

# Custom build – can it work in London?



ABOVE: 1512 Custom Build Section  
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Authorities will have new obligations to achieve custom built homes. How will they meet them? asks Luke Tozer



Luke Tozer, partner Pitman Tozer Architects

What is Custom build and how does it differ from Self Build? Custom build is part of the Self Build family, where instead of an individual doing their own Grand Design (self build), a custom developer helps an individual or group through part or all of the process, giving the customer choices along the way. It's been happening in Europe for ages where Custom and Self Build makes up to 80% of new build homes in Austria but in the UK, it's mostly Self Build and accounts for less than 10% of new completions, providing roughly 10,000 new homes each year.

If it's so popular abroad, why hasn't it happened here? Barriers to self and custom build have been identified by the government as land supply and procurement; access to finance; the planning process; and general regulation and red tape. In short, the whole process of getting something built, the way we do it, in the UK. A cultural and legislative shift is needed here in order to lessen the barriers, and make the fringe activity more mainstream. This is beginning to happen through increased land supply and planning, see below, but all developers agree UK Custom build is in its infancy and taking time to mature.

There are two main emerging types of Custom build, which

address issues of affordability and consumer choice:

**Self finish homes:** Here the developer provides a watertight, warm, external envelope with services, a shell, which the customer then fits out themselves. The shell is Building Regulations compliant and mortgageable such that the new owner can move in and fit it out over time as their finances and skills allow.

Gus Zogolovitch of custom build developer Inhabit homes (<http://www.inhabithomes.co.uk>) likens the difference between volume house building and custom and self finish homes to "the difference between buying a ready meal or cooking a meal yourself". From his perspective Inhabit's model of selling homes at shell gives customers choice and potential savings while saving significant time on site, lowering the cost of the build and speeding up the development cycle, improving profits.

They are currently adopting this approach at a development of five homes in Peckham. In this scheme of terraced houses, they offer the customer to buy at 'golden brick' in which they own the land and contract us to build the shell or buy a water- >>>

tight shell once complete. With either option the purchasers can customise the fit out themselves.

Neil Double of Naked House (<http://nakedhouse.org>), a not for profit community group set up to address affordability in London, uses Custom Build as a model and aims to provide 'Naked', intermediate homes for its members on incomes from £25-80k to purchase. He estimates that self finish can save new owners 20-30 per cent of the cost of the home.

**Consumer choice and customer involvement in design**

An alternative approach is where the Custom developer provides the finished house, but gives the customer options and opportunities for customisation along the way. Isabel Allen of HAB Housing says 'Consumers have come to expect increasing levels of choice and opportunities for personalisation when they buy holidays or cars. I think it's inevitable that they will demand opportunities to customise their homes' and views it as inevitable that a degree of custom build will become the norm for mainstream housebuilders. She sees the advantages of an approach that is adaptive to local need and collaborative and blurs the boundaries between the developer and the local community, where many of the eventual purchasers already live. HAB Housing have recently launched a small scheme of custom build homes near Winchester at Kings Worthy.

Igloo have pioneered an approach, more common in the Netherlands and Germany, where as developer they provide serviced plots and access to a range of house manufacturers who each provide a pattern book of customisation options for the customer to select from. They are looking at applying this model to a "floating village" in Royal Victoria Dock with 50 custom build homes.

**Why now?**

The government is keen to encourage Self and Custom build, to provide much needed additional housing capacity to the traditional house builders. It provides an additional rather than competing solution to the housing crisis.

The Self-Build and Custom Housebuilding Act proposed by Richard Bacon MP under the coalition government achieved Royal Assent on 26th March 2015 and placed a duty on local authorities to keep a register of individuals and community groups who want to acquire land for self and custom build projects (<http://localselfbuildregister.co.uk>). It requires them to take account of and make provision for their interests in the Local Authorities housing initiatives and local plans.

The new Conservative government with its renewed emphasis on home ownership has reiterated the desire for more Custom and Self build in the Housing and Planning Bill, which is currently making its way through the committee

stages (<http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/bills/cbill/2015-2016/0075/16075.pdf>). This bill places a duty on local authorities to grant planning permission for self build homes to meet the local need as demonstrated by the local self build register.

The self build association NaCSBA ([www.nacsba.org.uk](http://www.nacsba.org.uk)) launched a toolkit for Local Authorities ([customandselfbuild-toolkit.org.uk](http://customandselfbuild-toolkit.org.uk)) to assist them in meeting these new obligations and sets out examples of best practice. NaCSBA estimates that due to this new legislation, approximately 10,000 additional building plots will be available over the next 2-3 years. Ted Stevens, of NaCSBA, says "community groups are springing up all the time, clambering to get Custom Build schemes off the ground." So moves are afoot to address the land supply and planning barriers. It remains to be seen whether Local Authorities, already stretched by budget cuts, will have the skills necessary to adequately meet these additional demands, even with NaCSBA's help.

**What are the specific challenges and opportunities in London?**

In a word, land: its ownership and its cost. Other than vanguard developers like Inhabit there are currently few able to compete for land on the open market and none seemingly able to apply this model at a significant scale. So the greatest challenge is land and this is where the opportunity for Local Authorities and the GLA comes in. Either by becoming custom build developers, or by teaming up with them, there is potential for Local Authorities to utilize their existing land assets, provide housing for locals and gain an income, without selling off the family silver.

Naked House (full disclosure, with Pitman Tozer Architects) are working currently on a series of schemes in Enfield on Council Owned land, old garage sites and small sites, where the council retains the Freehold and grants a long leasehold to the developer and charges a ground rent. Here it's a reversion, almost, to the long established Freehold Leasehold model, used by the great estates of Portman, Howard De Walden and Grosvenor. Something London has had success with in the past. Naked House will develop the shell and its members (on incomes of £25k-85k) will be able to purchase a 'naked' flat and fit it out themselves as their finances allow.

While planning has been a challenge for certain types of custom build to date, there is an expectation that with the obligations on Local Authorities in the Housing and Planning Bill, these are set to be eased.

**Community involvement**

Custom Build represents a significant opportunity for Local Authorities to engage with the local community to address the



effects of rising house prices and affordability. Locals interested in custom or self build are registering themselves online. What better way for public land to be used than to allow local people to be able to build, at least in part, their own home?

**Design opportunities of Custom Build and its wider potential**

Designing a flexible envelope that can be configured in a variety of layouts and then designing a suite of components from which the customer can select is potentially closer to the Georgian pattern book model than anything the volume house builders have come up with. There is a real opportunity for manufacturers (IKEA has been developing a model for this) to increase supply and help address issues of rising construction cost and skills shortages.

There is the opportunity for designers of working closely with a developer to design an adaptable model, a prototype, with potential for reproduction and scalability, combined with the more familiar process of working with the individual customers to make that into a specific home.

If concentrating on designing the shell and leaving the internal finishes fit out to the owners seems to move away from the traditional architectural desire of producing a Gesamtkunstwerk, it could also remove a lot of the pain and speed up the process and number of homes architects could

ABOVE: Blenheim Grove

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deliver. It could significantly broaden the built impact of well designed, adaptable homes.

**What can you do?**

First and foremost if you are interested in being a self or custom builder in London you could apply to be on the self build register, and encourage others, clients etc to do so too (<http://localselfbuildregister.co.uk>).

If you contact the head your Local Authority planning department to ask them how they anticipate meeting their obligations under the new legislation and how many custom and self build schemes they have granted consent to date. The answer, if not "I don't know" will be "hardly any". That at least is set to change. ■

*Additional Reading:*  
 Self build portal, run by NaCSBA:  
<http://www.selfbuildportal.org.uk>  
 For best practice examples, by NaCSBA:  
[Customandselfbuildtoolkit.org.uk](http://customandselfbuildtoolkit.org.uk)  
 Self Build and Custom Housebuilding Act 2015  
<http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2015/17/contents/enacted>  
 House of Commons Briefing Paper, June 2015 "Self-build and custom build housing (England)" by Wendy Wilson