

Span Estates: A Personal Reflection

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The lecture by Dr Barbara Simms on Span Estates prompted thoughts about suburbia and community definition. Both topics fit into a planning agenda and receive much debate.

Span Estates refer to housing developments in and around suburban London as well as latterly in towns such as Oxford. The founder of the company was the architect Eric Lyons. The development partners were not members of the RIBA, although qualified. Architects at the time were not allowed to be involved in building developments. The company attracted landscape architects. The housing developments had the characteristic of integrating landscape and open space into the layouts.

I was brought up in the area which experienced the early Span Estates with the development of Ham Common, in south London, as the main example at the time. This development has been categorised as flats and courtyards, integrating landscaped public open spaces. A management fee was paid annually for the maintenance by flat owners.

At the time of the initial developments by Span Estates was the question of source of finance for developments. The profession did not embrace involvement in developments.

Eric Lyons was able to raise funds available to all while the partners not members of the RIBA overcame membership conditions. There did remain at the time the question of how the company had access to funds with schemes seen as innovative and a risk.

There were various influences on the type and style of development. First perhaps is the function and attraction of suburban areas in London. My parents moved from the north in the 1930s to the edge of London at the time, attracted by immediate access to the countryside and convenient access to the centre of London by train. My father became a typical commuter while the housing estate had all the characteristics of suburban development. Semi-detached houses, ease of access to schools and shops and engulfing of inherited villages, towns and large buildings and amenities. Michael Frayn in his recent book *My Father's Fortune: A Life* outlines in detail a similar pattern of being attracted into suburban estates. He became an advocate of suburban life and was part of a television series on architecture, advocating his parents' choice of location.

(Michael Frayn acted as a developer and produced with the other eventual owners a terrace of houses which match their requirements in a direct gesture of participation.)

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The book by Matthew Engel, *Eleven Minutes Late, A Train Journey to the Soul of Britain* outlines the impact of the railway on suburban developments and commuter work patterns and travel.

Suburban London continued to expand engulfing those farms on the edge.

Ham Common was a high amenity open space, surrounded by large houses in their grounds. Cleared sites became available for development such as by Span Estates.

Advocates of urban renewal reacted to increasing suburbanisation. There were empty sites across inner London as a result of bombing during the Second World War. Major sites were available for redevelopment in the City of London. Peter Chamberlin argued effectively for urban renewal to avoid the suburban sprawl. His firm produced the pioneering Golden Lane block of flats in the City of London, and then produced the Barbican scheme in the City, with its housing and amenities (it included the London base for the Royal Shakespeare Company).

On the map of London at the time, plotting new housing was dominated by the erection and management of public housing. The Barbican scheme, modest in scale, was for a new middle class close to the place of work.

The Span Estates were for a middle class known now as the young professional class. They did not address community facilities such as schools, but did have a community

aim where they would support interaction between residents in a housing unit. The layouts provided a grouping of houses, say, around a cul-de-sac with the hope of identity as a community. This aim set aside a Span Estate from other housing developments at the time.

However support within an estate is debatable. There is an initial problem of not necessarily understanding community. (Sociologists have identified some 93 different definitions.) With the housing estates there were issues such as estate management and costs, social and support functions and some understanding of identity. There was the common experience such as living together through the Second World War. The views of community were recognised among the middle classes.

Wilmott and Young studied communities in the east end of London, especially those which were re-housed from high density terrace housing. The strong sense of community was lost on change of location and housing types (blocks of flats). The community spirit included support systems especially held together by poverty, but also the dimension of immigration. Different continental European countries and Irish provided their own identity in the east end of London.

Span Estates appealed to the aspiring professional groups. The Wilmott and Young observations appear not to be applicable. There are the observable status symbols and neighbourly competition. The barbeque set in each garden or court became the

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common symbol. Such fashions appeared to be a result of marketing through the colour magazine which was introduced in the early days of Span Estates. They retained being fashionable. Habitat produced furniture to match, to the blessing of the cultural historian.

Michael Frayn lectures on the current lack of community. Two of his recent books reminisce about a time when there was community spirit and dependency as a consequence of the war experience. The strength of local organisations after the war fell away as the post-war adult population passed.

The starting point for this paper lay with the Span estate at Ham Common. A further site became available off Ham Common but developed to the design of Stirling and Gowan. It was a brick and concrete block in the Brutalist style. This scheme became a cult scheme if not for all occupants.

Meanwhile other estates were being developed by house-builders, usually subject to strong criticism by architectural commentators. The specific scheme near Ham Common was Tudor in style with streets known as Tudor Lane and Tudor Avenue. The style was poor arts and crafts within large leafy trees.

The initial Span developments were influenced by the Festival of Britain in 1951 and an involving contemporary style. This approach included the integration of landscape with buildings as well as artworks with a view of colour, texture and form which

provided a picturesque aesthetic. There was also a display of new technologies which were not transferable into housing.

The book on traditional construction details by McKay was the initial source. The hanging tiles of the early scheme were a characteristic, using McKay details. Eric Lyons was a hands-on principal architect. There are various stories. An example was the reduction of 75 diameter rainwater pipe to 50 diameter. This was not just cost-saving but an aesthetic decision to establish a refined, variously textured outcome.

This contrasted with the Stirling and Gowan design approach where all details were large and relatively crude. This illustrated a wider debate. The Festival of Britain divided approaches into two groups. There were those who emerged in Britain influenced by exhibition design (only form of work during the Second World War and immediately after the war) and an English delight in the underplayed and picturesque. A radical alternative emerged as an approach influenced by the work of Le Corbusier and other central European architects. This alternative was underwritten by a form of social idealism. Examples of the approach to housing is seen in the Parkhill flats in Sheffield and the Robin Hood flats in London.

The speaker, Dr Barbara Simms, mentioned the community aims of the Span Estates, with reference to examples in continental Europe. Examples were requested by John Rosser from the audience. These may occur but I offer a commercial skill

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as the characteristic of the Span Estates. Eric Lyons gave public talks and lectures in the local school of architecture. He was one of a group of architects who claimed being socialist, covering though improving the housing conditions while using other schemes to give authority to housing types and layout. I recall him praising Scandinavian Modern. Sweden was the model country showing the potential of public housing and evidence of the welfare state. This was to justify the Span approach.

The Swedish approach did not always go down well among potential purchasers of Span houses. Eric Lyons changed the country to Switzerland to justify the Ham Common scheme. The schemes were not named but the Swiss provided the authority. The Ham Common scheme was different in its layout of flats and courts with an emphasis on landscape and needed justification.

At the same time a housing scheme by Atelier 5 was being built in rural Switzerland as a row of terrace houses. The scheme was refined Le Corbusier and was admired by the protagonists of the Modern Movement. A scheme by Benson and Forsyth was adopted by the radical groups in London.

Wates took on the challenge set by the Span Estates and the radical alternatives, by employing Atelier 5 while acknowledging their aesthetic. The annual maintenance charge was adopted as was the importance of landscape. Wates cited Span Estates. Barratts joined the list of house builders who were influenced by the success of Span Estates, by employing architects, responding

to context, landscaping and maintenance charges.

The flats and courtyard layout at Ham Common allowed occupants to overlook the courts and minimised vandalism. The sole sculpture was subject to vandalism but, I believe, only once. Planting and trees eventually grew both in the public and private open spaces. Where private, the owners were required to maintain their own efforts. A management fee covered maintenance of the public spaces. Eric Lyons supported the arts as shown at the Festival of Britain. A court in the Ham Common scheme received a metal sculpture (abstracted figure).

Other schemes were built by Span Estates. Blackheath received various schemes with the terrace house the common pattern.

Eric Lyons became President of the RIBA (and stopped, by the way, the takeover of the RIBA by the public architects). Subsequent developments included releasing the architects to allow them to operate as developers. Meanwhile the barbeques continue to burn during those few days of the year when climate permits.