate the shortage of quality affordable homes and to meet the predicted increase in demand, house builders should develop new approaches. It highlighted that the shortage of skilled labour is also threatening the industry, further increasing costs and construction times and emphasising the urgency to introduce new methods.

Lack of funding

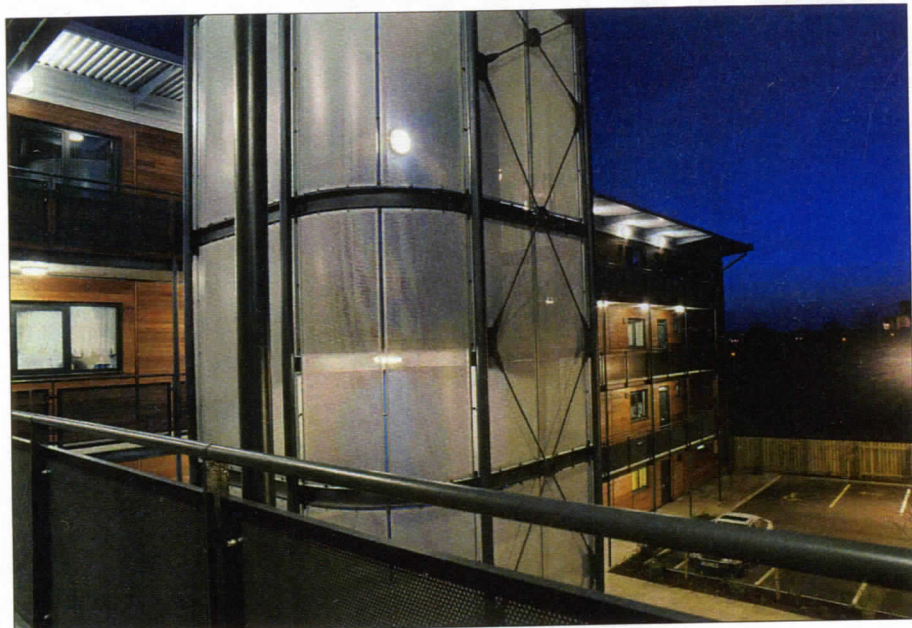
As housing and land prices boom, it has become extremely difficult for social housing providers to compete with private developers, as they do not have sufficient funding. A solution to the current crisis is not likely in the near future.

Theoretically, off-site manufacture will overcome all these problems by providing aesthetically pleasing houses, which offer good insulation and heating costs whilst significantly reducing construction times from around 12 to 15 weeks to 2 to 3 weeks. The frame of the modular buildings also allows them to be rebuilt on sites, which may be unsuitable for permanent housing.

In this country, modular construction accounts for only 1% of house construction whereas in other countries it is an accepted form. In Finland more than half the population lives in houses that have been manufactured in factories.

In the UK, modular construction has been limited to hotels and student accommodation despite its success in these

Modular construction is well accepted on mainland Europe



Sixth Avenue apartments in York were made from steel-framed modules.

sectors. The new 'Beehive' Travel Inn hotel in Bolton demonstrates how modular construction can be a successful alternative to brick and mortar. It was operational in 20 weeks, achieving a six-week reduction in build time against the usual timber frame construction method.

The application of the technique to social housing is a logical progression and as more and more housing associations and local authorities recognise the need to find new methods of building, steel framed modular construction seems to be the most viable alternative.

The Peabody Trust was one of the first housing associations to set new standards in cost effective quality housebuilding with its award winning Murray Grove development.

In March 1998, Peabody received planning permission from the London borough of Hackney to develop 30 factory-built dwellings on a brownfield site in central London. It is said to be the first multi-storey housing scheme to be built in a factory.

Apartments craned onto site

Yorkon precision engineered 30 high specification apartments at its factory, which were then craned into position in a few days, complete with fixtures and fittings, including carpets, kitchens, bathrooms, plumbing and heating.

Keith Blanshard, director and general

manager at Yorkon, said: 'Murray Grove demonstrates the efficiency of modular construction and epitomises many aspects of the Government's Egan Report. The lesson for all is clear - modular construction is the building method of the future.'

System goes North

This project was followed in the North with the development of Sixth Avenue Apartments in York. Yorkon manufactured 48 steel-framed modules while the foundations were progressed on site. Built on brownfield land, the £2m apartments project has provided much needed affordable houses in York.

James Pickard, project director at Cartwright Pickard Architects, said: 'Our aim was to create a community of attractive, spacious homes, which give residents the benefit of low running costs. It uses new and interesting alternatives to conventional brickwork that enhance the building's appearance and were faster to install.'

The actual process of modular construction may be more expensive than the tried and tested methods but it has been acknowledged that costs will reduce if and when it comes into widespread use. The future of social housing in the UK may be undecided but as the industry recognises the need and urgency to develop alternative processes its future looks set to embrace off site construction.

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719