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# How to tackle the housing crisis - four architects' visions

1 April 2015 | By Owen Hopkins

Against the backdrop of the UK's ever tightening housing crisis – a key issue in the general election campaign – the Royal Academy has been running a season of debates, talks and an exhibition examining housing's future. Owen Hopkins, the season's curator, explains

The housing crisis is all around us and affects us all. In 2008 the number of houses begun fell to its lowest level since 1924. Numbers have hardly increased since. The result is a profound shortage of homes, leading to soaring house prices, especially in London and the south-east, the deterioration in the quality and condition of housing, and, at its most extreme, the rise in homelessness.

With the first step of the housing ladder increasingly out of reach, more and more people are finding themselves stuck in private rented accommodation. Unstable, short-term tenancies are rife. With an aging population, increasing numbers of older people are living in homes unsuitable for their needs, mounting pressure on public services, from social care to the NHS. Loneliness in people of all ages, but especially among older people, is becoming endemic.

Some of the residential towers planned for London's Vauxhall – these are by SOM and BDP

It is somewhat ironic that perhaps the most visible manifestation of the housing crisis is the spate of new tower blocks rising all over London. With developers seeking to cash in on the rise in property prices, many of these new flats are sold off-plan to foreign investors, never to be occupied by Londoners – and pushing prices ever higher. If trends continue at their current levels, by 2018 there will be one million fewer affordable homes in the UK than there were in 1980, while in that timespan the population will have grown by seven million. Meanwhile, the number of people in work but forced to take housing benefit will very likely have doubled from 2010 levels. Already, more than £1 in every £7 spent by the government on social security goes to private landlords.

While all political parties seem to accept the mounting social and economic effects of the housing crisis, few have offered any credible proposals for rectifying it. The rolling-back of the state as a provider of housing from the early 1980s was intended to free the private sector to build more, yet it has shown little appetite in filling the gap in supply. The number of homes provided by the private sector even in boom times has remained relatively constant, even as the state's contribution has fallen away.

There is no single solution to the housing crisis – despite the cases made by some for a reversion to the state-sponsored social housing provision of the post-war decades, or by others for a revival of the Garden City movement. While there are many lessons to learn from the past, the answers can only be found by looking forward. But what might that future look like? What new ideas might allow us to overcome the challenges of today?

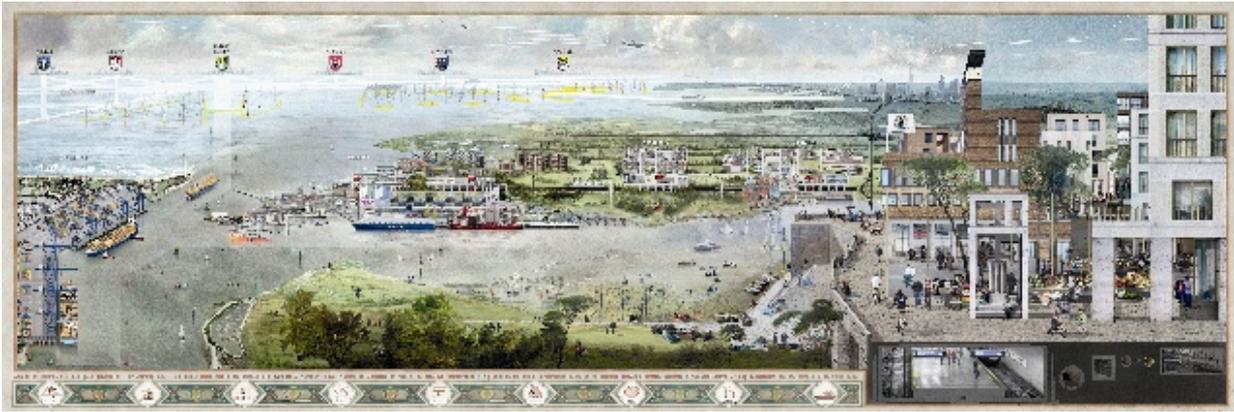
These questions provided the basis for the season of debates, talks and exhibition that the Royal Academy has been running this spring. A key area we wanted to explore was the often marginalised role of architects in discussions about housing. So we asked four architects engaged in housing in



various ways – Mæ, Dallas Pierce Quintero, 5th Studio and Sarah Wigglesworth Architects – to each put forward their visions for the future of housing, which we would then exhibit in the RA's Architecture Space. The brief was relatively open, asking the architects to propose ideas that were speculative but at the same time grounded in the realities of our present moment. We did not prescribe a site, budget or client, rather leaving each architect to choose their own, or approach the questions we posed from an abstract or more strategic perspective.

Harwich Reborn by 5th Studio – illustration for Royal Academy exhibition and talk

The answers they came up with are both provocative and profound. 5th Studio has focused on a



regularly overlooked part of the UK, which it uses as the basis for a proposition for rethinking the role of the state: not as a provider of housing, but as an enabler of “bottom-up” development.

The proposal by Mæ is one such initiative that could benefit from what this approach might unlock. Mæ explores the possibilities of custom-build housing – a type of personalised house-building that is commonplace on the continent but rare in the UK.

The two other proposals focus on particular groups hardest hit by the housing crisis. Sarah Wigglesworth Architects, working with the University of Sheffield DWELL Project, put forward a project deriving from its research into how older people might “downsize” to housing designed for their needs in Sheffield’s city centre.

Young people, whose needs are rather different though no less urgent, are the focus for Dallas Pierce Quintero. It has created a fictional cityscape to propose various options intended to suit both the lifestyles and financial positions of young people.

The four proposals offer contrasting yet complementary visions for the future. Together they show that it is eminently possible to give people a choice in where and how they live, and that this choice does not have to be curtailed by individual wealth or personal circumstance.

A bright future for housing in the UK is within our grasp, if we really want it.

**Postscript:** Owen Hopkins is architecture programme curator at the Royal Academy of Arts and author of *Architectural Styles: A Visual Guide*

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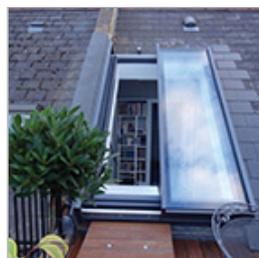
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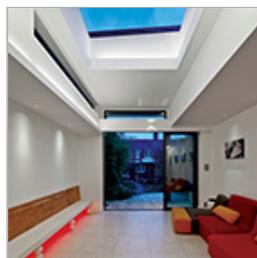
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