

Honey, I shrunk the flats

29 January 2015 | By Paul McGrath



Paul McGrath is intrigued by one (very) small house builder with deep Pockets

Pocket Living, the niche developer that provides “compact” homes for first-time buyers, must be near the top of any architect’s wish list of desirable clients.

Design led and flush with a £21.7 million loan from the Greater London Authority, it is set fair to provide London with 4,000 new homes by 2023.

At Archiboo’s latest networking event in Vitra’s Clerkenwell showroom, Russ Edwards, Pocket’s design director, was asked to talk about the firm’s core values and what it expects from the architects it commissions.



Russ Edwards, Pocket design director

Everything Pocket does reeks of style. Its niche is delivering single-bedroom homes across London at 20% below local market prices. For “enlightened” local authorities tasked with delivering affordable housing, that is a powerful message they cannot ignore.

Armed with the mayor’s interest-free money and the assistance of a small coterie of architects, it is busy being “different” to other developers. As a result, some local authorities have asked it to reinvigorate stalled “section 106” schemes with its unique proposition. Doing things differently clearly has its advantages.

In facilitating this talk and others, Archiboo is seeking to introduce architects to new ways of thinking. It was refreshing to hear how Pocket is responding to the introduction of the London Housing Design Guide which potentially threatens its niche market. Last year, Pocket invited 19 architectural practices to submit design ideas for a 2-bed 2-person home; a category the London Housing Design Guide does not currently acknowledge.

By using architects’ ability to visualise conceptual thinking, its aim is to demonstrate to politicians, policy makers and the like how this can be achieved. As Edwards says, “good design impresses planners”.

Edwards is confident there is a big market for 2-bed 2-person homes so it will be interesting to see whether Pocket’s ambitions will be stifled by an overly oppressive imposition of minimum space standards.

As an architect talking to mostly architects, Edwards naturally understated the role its architects have in delivering Pocket’s core product: well-designed homes at “affordable” prices. That is probably because Edwards is also an architect who intrinsically appreciates the value of good innovative design but is canny enough to know exactly which architects really understand Pocket’s core values.

If you would like to work for Pocket, Edwards had these words of advice:

Invite him to your workplace.

Convince him your practice has the capacity to deliver.

Explain what you have done and why.

Ensure your personality shines.

If you impress, your practice will then be tracked on its progress. You will also be judged on your ability to represent Pocket and your relationship with the planners in your area. Expect to hear a lot more from Pocket in the future.

Design competition

Pocket held a competition to find innovative designs for affordable two-bedroom homes in the capital.

The idea was to find a design that would open up home ownership to couples with young children, joint buyers, and single-parent families who earn too much to qualify for social housing but are priced out of the open market.

The winners were:

- David Kohn Architects
- HAT Projects
- Mikhail Riches
- Henley Halebrown Rorrison Architects
- Weston Williamson & Partners

The longlist was: Atelier One; CF Møller; David Kohn Architects; Figure/Ground Architects; HAT Projects; Hawkins Brown; Haworth Tompkins; Henley Halebrown Rorrison Architects; Jestico & Whiles; Lyndon Goode; Mikhail Riches; Nord; Proctor & Matthews; RCKa; Sarah Wigglesworth Architects; Sergison Bates; Shedkm; Universal Design Studio; Weston Williamson & Partners.

Postscript:

Archiboo's next event, The Architect's Pitch, is on January 29.

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