

Appendix A

Lewisham Self Build: Segal Close and Walters Way

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Walter Segal (1907 – 1985) was a Swiss Architect who developed a method of building using a modular, timber frame system that allows for ease of construction and low maintenance whilst eliminating the need for “wet trades” such as bricklaying and plastering. The photo below shows a typical Segal designed home with its flat roof and timber frame¹:



In the late 1970s Lewisham became the first council to fund a self build project using the Segal method of building at a site now known as Segal Close and 3 other small sites in Sydenham and towards Bromley.. This scheme allowed those in housing need, mostly without building skills, to design and build their own homes in line with Segal’s dream of “self help house building, based on mutual help among members of a friendly society on leasehold land.”²

Initial Stages

Segal Close came about as a result of the introduction of Segal to Brian Richardson (Assistant Borough Architect) by their mutual friend Colin Ward. Richardson enlisted the support of Councillor Nicholas Taylor who ensured that the Housing Committee requested a report on “alternative methods of housing such as setting up a co-operative self build housing society.”³ Richardson prepared the initial report for the committee which had concerns around the “durability, sturdiness, fire resistance and insurability of the timber frame” houses as well as questions on the forms of tenure, methods of organisation and finance, and proposing specific sites.⁴

The timing of the proposal was also helpful as the Council had just bought a lot of land during an economic boom only to find that large portions of it were unbuildable due to the government’s Housing Cost Yardstick that essentially ruled out any land that was not “a large site, fairly square shaped and level, with good bearing soil and

¹ <http://www.themodernhouse.net/directory-of-architects-and-designers/walter-segal/>
accessed on 18/2/13

² Broome, John and Richardson, Brian, *The Self-build Book: how to Enjoy Designing and Building Your own Home*, London: Green Earth Books (1995) p.73

³ ibid

⁴ ibid

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without trees” due to high costs.⁵ The Segal designed timber framed houses offered a potential solution for building on these sites.

An initial residents meeting saw an attendance of over 100 people who responded to a featured article in the borough magazine. This saw the establishment of a steering group of potential self-builders and council officers to carry the project forward. They sought information from the group of potential self-builders on the shape that a proposal should take. This resulted in the agreement of a shared ownership model and the decision that self-builders would not be excluded due to a lack of skills, their age or income limits. The Mayor of Lewisham selected the first residents to build a self-build home by way of a ballot – all were taken from the housing waiting list. After this residents were added to the scheme on a first come first served basis as they applied.

Bureaucracy

Despite the land and the self builders being in place the scheme still required permission from, amongst others, the Department of the Environment (DoE) regional architect and as one self builder commented “the hurdles put in our way seemed endless.”⁶ Areas of concern included:

- the high cost of the land being handed over to the self builders which meant that the Housing Cost Yardstick calculation required that the sites be turned into multi-story flats which would not have been possible given the nature of the land;
- the self builders needed an exemption from normal procurement rules requiring competitive tenders for all building contracts;
- as the houses were not yet fully designed it was difficult to demonstrate how they would meet the DoE design standards and cost limits as well as the “myriad of other constructional and planning controls;”⁷

The self build project was resource intensive and involved a wide range of officials and stakeholders including: self builders, architects, quantity surveyors, the Borough architect, DoE officials, the Borough engineer, the Borough surveyor, the GLC Fire Prevention officer, the district surveyor, the Fire Brigade, the Borough Valuer, the Borough solicitor, the Borough treasurer and the Housing Committee. Although all these individuals would be involved in any large development projects the radical nature of this proposal meant that the normal procedures was more demanding than usual. One self builder commented that the “meetings between officials went on and on, round and round, but in a gradually upward spiral.”⁸

Each of these organisations spent time awaiting one another’s decisions at some stage throughout the process but the self builders were able to use some of this time to attend classes organised by Richard Grant of the Churchdown Adult Education Centre in Downham. These covered a broad range of subjects including a series of lectures on structural principals, making joints for timber frame homes, plumbing and electrical wiring as well as a series of talks from the Council Solicitor and Valuers on the legal and organizational aspects of the project.

Approval and building

⁵ ibid

⁶ ibid

⁷ ibid

⁸ ibid

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Approval was eventually granted for the building work to start in 1979 as the Chair of the Housing Committee, Ron Pepper, stated “let’s not wait any longer for confirmation and just get on with it.”⁹ As Segal had predicted the building was the easy part and the first house was finished inside 9 months. The technical performance of the “self builders amazed everybody charged with supervising the job, and probably themselves most of all.”¹⁰ The work itself created a community spirit within the group – “The most worthwhile result, though, seemed to be the flowering of talent and initiative among the self-builders; they seemed to be growing with their houses.”¹¹

Finance

At the initial meeting that set up the steering group it was determined that the majority of self builders preferred to own their own home in a shared ownership arrangement with the council that would allow them to finally become the sole leaseholder if they were able to buy the council out. The houses were purchased on a shared ownership arrangement whereby the self builder purchased part of the equity on a 99 year lease from the Council and paid a portion of the standard council rent for the balance of the equity. The cost of the lease was reduced by a sum that represents the value of the self-builder’s labour to build the house. The self builder assumed full responsibility for maintenance, even though the council may own part of the dwelling. The self builders were guaranteed a council mortgage.

Organisation

The Lewisham self builders devised and registered their form of housing association – they rejected the ‘model rules’ book issued by the National Federation of Housing Associations for the Self Build Groups as it involved logging working hours, applying penalties and barring women and children from the sites. Instead the “Lewisham self builders decided on one rule: there should be no rules, beyond the regular payment of a nominal subscription that would build up a fund for buying some essential tools, electric hand-saws and the like, and some headed note-paper.”¹² They saw how it went and never added any further rules. The simple construction method allowed each household to build their own house rather than the more usual arrangement where the group works as a team building all the houses together. This avoided the need for complex rules whilst allowing the self-builders to co-operate freely or employ others to do some of the work if they wished.

Conclusion

The first self-build scheme at Segal Close provided homes for 14 families on the housing waiting list in the late 70s and this was the first of a number of self build schemes available in the borough. In 1995 only four of the original phase one homes had been sold – the rest were still lived in by the original tenants. This scheme, which could be thought of as the first ‘Community Self-Build’, was a success and the council commissioned a second similar scheme of 13 two-storey houses at what is now Walter’s Way in Honor Oak Park completed in 1985. Subsequently the role of developing social housing has passed to housing associations who developed a further 5 sites in the borough in the 1990’s.

⁹ ibid

¹⁰ ibid

¹¹ ibid

¹² ibid