

# Brick by Brick: valuing good design

Having a meaningful design aspiration is often missed during the drive to address the housing crisis says Alison Coutinho



Alison Coutinho is a senior construction manager at Brick by Brick

Brick by Brick is building homes across the London Borough of Croydon and, irrespective of their location, the developments have a common goal: to exemplify good design.

The delivery of high-quality design falls off the agenda for many developers in the face of rising construction costs and uncertainty in the sales market, but Brick by Brick has three indispensable assets that ensure good design remains the absolute baseline.

#### The development brief

Cost, value and design are given equal weighting in our brief, which means that our small panel of architecture's top talent is tasked with making high-quality design intrinsic to our developments.

We nurture the client-architect relationship by having a collaborative approach, and we actively involve them in appraising the financial viability of our developments. The approach cuts out linear and iterative design amendments and, instead, enables an holistic design process where all parties are working towards the same goals.

To this end, we have actively sought forward-thinking architects who share our ambition and who have a common passion for realising the development potential of challenging, high-risk sites that Local Authorities have previously shied away from.

Our bespoke design manual - formulated by our in-house architecture practice, Common Ground Architecture - forms a significant part of the development brief. It outlines key design guidance, information about our painstaking quality-monitoring process and our interior finishes specification, which is the same for market-sale and shared ownership homes. This locks in buying

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Kindred House Croydon by Pitman Tozer

>>> gains for Brick by Brick, ensures commonality in our product and efficiency in the design programme.

**The designers**

The architects we work with are extremely versatile, and are as adept at designing small sites with a handful of homes as they are working on larger schemes in central locations. This means that we don't have to spread ourselves too thinly by working with a large number of practices just because we have a wide range of sites.

Versatility cannot be underestimated when it comes to our sites, the majority of which are awkward in shape, unpredictable in condition and complicated in land terms. As such, we encourage our design teams to tackle them from a position of innovation, and to thrive on the challenges the sites present.

An added benefit of working with a small number of architects over a large number of sites (we have more than a hundred live developments!), is that it gives us an opportunity to collectively reflect, learn and adapt from development to

development. This allows a medium-sized business like Brick by Brick to develop its expertise over a much shorter period.

**The delivery team**

The final, but by no means least important, way that we strive to meet our goal of good design is through the Brick by Brick team. Our team of 35 is based in a converted Victorian shop in the centre of Croydon, which was renovated by Common Ground Architecture in early 2019.

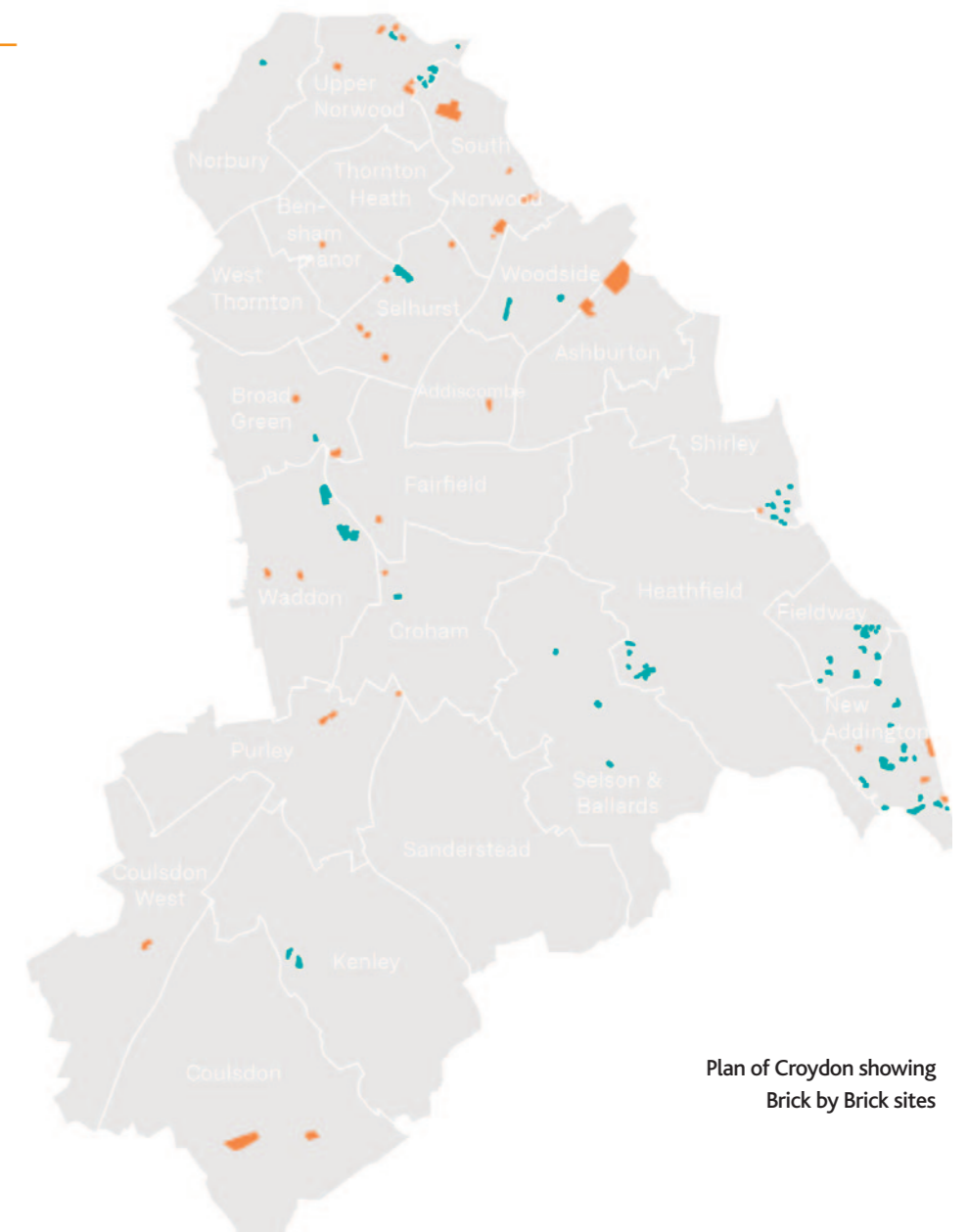
Common Ground Architecture's role in the company is unique - as well as being an architecture practice in their own right (providing an alternative source of income), they fulfil a client-monitoring function for our homes under construction. This ensures that the design concept of a scheme is upheld through delivery, which is critical to maintaining the standard of the product developed between Brick by Brick and our architects in early stage design.

We also employ architects to work in our delivery teams. Having been on the side of a consultant, their insight is invaluable as they are able to

navigate common risks, for example coordination issues and identification of scope gaps, whilst also driving the agenda for good design alongside the other aspects of development management. This happens to be where I fit in at Brick at Brick. Having practised architecture for more than ten years, I moved client-side so I could use my experience to drive best value. Alongside my fellow architects at Brick by Brick, we have colleagues from a variety of construction-related backgrounds. This variety does not just keep the agenda of good design alive, it enriches and challenges it from all perspectives.

The definition of good design may differ from person to person, however having a meaningful design aspiration is so often missed during the drive to address the housing crisis. Our quest for good design is ultimately for the people we are delivering homes for and the communities that they will be joining.

Our first homes are due for completion later this year and we are so excited to see how formerly disused sites across Croydon will be enlivened by the developments we deliver. ■



Plan of Croydon showing Brick by Brick sites

The London Planning and Development Forum at its last meeting received a presentation from Professor Janice Morphet of UCL about their just published research into direct building by local authorities. Brick by Brick is an exemplar. See page 36 et seq

See also our feature *A Distinctively Local approach to designing homes fit for the future* by Simon Bayliss of HTA et al.

*Alison Coutinho is a Senior Construction Manager at Brick by Brick. She leads on schemes from planning to completion, including the +400-unit Fairfield Homes development in Croydon. She has extensive experience in design having practised architecture for more than ten years and held a part-time lecturer's post at Leicester School of Architecture. Prior to joining Brick by Brick, Alison held a senior position at Berkeley Group plc gaining experience in masterplan delivery. Alison also sits on the RIBA Education Validation Panel.*



Typical living room