

+++ Other housing examples

++ Walter Segal houses

In 1971, [I was on a study group for York Labour Party](#), which was to look at the housing crisis. I brought to the attention of the General Committee the cheap and simple housing of Walter Segal as a solution. I remember the council leader of the time, Alderman Burke, saying these are prefabs and York was the first council in the region to get rid of the prefabs.

Walter Segal had developed a design which used standard building materials in the sizes they came from the building merchants so the need for cutting the materials was minimised. The method was suitable for self-builders:

Based on traditional [timber frame](#) methods modified to use standard modern materials, his method eliminates the need for wet trades such as bricklaying and plastering, resulting in a light-weight method which can be built with minimal experience and is ecologically sound. The roofs tend to be flat with many layers of roofing felt, which allows the creation of grass-covered roofs. Foundations are minimal, often just paving slabs, the strength coming from the geometry of their construction. Segal houses have been compared to traditional Japanese houses.

[Walter Segal, Wikipedia](#)

Houses built to Segal's design will have a much lower carbon footprint than traditional bricks and mortar houses because they rely on wood as a construction material and have less need for concrete foundations.

I remember seeing examples of houses built to his design in the architectural press of the early 1970s. Some were very cheap. Houses built to his design now sell in the £500, 000 range but this does not represent the cost of construction - buying a house also buys the associated Property Location Right. A good selection of Segal method houses can be seen with the search "Segal houses" and looking at the images section.

I did write to Walter Segal in the early 1970s to ask him if he was ready to do mass housing. He replied including a sketch of a layout of simple separate houses in reasonably sized gardens. Sadly I have lost his reply but I remember they were two stories in contrast to his earlier single-storey homes.

++ Plotlands and self-build

In his [Hidden History of Housing](#), Colin Ward wrote about plotland development:

Up to 1945 'plotlanders' were able to make use of small patches of land not needed for agriculture, gradually building up weekend shacks into permanent residences, by using their own time and labour rather than large sums of money.

The [house I grew up in](#) was one of the last plotland developments. My father built it with the help

of relations on land my parents received as a wedding present in 1939 before the Second World War. The post-war Labour Government stopped to plotland developments.



My father, Uncle Ern and Uncle Tom building my childhood home in 1946

Over recent years, the UK Government has shown interest in providing spaces for self-build and custom-build housing – a modern form of plotland development. Local authorities are now required to keep a register of people wanting plots to build for themselves or have houses built for them.

Modern plotland development is aimed at self-build or custom builders to help "diversify the housing market and increase consumer choice". However, these arrangements do not give self-builders the opportunity of buying a plot of land at agricultural prices, say £750, and building a cheap house on it. In York, the council have auctioned plots which have sold for over £100,000. Of

that I'd guess that no more than £5,000 was for site preparation,

In 2016, I wrote about the idea of a national [Office of Plotland Development](#) that could promote plotland development as a sustainable means of reducing the unfairness of the housing market. It didn't float. It sunk and I've just discovered a website I once put up, yorkplotlands.uk. I'd totally forgotten about it.

++ Developments in Cambridge

In a recent speech, Michael Gove emphasised the importance of Cambridge as a science centre:

Cambridge's future potential has been circumscribed by a lack of new space for lab capacity and research activity. And also by the constraints on new housing which have priced new graduates out of the market and have also made attracting and retaining talent harder.

Supercharging Europe's science capital in

Long-term plan for housing: Secretary of State's speech

A large housing development in Eddington on the North West Edge of Cambridge is part of this vision. It was planned to be sustainable:

The development sets out to achieve high levels of sustainability, including many photovoltaic cells to gather solar energy, low levels of car use, a district heating network with energy centre scheme, communal waste collection systems, and the [recycling of rainwater](#) for irrigation and the flushing of toilets.

North West Cambridge development, Wikipedia



New Dwellings at Eddington, Cambridge

These are desirable features but so far the development has not so far produced housing that is affordable. e.g. There is a flat with one bedroom in Eddington that can be rented for a whopping £1650 per month. (The Greater York Plan aims at rents a small fraction of that.) The property description for this Eddington flat says:

A brand new, ground floor, one bedroom apartment with private terrace area in Cambridge's newly built neighbourhood with homes, shops, a school, a state-of-the-art community centre, performing arts venue, and more just two miles northwest of Cambridge City Centre, with easy access to A14 & M11.

Flat to rent in Turing Way, Eddington, Cambridge CB3

"Easy access to the A14 & M11" shows expected lifestyles here are high in carbon emissions. It has underfloor heating and an Energy Performance of B.

The website carbon.place has estimated that residents in this area (LSOA E01017956) have carbon footprints of over 13 tonnes CO₂e a year. Even if this is a bit overestimated, it's enormous. Much of it is attributed to flying and driving cars, typical of the affluent people that can afford these rents.

To make housing much cheaper Cambridge needs a plan like this plan for a Greater York. However, Cambridge is more vulnerable to sea-level rise than York.

++ Neighbourliness in Northstowe?

The Appendix, *Building types and neighbourliness*, discusses the propinquity effect, which explains how neighbours meet each other informally (e.g. at a common post box) and get to know each other are more likely to become friends. At first glance, the new housing in Eddington looks as if it would have low propinquity, especially the blocks of flats, so neighbourliness would develop slowly. However, a friend visits occasionally, and stays opposite a local school says most parents use bikes or walking to deliver their children. More research needed.

There has been a development a few miles north of Eddington, Northstowe, where, at a cursory glance, the building types may also cause low neighbourhood propinquity.



New houses in Northstowe, near Cambridge
A harder place to get to know the neighbours?

There are also the few local facilities. Northstowe is advertised as sustainable with a strong sense of community:

Northstowe is a sustainable new development near Cambridge where modern amenities are planned in an area rich in local history. The town has a strong sense of community and an identity that is entirely unique, where health and wellbeing are promoted. At Northstowe you're never far from nature and yet only 20 minutes from Cambridge City. Northstowe, Cambridgeshire's New Town

However, the BBC headlined it as a "broken-promise new town built 'with no heart'":

The new town of Northstowe will be the UK's biggest since the development of Milton Keynes in the 1960s. But six years after the first people moved in, it still does not have a single shop, café or GP surgery.

A broken-promise new town built 'with no heart', BBC News (July 2023)

One resident, Pamela Nally, 43, bought her home here in February 2021. said:

To me, there's no heart to Northstowe.

It's like building a home without a kitchen. A kitchen is a heart of a house. A shop and a café and that local area is the heart of a town.

A broken-promise new town built 'with no heart', BBC News (July 2023)

In the Appendix *Removing Cars from Housing*, it is noted that facilities move out of neighbourhoods as cars move in. In the case of Northstowe, are facilities reluctant to move in because cars are already there?