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Claire Bennie,
Peabody's Director
of Development
Interviewed by
Edward Wainwright

Designing development



1 Adam Khan Architects' entry for the Pembury Youth Hall site

Claire Bennie trained as an architect at the University of Bath and Glasgow School of Art. Moving from an Associate position at Proctor and Matthews architects in London in 2003, Bennie took up the post of Research Manager at Peabody, where she has been Development Director since 2011. In this role, Bennie manages a 'development pipeline' of over 3000 homes across twelve of London's boroughs, with a mix of tenures. Bennie's architect-background positions her as a design-centred development director, and she was the force behind the recent Small Projects Panel competition.

EW: Why did you launch this competition?

CB: At Peabody we are engaged in building a pipeline of a thousand homes a year of mixed-tenure, mixed-sized schemes. Some of which we will be buying from developers and some we will be developing ourselves. It's a really mixed portfolio. Having come from a base in 2009 of not developing anything much at all, we have now had four years experience of building up that pipeline and trying to establish which organisations we want to work with. We've had a fantastic architect and others panel for the four years, but we realised that there was a real gap. We had quite a few small schemes that we wanted to do, tricky schemes on our estates, or we maybe had a big masterplan where we wanted to do a special building, and we just found that it was very difficult for our more established architects to find time to do those smaller schemes. I know, just from my own education and experience, that there are many smaller firms out there, who love that kind of work. For these more emergent firms, these smaller schemes are a perfect opportunity to get some great experience with Peabody; to experience our estate managers; to really understand an affordable-housing client better; and what I get is director level service, innovation, people who are very excited about something which has got fifteen homes.

So we ran the competition to just get people energised and excited about smaller schemes and to tap into the latent talent that was there. And the other obvious reason was that public sector procurement rules mean that smaller firms and less established firms get cut out of having public-sector clients as

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they don't pass the hurdles and tests. I think sometimes public-sector clients think that you have to have these hurdles. Of course you have to have some of these requirements. You have to manage your risk, but we wanted to lower the bar to an appropriate risk level and say you can let people in, even if they haven't designed any housing, so long as they can design buildings, relate to people, and really think hard about what it is when people live in close proximity to each other. All of our six winners really proved that not only could they design, but they were also incredibly engaged with neighbourhoods and communities. It makes you realise that there is so much there that we can tap into and use, and other commercial house builders have contacted me and said that the competition was so interesting, and will be talking to some of the entrants as well, and that to me is almost the biggest success.

What was the response like from the architectural community?

We got over 300 responses, and we really struggled to get it down to below 100. It was an astonishing response, and I spoke to some smaller firms before the competition to determine whether the timescale was appropriate, and we spent a lot of time thinking about the scale and scope of the competition itself.

What commonalities were there between these entries? Did you see a certain type emerge from the proposals?

We asked them to show us a scheme that they had done, and what they had learnt from it, and then also design us a scheme on one of three sites, of which 150 picked the Morpeth Road site in Hackney. The least attractive site proved to be the least popular, but produced some of the best schemes, and with such tight sites, definite typologies emerged. What was amazing was the level of graphical ability on display in the entries. The stunning representations really conveyed the scope of the schemes, they looked compelling, and really fitted in to their contexts.

With that level of passion and engagement from the smaller practice, do you end up with a higher design quality?

I think you end up with the same quality, but what you get with those firms who are able and willing to develop more options is a greater degree of time and energy to put into iterative design. The smaller practices have a greater capacity and openness to accept this backwards and forwards approach to design and engagement with communities, as they are searching for typologies and solutions that have yet to be defined. There's just some kind of energy in the room with these smaller practices, where people are coming fresh, and haven't yet been jaded by regulations and bureaucracy.

To play devil's advocate for a moment, as a development manager, isn't cost the most important thing to consider in this climate?

Cost is important in itself, and the most important thing for me is getting the best possible design and it not costing a stupid amount of money. It's always incredibly important to think about whole life costs. We're looking after buildings that after 152 years are still going, and the reason is really solid components and very simple details. To me, you spend the money on the details and components, and then it lasts longer. Cost in use is phenomenal and as much, if not more important, than the initial capital costs. The initial costs are key as it has to make sense in the appraisal, but having to replace a component twenty times over the life of a building is cripplingly expensive, incredibly annoying for our residents, and costs a fortune on service charges. The important thing is to target spend, and what our interviews with the twenty shortlisted candidates for the Small Projects Panel proved was that they all understood that.

Within that context, the types of projects that seem to grab headlines are the ones that offer an immediate fix and a cheap solution to an immediate need. I'm thinking here about YMCA working with Rogers Stirk Harbour + Partners (RSHP) recently to design movable units – stackable blocks for short-term housing need. Is this something you'd be interested in considering?

I don't rule it out at all, and I would trust someone like RSHP to get the product absolutely right. If you spend ages on that one product, on every material and every junction, and thoughts about maintenance and how you're going to replace components over time, then why not try and get something cheap and stacking. Ten or fifteen years ago, Peabody did a number of prefab schemes which were all about the same price as an ordinary scheme to be honest, but that's because we spent ages on the unit with AHMM and others, and if we'd done 2000 of them on huge pieces of land given to us by



2 Jan Kattein Architects' designs for the Morpeth Road site

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3 Lyndon Goode Architects' scheme for the Palmer Garages site



4 Pitman Tozer Architects' entry for the Palmer Garages site

the public sector, they might have started making sense over time. But for small, bespoke schemes it doesn't make any sense to do them prefab. It's absolutely right that people try and save that cost, as long as it lasts over time. It's no good if it's solely a quick fix. You could do a temporary solution to housing needs, but ultimately people want to settle in to communities. Maybe there's a two-track solution: there's a quick fix, while a longer-term development is constructed. The danger is another post-war system building disaster, where we're now knocking them down fifty years later.

What's Peabody's role in providing for the longer-term challenge of housing that certainly London's facing, and large parts of the rest of the UK?

Our goal at the moment is building a thousand homes a year, and that's of various tenures, but in the end we're just one provider among many, and a thousand homes a year isn't going to solve the crisis. The most significant thing we're doing is our current merger with Gallions Housing Association, and we are now proud owners of a significant amount of the Thamesmead Estate in south-east London, an exciting and very challenged place that's had piecemeal investment over the years. It's just about to be at the end of the Crossrail line, which gives us an incredible opportunity to really rethink the homes there as well as the business investment in general, and there is outline consent existing for 2500 homes on the river, which will become an increasingly viable proposition as values increase. We're almost hoping to do a new garden suburb in Thamesmead, with the promise of an incredible transport connection to Canary Wharf and central London. It's a 20/25 year project, but that would see us delivering new neighbourhoods and communities, and really mixing the tenures in that area, as well as seeing businesses, inward investment and jobs move into a place. It's the biggest thing Peabody would have done for quite some time. We've got 27,000 homes in the Peabody group now, and that's over 152 years, which is two hundred homes or so a year. It's a very organic process, and house building often is. We will keep doing the maximum we can to build housing in London, but even at the very peaks of activity in development in our history, at a thousand homes a year, that'll be the fastest rate Peabody has ever built at. So we hope to be part of the solution to London's housing situation, and we hope to be a part which delivers really robust, long-term and solid homes that people want to live in.

What sort of a mix of tenure are you looking at in these thousand homes a year?

It's probably going to end up at 40% for market sale whatever we do, just because there is now no, or very little subsidy from the public purse for affordable house building, so we are destined to build more for market sale and rent. We'd love to do more affordable homes than that, but the economic constraints mean that's not possible.

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To produce housing at all then, I suppose you have to work within that market, particularly without funding from central government?

Yes, you do. If we are going to sell 40% of the homes we build, we need to maximise the value we are going to get for those homes, so we can maximise the cross-subsidy going to the affordable and we will sell to a variety of people: Londoners, UK investors, but important to that is community. That might sound a bit clichéd to say, but we wouldn't want too many very transient users on the estates, because it creates issues like not being able to get hold of absentee landlords. But we are very torn between selling to people who will be able to provide us with that early, captive income to be able to build as much affordable as we can, and making sure there's a community there at the end of the day.

If there's open market sale of 40% of the development, how can you ensure that those communities are able to flourish, particularly with high-turnover and transient populations moving through buy-to-let investment properties?

We remain the freeholders, and we do all the maintenance, the cleaning, the grounds, and the more we expand our market rent portfolio, we will be in control of managing those tenancies as well. We can manage anti-social residents, give people longer-term tenancies that we know they value, and if people buy-to-let on our new-builds, we will be talking to them and offering to manage their properties, as that will give us the overview and provide a good service to those buyers.

Do you think it's within Peabody's remit to place restrictions on the sale of your properties to buy-to-let landlords, in order to retain the control over the ownership?

No. It makes the developments much less mortgageable, and it cuts down on potential purchasers, and we are simply not in the position to pick and choose in that way. We've got to compete against private-sector developers, who are fine with that, and if people think we are anti buy-to-let, then there's a problem. But what we can do is offer the management service, and then we have much more control over the running of these estates, and we can really encourage people to stay with us for much longer. We have to act in a fairly commercial way, as we are now competing with others who wouldn't think twice about selling to investors.

How accurate is the depiction that we see in the media of London's housing crisis?

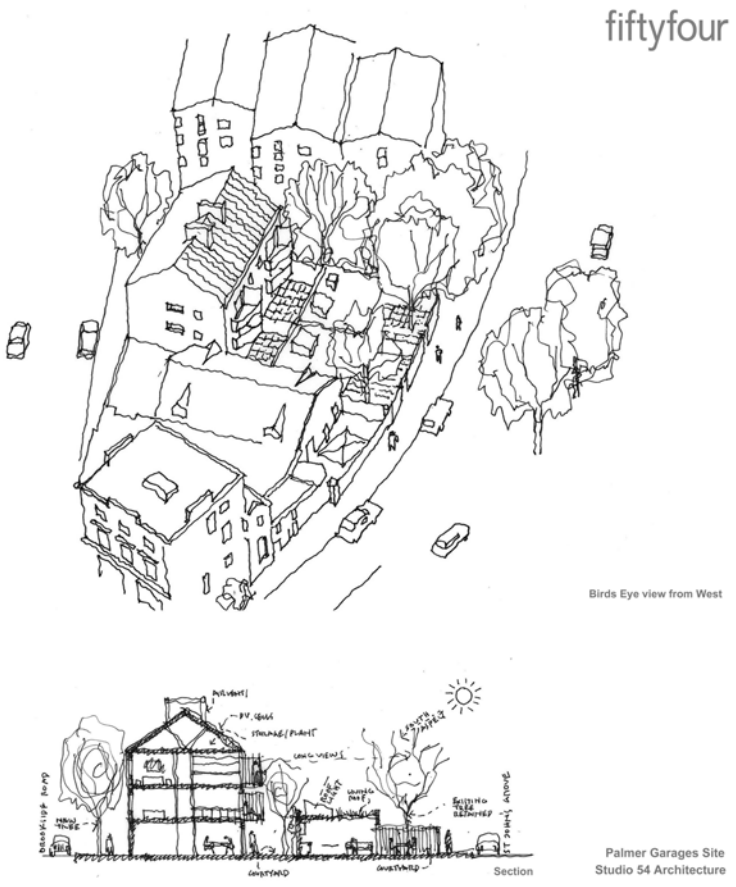
Is there a crisis? You bet. First time buyers are completely locked out. There was a tremendous article in *The Independent*, which summarised the ten reasons popularly given as to why there is a housing crisis, and the ten commonly stated mechanisms to deal with this. The author suggested that only about two of these solutions would actually do anything, and he came down on the side that planning and nimbyism were the big problems, with people not wanting new housing anywhere near them, and the big struggle to release green-belt land.

I suppose there's potentially a quite interesting relationship back to the idea of running a competition for small practices, as the whole passion behind these practices to work with communities, to develop iterative schemes and produce actively engaged proposals that might start to break down that 'not in my back yard' attitude that seems to accompany many less well articulated and thoughtful schemes, is often their way of working.

Indeed. If you're going to introduce a large chunk of housing into an existing community, and get three architects to come and tell the story of how that will work, and how that will be a positive change – that can certainly help the process along. But change is change, and it's a question of navigating people through it in the best possible way.

To take the conversation back to the competition, what are the next steps?

We are going to give the three practices the three sites and let them get on with designing those fully. We've exhibited the work at New London Architecture, and were able to help initiate



5 Studio 54 Architecture's proposal for the Palmer Garages site

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6 Urban Salon's design for the Morpeth Road site

conversations with the shortlisted architects and interested local authorities who have large amounts of captive land. We have struggled on at least three other small sites recently, so I'm pretty confident we'll be able to give all six winners of the Small Projects Panel sites in the next nine months or so. And we've just gained board approval to do over a thousand more homes on three or four sites – much bigger schemes, but I really hope that within those there will be particular buildings that we can get these practices involved in and taken under the wing of the larger projects panel.

Do you think you're likely to run a competition like this in the future?

Yes. In terms of public procurement rules, every four years gives us a fantastic opportunity to run a competition, but I'm sure there'll be some more one-off competitions within that four-year time frame. It's been an exciting and interesting competition to run, and it's brought to the surface architects who are tremendous people who really do care about communities.

You suggested that some developers have been in contact with you and are really quite interested in working with practices like these?

Yes. It has given these developers a window into what's out there. It's like a door opening into a world that often developers just don't have the time to go through, so what we did enabled others to see that world. It's hard for developers to resource, finding innovative and community-engaged designers. People are strapped for time and resources, and a little bit risk averse, concerned that they'll end up with unachievable designs from less experienced practices, but almost the first thing I'll say to the designers is that these projects have to be affordable, and a lot of them are excited by this challenge.

As someone with an architectural background, does that help you take those risks, and know that designers you'll work with can make these projects happen within quite tight budgets?

Without a doubt – it means I know it can be done. It probably means a little bit more work on our side to guide the process, and more time input, but it pays dividends in the outcomes.

Is there more of a call then for young architects in training to perhaps become development managers and associated professionals, planners and the like, rather than follow the more conventional architectural design route?

Yes, I completely believe in that. I'm a convert from architectural practice myself, and a lot of people who have studied architecture have enormous intellectual and other qualities that mean they should flip onto the other side of the fence and commission stuff. It's immensely rewarding, and they're in a great position to do it. But it was only working here in among our existing buildings for two or three years that everything was brought home to me about what it is to look after a building in the long term; what goes wrong with them and hence what you have to do at the outset.

It appears architectural education doesn't do anything to support people in those other ways of thinking – that you can have architectural impact beyond the process of being an architect. There's a whole range of other activities and roles you can inhabit that influence the built environment.

I suppose most people go into the profession as there is that creative drive, but I feel that what my fantastic colleagues and I do does feel very creative. It's very rewarding, and not having to go away and do the ironmongery schedules – its brilliant!

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