

400 new homes to become 4,000

Pocket Living's reinvestment plan is great news for architects

Mark Wilding

Developer Pocket Living recently secured a £21.7 million loan from mayor of London Boris Johnson to build affordable housing in the capital.

The deal will initially allow Pocket to build 400 affordable homes – a decent number in itself. But the money raised from sales will then be reinvested in development, allowing Pocket to build many more homes over the next 10 years.



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Nick Williams

Senior operations director Nick Williams explains: “All the profits get reinvested in the fund, and the idea is we reinvest it five or six times. “Our target is to build somewhere between 3,500 and 4,000 homes – assuming all goes well and we find sites and get planning permission.”

The deal looks like good news for architects. Pocket has a history of working with a wide range of practices which have included HTA, PRP, Waugh Thistleton, John Thompson and Darling Associates. Williams says the size of Pocket's typical projects, between 30 and 40 units, allows the developer to work with both large and small practices.

“We like to have a balance between established firms and younger, more unusual firms coming through,” he says.

“We try to spend a fair bit of time researching which architects we should work with. We’re looking for firms that have interesting ideas rather than just ones we’ve worked with before.”

Pocket is not a charity or a housing association but it works with local authorities including Camden and Westminster to develop affordable housing. Next year it will start work in Hackney for the first time.

The new loan will be used to develop homes in eight London boroughs for the intermediate market – buyers who earn too much to qualify for social housing but can't afford to buy on the open

COUNCIL HOTELS?

Many local authorities have been increasing their house-building activity in recent months but councils are now also being encouraged to build hotels using loans from central government's Public Works Loan Board.

Travelodge has urged councils to take advantage of this cheap finance to develop hotels which the chain then occupies on 25-year leases.

Councils in Aylesbury and Eastleigh have already struck deals with the chain. Travelodge says it is in “advanced negotiations” with five more authorities and has written to 124 more across the country to suggest similar deals.

market. Williams says keeping an eye on costs while achieving good designs is a tricky business.

“We try to ensure people who are buying a flat get something that is good,” he says. “It is a challenge – you can always build things cheaper.”

The developer typically uses a design-and-build model where an architect will take the project to design stage E before handing over to a contractor.

To help keep costs down Pocket uses a standardised model for the interior layout of its homes, and has two in-house architects who work with external practices to refine the layout and finish.

“We have a definite product which we are refining all the time and we know what we want to do on the inside, which means a very clear brief for the external architect,” says Williams. “So they’re not having to reinvent the wheel in terms of designing a one-bedroom flat.”

But that's not to say there aren't opportunities for innovation. “We are looking for a degree of original thought,” says Williams.

And, of course, a tight budget can always be looked at positively as an opportunity for creative solutions. He adds: “Most of the architects we work with quite like the challenge.”



Darling Associates' Fermoy Road housing in London for Pocket Living comprises 32 one-bedroom units.