



Gordon Brown's aim to build three million homes in the UK by 2020 has led to fears of a flood of 'Noddy' housing sweeping the country

# HOW TO SOLVE THE HOUSING RIDDLE

By Richard Vaughan

'The majority of what volume housebuilders produce is crap, and they are devastating our country,' says Keith Bradley, partner of Feilden Clegg Bradley Architects.

But with Gordon Brown's policy announcement last Wednesday demanding three million homes by 2020, there has never been a greater onus on volume housebuilders to deliver.

Now fears are being raised about the country becoming awash with box-like 'Noddy' houses. There are even mutterings of the mistakes made in the 1960s being repeated.

National House Building Council figures show that 45 per cent of all houses built in the UK are by 13 companies, and 60 per cent of those come from three firms – Barratt

Homes, Persimmon and the newly formed Taylor Wimpey.

That means one in three new homes built in the UK is built by just three firms who, to paraphrase Bradley, are not very good.

Communities minister Iain Wright claims that building more homes 'can, and must, go hand-in-hand with building better homes'.

He says: 'Well-designed homes are key to our vision for better homes. Homes that meet the needs of all members of the community; that can help address the challenges of climate change in developments that can be maintained so that spaces stay clean, safe and green.'

'The recent changes to policy guidance give a clear framework for the achievement of high-quality housing,' he

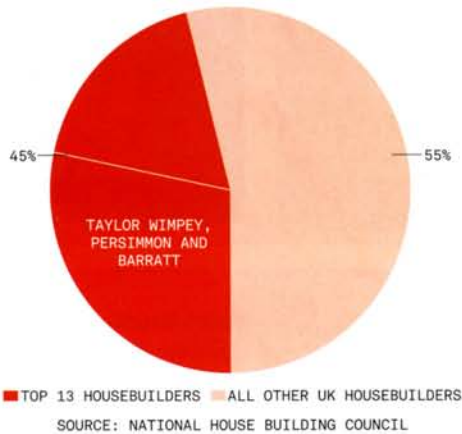
adds. 'And they set out clearly that local authorities should not accept design that fails to meet requirements.'

The new Planning Policy Supplements (PPS) have generally been seen to give greater support to better design in the housing debate. PPS 1 focuses on creating sustainable developments, while PPS 3 drives higher-quality housing through better design.

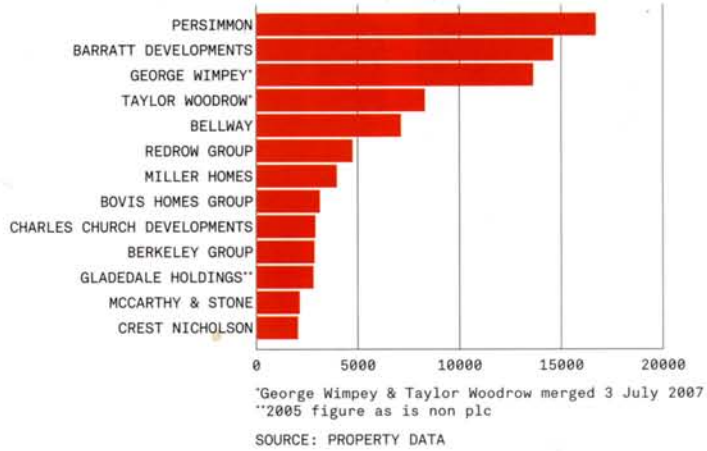
The problem, according to Matt Bell, CABE's director of campaigns and housing expert, is one of 'them against us', and claims changes need to be made by both architects and housebuilders.

'There has been a certain degree of snobbery from architects. Housebuilders will want an architect to work on a core design with fixed floor-plates, creating homes where

**WHO BUILT THE UK'S HOUSES IN 2006?**



**TOP 13 HOUSEBUILDERS IN 2006**



ordinary people live their lives,' he says.

'Housebuilders must get architects working with them from the beginning. If the floor-plates are agreed upon, and the design is right from the start, so much flows from there.

'Architects need to realise it's about the urban design, more than the design of the individual products,' adds Bell. 'They will be working with limited floor-plates, but if you mix good core products with good urban design the relationship can work.'

A mutual distrust between housebuilders and architects has developed claims Bell, and more pressure must come from the RIBA to push architects to put their services forward to the major volume housebuilders.

Bell has also called for the government to alter the

planning system, forcing planners to champion good design and punish badly designed schemes, hitting housebuilders' costs hardest.

According to Paul Davis of Paul Davis & Partners, house builders often see architects as being too interested in designing iconic buildings, which tends to frighten away potential clients.

'Maybe what should be set up is a competition to look at and refine housebuilders' existing plans,' says Davis. 'Perhaps a separate contest for inside, and one for the outside.'

But an underlying problem appears to be that many volume housebuilders refuse to see a problem with their design.

Indeed, Mike Farley the chief executive of the UK's largest volume housebuilder,

*Continued overleaf*

**UK HOUSEBUILDING: THE FIGURES**

**The total number of homes in the UK in March 2005:**  
26,200,000

**Number of new houses Gordon Brown wants by 2020:**  
3,000,000

**Number of houses which need to be built a year between now and 2020 to meet Gordon Brown's predicted figures:**  
230,769

**Number of houses starting on site in 2004/2005:**  
225,789

**Number of houses built (both private and public sector) in:**

1950: 204,200	1960: 309,200	1970: 319,000
1980: 155,100	1990: 164,200	2000: 144,667
2006: 225,789		

Source: Property Data



Rogers Stirk Harbour + Partners' Home of the Future scheme at Oxley Woods, Milton Keynes



**Alan Shingler**  
Sheppard Robson

*Alan Shingler is practice head of sustainability and lead architect on the £60k house projects for Crest Nicholson as part of the government's Design for Manufacture contest.*

'Crest Nicholson has bought into quality design at the highest level. However, the regions operate quite differently and if you are developing new products you need this support from the top.

'The Design for Manufacture competition brought together partners that probably never would have worked with each other. That was down to English Partnerships (EP) and, as a major landowner, it is in a unique position to push high-quality design.

'The contest was judged with the emphasis on design quality. Unfortunately, some sites are still judged simply on land receipts, so there needs to be more consistency

'EP's Carbon Challenge is the next phase in pushing high-quality design. It is a longer programme with more units and more partnerships needed.

'But in the next few years all the volume housebuilders are going to have to review their portfolios, to meet the Code for Sustainable Homes by 2013 and that is an opportunity for architects to get involved.'



**Keith Bradley**  
Feilden Clegg Bradley

*Keith Bradley is a partner with Feilden Clegg Bradley. The firm is currently working on housing at Gallions Reach in East London.*

I am extremely worried. On the recent evidence the volume housebuilders will have licence to do what they have been doing over the last few years. People can be sold anything now, and they, and the planners know that. They [the volume housebuilders] are devastating our country.

If we are producing bad architecture and crap homes – and it is both – the legacy will be there forever and will just be passed down the line. CABE recently reported that 85 per cent of all new houses are poor and only 5 per cent are very good – that is depressing.

Part of the reason design is suffering is because land values are hugely inflated. Because of that we are getting cheap architecture, as housebuilders will not pay decent fees. We are not getting the calibre of architecture that new houses need, and that is scary.'

*'If we are producing bad architecture and crap homes – and it is both – the legacy will be there forever'*

Persimmon, merely said the firm 'places architectural form at the heart of our agenda' by using external architects local to their 25 operating businesses.

According to CABE, however, Persimmon has yet to agree to set up a design panel within the company to ensure higher-quality houses.

But, says Urban Splash director Nick Johnson, it is often the fault of neither the housebuilders nor the architects, but rather the valuation industry.

Johnson believes the value engineering involved in housebuilding is so constrictive that it strips people of the opportunity to pay more for something better.

'If the punter wants to pay extra, let them pay,' he says.

Likewise, developer Elliot Lipton, chief executive of First

Base, believes that its customers appreciate high-quality design and finishing and are willing to 'pay a bit more for it'.

Lipton also believes that the government has clearly shown the way it intends to go, especially with the work that CABE, English Partnerships and the Housing Corporation has been doing in the housing sector.

'But,' he says, 'Gordon Brown should realise that for the local authorities to hit the targets set by him. There needs to be an effective partnership between the public and the private sectors. We all have to step up to meet the housing needs,' he says.



**Alex Ely**  
Mæ

*Alex Ely is a director of Mæ, which specialises in urbanism and housing and has recently won a competition – along with Proctor and Matthews Architects – to design a £16 million housing scheme in Houghton Regis, South Bedfordshire.*

'My plea is firstly that Gordon Brown and Hazel Blears will be brave enough to liberate some of the 90 per cent of England's land that is currently undeveloped so we can invest more in the quality and size of our homes [space standards currently being at an all time low] rather than paying a premium for a drip-fed, constrained land supply.

'Taking over the land of the cows will also have its environmental benefits – cows cause more greenhouse gas emissions than cars.

'Secondly, we need to denationalise development rights to enable us to build our own homes and encourage local authorities to embrace Local Development Orders so we don't have to rely on the poor-quality product built by an increasingly monopolised industry.

'Local authorities may now be empowered to build more social rented accommodation but isn't it more opportunity for affordable market sale housing we need?'



**Robert Adam**  
Robert Adam Architects

*Robert Adam is principal of his practice, which has worked on major housing developments including the traditional style Coed Darcy urban village in South Wales, and which was recently praised by CABE's Housing Audit for its Shepton Mallet housing development.*

'Design only really goes up the housebuilders' agenda if it goes up the public agenda – and design can only go up that if there is a demand for it, namely when there is a surplus of housing.

'If the objective is only to get the product, design becomes secondary or even tertiary.

'However, architects are also to blame for the [poor] housing standards because they have disengaged themselves.

'They are not interested in what the public wants. People do just like simple, traditional design. Architects today are just producing silly things to prove they are architects.

'Housebuilders will make a few of these glass and steel homes to win awards then get back to their normal stuff.'

*'Architects are also to blame for poor housing standards as they have disengaged themselves'*



**Ivan Harbour**  
Rogers Stirk Harbour

*Ivan Harbour is project architect behind the practice's version of the £60k house – the Home of the Future – developed for Taylor Wimpey for a site at Oxley Woods, outside Milton Keynes.*

'There's no straightforward answer to the question "how do more architects become involved with housebuilders".'

'Everyone involved in the process needs to make more of an effort. The public should demand better design; the government should incentivise better design; mortgage lenders should be prepared to support better design; and, as more housebuilders partner with architects, they will be well placed to deliver better-designed housing schemes.

'I believe design is moving up the housebuilders' agenda, particularly in response to concerns about social and environmental sustainability.'

'Taylor Wimpey has a genuine interest in pursuing the Design for Manufacture agenda. Our scheme at Oxley Woods demonstrates how it is possible for a team – including architect, engineer and contractor, working closely with the housebuilder – to respond successfully to a brief outlined by Design for Manufacture and achieve a design which is flexible enough to be further adapted in the future.'



**Glenn Howells**  
Glenn Howells Architects

*Glenn Howells has worked with Crest Nicholson and Berkeley Homes and has helped with CABE's capacity-building workshops as part of its Building for Life programme*

'Problems stem from land directors having to make snap decisions, effectively crystallising the cost of the project and of the design at that point.

'Design needs to be fed in at the top because the development directors lower down are under the cosh to buy sites and get numbers through.

'There must be more emphasis and support for design at the beginning as it can't be added on at the end.

'It's up to architects to challenge the developer, and standard semi-detached housing types, because the agents aren't going to.

'We need to simplify the way social housing is funded, procured and delivered – perhaps a one-stop shop for housebuilders rather than the maze of RSLs and housing organisations.'

*'It's up to architects to challenge the developer and standard semi-detached housing'*