

# Back to Back is back!

Peter Barber demonstrates how his Mcgrath Road project is a reworking of back to back housing.



Peter Barber is principal of Peter Barber architects

Back to back housing was the default typology for low cost high density housing in many northern and midland industrial cities during their rapid expansion in the nineteenth century. Hundreds of thousands were built in cities like Manchester, Liverpool, Nottingham, Birmingham and Leeds, though strangely it was rare in London. Their construction was outlawed in the 1909 Housing Act although some local authorities sanctioned their continued construction as recently as the late 1930's.

In my view the type had a great many benefits. They were cheap to build and therefore relatively inexpensive to rent, they were arranged along streets and in courts which assisted in creating the potential for neighbourliness. They delivered reasonably high density while providing people with a house rather than a flat.

Little back to back housing has survived. A significant fragment remains in the Kirstall and Burley areas of Leeds and the National Trust has saved six houses in Birmingham (out of the original 60,000 in that city) as a back to back museum. I went there and I thought they worked beautifully. I was shown around by a couple of ex back to back dwellers who had lived a street or two away. They had been kicked out in the 60's slum clearance and rehoused in suburban tower blocks now also demolished! They both spoke fondly of growing up there.

Our Mcgrath Road project in Newham works with the best that back to back housing had to offer and it deals with the commonly cited (and in my view sometimes overstated) shortcomings of the Victorian back to back. Each house has its own bathroom (in the 19 century bathhouses were usually shared). The top floor living room has a private roof terrace and its outlook is rotated so that each home is "dual aspect". Original back to backs had no private outdoor space and they had outlook in one >>>

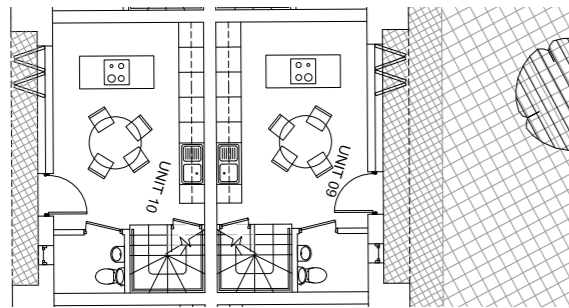


>>> direction only (not in my view a problem but a no-no in the modernist functionalist dogma which still pervades UK planning law.)

Each house has a deeply recessed arcaded frontage which is a place where people might choose to sit out at the street edge... a kind of level access stoop! The houses are laid out in terraces around a new tree lined square and along two new streets which meet at a pretty curving corner. There are 26 houses all for shared ownership. Our client is the London borough of Newham. ■

ALL PHOTOS  
©Morley von Sternberg

RIGHT:  
Floor plans – a pair of units at ground floor level



BELOW:  
Site plans LEFT-RIGHT  
ground, first and second floors

