

GREEN HOUSES THE CHISEL SELF-BUILD STORY

Nicholas Taylor has been a Lewisham Councillor since 1971 and is a former Chair of Housing, Planning and Social Services Committees. He has long pioneered the cause of self-build housing, as he explains here:

Why has quiet, suburban Lewisham become internationally renowned for subversive modern architecture? Self-build, that's why. And as someone who was in on the beginning of it all, over twenty years ago, it was a thrill for me to be on the recent jury which gave Fusions Jameen and the residents of Nubia Way (along with CHISEL and SLFHA) the first prize in the recent Lewisham Quality Housing Awards. It was a delight to visit the site and then every room of one of the houses and to experience the mature and elegant self-build which CHISEL and its architects, Architype, have developed out of the original vision of Walter Segal.

The essence of the self-build philosophy is that there is no point in waiting for the rest of the world; as individuals and small groups we have to take matters into our own hands and go boldly where no one in authority has gone before. The Lewisham self-build schemes may be tiny pebbles but they have made big ripples. Fired with the inspiration of Jose Ospina - himself originally from a part of the world where self-build is the norm - CHISEL has played a crucial role, nationally important, in making self-build unstoppable as part of the great flow of progressive community action.

So it is not surprising to find at Nubia Way that CHISEL's self-builders, with their resourceful architects, have brought self-build to the leading edge of what is usually called "Agenda 21", the save-the-planet ideas, springing from the agenda of the conferences at Rio and Kyoto, of sustainability, recycling, energy conservation. The houses have thick insulation, a tight seal of double glazing and energy-efficient boilers. But the insulation is not plastic gunge: it is cellulose fibre, made of recycled newspaper in South Wales. Imagine having pulped copies of the Western Morning News and the South Wales Echo shoved up your wall cavities! On this basis, my old joke about insulating my house with Lewisham committee agendas could one day come true. To give another example, the floors are not the chemically dodgy and biologically indestructible PVC that most people go for; instead, they are good, old-fashioned linoleum, which is a mixture of natural materials: chalk and linseed oil backed by hessian. And the finishes of paint and stain and varnish are not the chemical cocktails with which ICI terrorises the health of the people of Teesside; they are all natural, organic materials, mostly manufactured in Germany because (alas) no one has yet got round to doing it here - something which, hopefully, the new government's consultation paper on sustainability and the building industry will help to change.

It is also interesting to see at Nubia Way how Walter Segal's basic principles, tried and tested, of the light-weight timber frame, flexible and adaptable, have now been related more explicitly to the local cultural expectations of pitched-roof suburbia. Walter's trademark Glasal panels (smoothly manufactured cement fibre) now appear only on the ground floor; upstairs there is elegant timber weatherboarding, traditional in Kent but here used with a modern geometry of flush joints and monopitch roofs. As I explained to the Architect's Journal back in 1980 when it wrote up the first phase of Lewisham self-build: "What Walter has done is simply to update half-timber The essence of what has been achieved here is real vernacular - not a cosmetic vernacular of gables and leaded lights, but a vernacular in the true sense, of ordinary people building with ordinary people's skills."

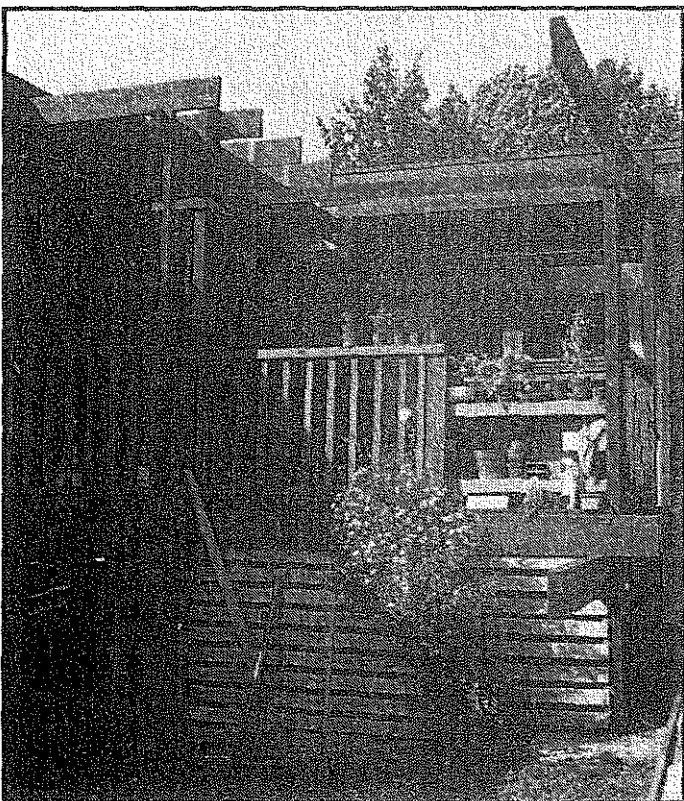
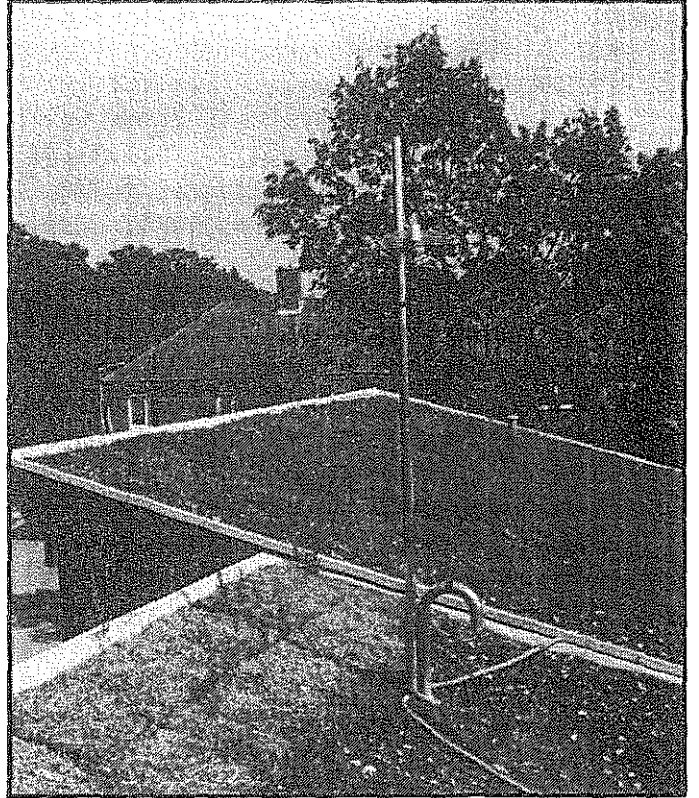
The essence of Segal's ideas still shines through, not just architecturally, but at the deeper level of populist and anarchist politics. As I wrote at the opening of the Segal exhibition at the Festival Hall in 1988: "To see Walter Segal with a group of working class self-builders was to see an architectural Peasants' Revolt in action, led by a twentieth century John Ball - a renegade priest of the Modern Movement gone out into the hedgerows of the common man." Walter, already over seventy when his self-build crusade got going, came from the heart of the Internationalist orthodoxies of modern architecture. But, having himself been brought up in a freewheeling, artistic commune on the Italian-Swiss border, he saw through the insidious dictatorship by which middle class British architects had foisted upon working class people with no choice, a straitjacket

of high rise and high density living which was profoundly alien because of its restrictions on personal freedom. Even slum houses had, after all, back yards where people could do their own thing. But for Walter it went further; having developed a method of self-build for a temporary house for his family in their Highgate garden, while their main house was being built, he realised that if he, with very limited practical skills of his own, could do it then why not millions of others? As a compulsive talker and teacher, he fairly soon got to know other people of the anarchist left who were deeply troubled by the authoritarianism of municipal housing, including the influential author Colin Ward and the architect Brian Richardson, whose spare time was dedicated to fighting for the rights of Kentish gypsies.

That, folks, is where I came in, as that much reviled creature, the Town Hall politician. Having already, in an article in the *Architectural Review* in 1967 entitled "The Failure of Housing", begun to rediscover the social and historical truths of the traditional house on the ground which led to my book, "The Village in the City" (1975), I wanted action and got myself elected as a Labour Councillor for Lewisham in 1971 (which I have been in my spare time ever since). Before a meeting of the Housing Plans Sub-Committee four years later, Brian Richardson, by then one of Lewisham's Assistant Borough Architects, suggested to me that we might try to get a self-build scheme going in Lewisham and asked me how I thought we should go about it. In the traditional democratic way, I replied, by writing a Committee report, while I went off and persuaded the Chair of Housing, Ron Pepper, that we should give it a go. As I pointed out, it could take small, spare sites which we could not economically develop by conventional means - mainly unstable clay hillsides where Segal's lightweight frames came into their own - and it could be advertised to people who were already on the Council's waiting and transfer lists. It got through the Housing Committee by one vote, opposed by the older Labour Councillors who believed in Council control and could not understand why tenants were not grateful for their tower block flats. As I rather arrogantly told the *AJ* in 1980, the whole project was a clear expression of "Lewisham's libertarian vision of a socialism which is neither of the managerial right nor the authoritarian left but which uses state intervention to release the creative energies of ordinary people". Tony Blair had only just joined the Labour Party when I wrote that yet a purer nugget of New Labourism it would be hard to dig up. Under Andy Hawkin's leadership, Lewisham was certainly then at times on the far fringes of what has now become received wisdom.

Of course, my own role was merely what is now called 'enabling'. I have never built or designed anything in my life (except the Taylor family's recent hilltop conservatory); I cannot put up a shelf; I can't even drive a car. But at least I can look round and pick up ideas and persuade people. In fact, it was as Chair of the Housing Committee in 1983 that I first spotted the Nubia Way site. Transferred to Lewisham from the GLC the previous year, along with the rest of the Downham Estate, it had been missed by Lewisham's valuers because it was occupied by a compound of garages. Local tenants complained to me that half the garages were empty and there were fires and dumping. I must admit that my first idea was to use the site for sheltered housing so as to release family houses on Downham occupied by the lone elderly. But self-build was just as good and, in the case of Fusions Jameen, has pioneered multi-ethnic housing in a neighbourhood where prejudice has been rife (witness the agonies of vandalism suffered by the self-builders).

So please forgive me CHISEL that, even though I did absolutely none of the hard work, I do get a twinge of pride when I privately 'case the joint' at this and all the other Lewisham self-build sites. I am reminded of Hawksmoor's letter to the Duchess of Marlborough in which, after all his efforts to get Vanbrugh's design for Blenheim Palace built, he confessed: "I am like the fond nurse who almost thinks the child her own". The joy of democratic politics, after all, and it must be so for development agents like CHISEL as well, is to be able to walk away afterwards, unremembered by those who enjoy the results. That is why, on the front page of my diary, I have the last words of the late, great Kurosawa's film *The Seven Samurai*, spoken by the Samurai leader in a tone of noble resignation as he and his surviving comrades look out over the rescued villagers busy once more in their paddy fields: "We have lost again; it is the farmers who have won, not us".



Award winning houses at
Nubia Way.

Grass roof at Nubia Way. The
pipe is the self- builder's own
device and is to pass the TV
aerial cable through the roof.
Stained timber terrace at
Lowther Hill.

Imagine a house builder. You're not visualising Paula McGeechan. Paula is young and glam; she wears smart clothes and lipstick. She also spent two and a half years caked in grime, building her own home. This is her story:

"I was living with my children in a two bed flat on a Greenwich Council estate when I got a letter from the founders of Greenwich Self-Build Co-op. They'd written to everyone on the council's transfer list, inviting us to the Town Hall for a meeting about joining a self-build project. We saw a slide-show by Architype, the architects, and heard a talk by someone who'd already built their own home and I was interested straight away.

It was always my dream to have my own house. As children, we used to talk about collecting enough LEGO to build a real Wendy House and now I was being offered the chance to build my own home bit by bit.

So I applied to become a member of the Co-op, was interviewed and joined up. For ages, it seemed like nothing was ever going to happen, there was so much bureaucracy and red tape to contend with, but suddenly it all came together. Unfortunately, by then everyone else had dropped out, including the founder members, so I had to start all over again, interviewing and finding people to join the Co-op.

We did all the work ourselves. The heavy stuff we did as a group - site clearance, digging the foundations and the main drains, making and raising the wooden frames. But once those were in place, we could start putting the joists in and everyone worked on their own individual places, though we still helped each other out with heavy work like roofing or fitting the windows. By the time I started on my own house, I'd met Stephen, so we worked together on it.

Everyone put in loads of hours but we weren't all there at the same time. I tended to work during the day because I had children but most of the others had daytime jobs so they worked on their houses in the evenings and at weekends.

As well as all the building work, we still had to run the Co-op which met once a month and I was also on the Management Committee which sorted out a lot of the detail. Sometimes, I'd get home from building all day, cook the kids their dinners and then be on the phone the rest of the evening, dealing with other peoples' problems.

It does put a strain on your relationships when you're spending all your spare time building. It is very hard work, especially in winter when you're up to your eyes in clay, thick with mud and dust. Also, you're working to a time limit, which adds to the pressure. But you finish the foundations and see the layout of your home; you complete the frame and you can see the structure take shape; you put in the windows and suddenly it looks like a real house and you feel such a sense of achievement that it all becomes worthwhile.

We did everything ourselves, even the site security. Once the boilers and kitchens and so on were in we didn't want to leave the site unprotected for fear of theft or vandalism so, as soon as one room was finished, we took turns to stay overnight. We moved in bunk beds and stayed there with the kids - using the site loo in the middle of the night was the worst bit.

It took two and a half years to complete the work, a year longer than originally intended. I'm not sorry we did it though, I'd make the same decision again. People who saw the site before we started never thought we'd build a house - they just can't believe it when they see it. My only regret is that now it's done we can't buy it though you could never rent any other kind of house that would feel so much like home. Although we're now considering buying our own place, it breaks my heart to think about moving out and someone else living in it and perhaps not looking after it like we do. After all we've been through together, we're so close to all the other self-builders as well. I always say, with self-build it's not just about building houses, it's about building homes; and not just homes but friendships and communities too. That's really what CHISEL is all about."

CHISEL was the first housing association in the country to develop self-build for rent schemes. In all, nine developments have been completed, four in Lewisham, three in Greenwich, one in Brighton and one in Colchester. These schemes have been quite unique, both in the level of participation they have afforded the self-build co-ops and in the importance they have attached to ecological awareness in their design.

1990-91 CHISEL receives allocations from the Housing Corporation for self-build for rent schemes of 5 houses at Herbert (later Llanover) Road in Greenwich and 4 houses at Brockley Park in Lewisham. Scheme architects are Architype, specialists in self-build construction using the pioneering Walter Segal system.

Unfortunately, the Department of the Environment does not agree procedures for self-build for rent schemes, so CHISEL cannot get direct funding from the Housing Corporation. However, the Housing Corporation will permit them to be funded out of TARIFF, a block funding arrangement for larger housing associations, so CHISEL teams up with South London Family Housing Association which agrees to incorporate CHISEL's allocation into its TARIFF programme.

South London Family Housing Association develops the financial model which makes all future self-build for rent development possible. It manages to stretch CHISEL's allocation to fund an additional scheme of 4 houses at Lowther Hill near Brockley Park in Lewisham.

1991-2 The site at Herbert Road is purchased from Greenwich Council; sites at Brockley Park and Lowther Hill are bought from Lewisham Council. Fusions Jameen, a black and minority ethnic co-op, commences building at Brockley Park and Lowther Hill after site preparation by a building contractor.

CHISEL receives an allocation for 8 houses at Prospect Vale in Greenwich as part of a consortium led by London and Quadrant Housing Association which processes the funding through its TARIFF programme. Greenwich Self-Build Co-op commences construction at the site.

CHISEL receives an allocation for 9 houses in Brighton for Diggers Self-Build Co-op at the Hollingbury Old Golf Club. The site is bought at the end of the year after extensive negotiations with Brighton Council over the lease, which precludes the raising of private finance and voluntary sales to tenants.

1992-3 Brighton Diggers Co-op commences construction.

CHISEL receives an allocation for 12 houses at Drakefell Road in Brockley. The scheme, for Greenstreet Housing Co-op, has been produced by architects Potter and Holmes, the only scheme not designed by Architype. Purchase of the site is delayed by negotiations with the London Borough of Lewisham which eventually fails to obtain possession of part of the site still occupied by two pre fabs. As a result, only 10 houses can be built; the funding for the other two is transferred to Nubia Way for the following year. The scheme is processed through South London Family Housing Association's Cash Programme (the replacement for TARIFF)

Fusions Jameen wins a Department of the Environment/Royal Institute of British Architects Housing Project Design Award for the schemes at Brockley Park and Lowther Hill.

1993-4 CHISEL receives an allocation for 11 houses at Nubia Way in Lewisham for Fusions Jameen. The site is purchased and site preparations begun for 13 houses, the two extra houses being provided by the funding transferred from Drakefell Road. Funding is processed through South London Family Housing Association's Cash Programme.

CHISEL receives an allocation for 12 houses at Birchdene Drive, Thamesmead, for Greenwich Self-Build Co-op, processed through London and Quadrant Housing Association's Cash Programme.

CHISEL, in partnership with Shaftesbury Housing Association, receives an allocation from Colchester Council for 5 houses at Marks Tey, Colchester, for Roxborough Housing Co-op. The houses are all for people in wheelchairs and the building work is carried out by able-bodied family members assisted by a local Community Service scheme and Habitat for Humanity, a Christian group which promotes self-build housing.

1994-5 Fusions Jameen commences building at Nubia Way.

Brighton Diggers and Herbert Road, now renamed Llanover Road, achieve completion and have their official openings.

Brighton Diggers wins a DOE/RIBA Housing Project Design Award and a British Gas Premier Housing Award for energy efficiency.

CHISEL transfers most of its staff to South London Family Housing Association with which it enters into a service agreement to manage and develop its schemes. It retains an independent Management Committee and a part-time administrator.

1995-6 The schemes at Brockley Park and Lowther Hill are completed and opened with an official launch celebration.

The scheme at Prospect Vale is completed.

1996-7 The scheme at Marks Tey is completed.

The first properties are handed over at Birchdene Drive.

Brighton Diggers wins a DOE/RIBA Housing Design Award.

1997-8 Birchdene Drive, Nubia Way and Drakefell Road are all completed.

Nubia Way wins the first ever "Quality Homes for Lewisham" award, presented by the London Borough of Lewisham.



Self build at LLanover Road.