

Generation Rent & the problem of community

The impermanence of renting is proving particularly problematic for inner city communities says Steve Edge

Saturday morning. Brixton, London. 1967. The dull thud of boot on ball is followed by an excited cheer as a group of children celebrate slotting a football between the two jumpers thrown down as makeshift goalposts on their local street. Down the road, a car revs into life, a bonnet slams shut, and a set of jump leads are returned to their owner with an appreciative smile and a promise to return the favour soon. Door knockers are knocked as neighbours pop next door for a chat, lawnmowers hum gently in the background, and further cheers ring out as another goal flies in between the jumpers. In the midst of all this, a nine-year old Steve Edge emerges with his brothers and cousins for a piece of the action.

This isn't just a picture of Steve's childhood. It's a picture of a community in its prime, a community of young families, elderly couples, single parents and newlyweds, a community of labourers, librarians, nurses, accountants, actors, artists and small business owners. While their backgrounds, occupations and incomes may differ greatly, these people have one thing in common: they all live in rented accommodation.

Fifty years on, and renting is experiencing a major resurgence. The influx of PRS (Private Rented Sector) accommodation in the UK has been driven by rising house prices and a lack of social housing, but also by a significant shift in values from one generation to another. Today's young professionals aren't putting down roots as quickly as their parents or grandparents did. And this isn't only because they can't afford to buy houses or start families. It's also because they value flexibility: the flexibility to move cities or even countries for jobs and opportunities, the flexibility to return to university or travel without the burden of house maintenance and mortgage payments. It's this flexibility that makes renting an attractive option.

But this impermanence is proving particularly problematic for inner city communities. The tendency to value flexibility over stability – paired with the fact that rising rents are forcing existing communities apart – results in a situation where it isn't uncommon for people to change accommodation

year by year. This in turn means people aren't committing, or simply can't commit, to a given neighbourhood for a sustained period of time. Together with the diminishing amount of social housing, this is leading to the breakdown of communities in many cities across the UK.

What's more, this trend isn't set to change any time soon. It's predicted that by 2025, over 60% of 20 – 40 year olds will be renting. These figures may be shocking. And they'll certainly be worrying for many aspiring homeowners. But they aren't anything new. In the post-war period, less than a third of UK households were homeowners, and of those born in 1958, 48% spent at least part of their childhood in social rented housing. But despite the prevalence of renting at this time, communities flourished.

As part of the 1958 cohort, Steve experienced this first hand, growing up in a strong, diverse community of renters in London. Of course, the key difference today is that it's PRS, not social housing, that occupies the bulk of the rental market. But this doesn't mean that today's PRS developers can't learn from the success of social housing communities like Steve's, and lead the way in addressing the breakdown of communities in cities across the UK.

As it stands, developers are missing the mark when broaching the subject of community. All too often, hoardings and adverts for newly built PRS developments bear sunny images of beaming models, accompanied by generic marketing messages like 'a vibrant new community' or 'discover your new lifestyle'. Messages such as these are widespread across UK cities, yet beyond selling the apartments and houses, few developers have any intention of nurturing a sense of community.

The trend for developers to fabricate communities through marketing messages and sell lifestyles that they will rarely follow through on is worsening the problem. And audiences are getting wise to it. In order to relate to their customers and spark some wider positive change when it comes to building communities, developers need to shift the focus. Instead of imposing empty lifestyle messages and promises of community, they must consider what a

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real community of renters looks like, and set the scene for this to grow naturally.

As someone who grew up in a thriving community where renting was the norm, Steve is well placed to address the topic. He understands that communities are based on something shared: a shared place, a shared way of life. The role of the developer or housebuilder isn't to half-heartedly impose empty ideas of community, but to lay the foundations for communities to grow from the ground up.

It's about channelling this understanding into today's market – a market which desperately needs to support and nurture real, healthy communities in the growing number of PRS developments across the UK. As the problem of failing communities escalates, there is a unique opportunity for developers to buck the PRS industry trend, actively foster new and existing communities, and place themselves at the forefront of positive social change in what can be seen as a cold, hard-hearted sector. ■

BELOW: Steve Edge fishing

