



THE LIVERPOOL BREAKTHROUGH

or Public Sector Housing Phase 2

Something incredible has happened in Liverpool—arguably the most important step forward in British housing for decades.

Without anyone in the rest of the country really noticing, an era spanning 60 years of paternalistic public housing provision has quietly come to an end. In its place a new way of building publicly funded housing has taken over in which the users are firmly in the driving seat. Nick Wates reports.

Liverpool City Council no longer uses its own architect's department to build, on spec, new public housing for rent—apart from a small amount for special needs. Instead it funds the people who need new housing to organise the design, construction and management of it themselves through self-generating, self-reliant co-operatives.

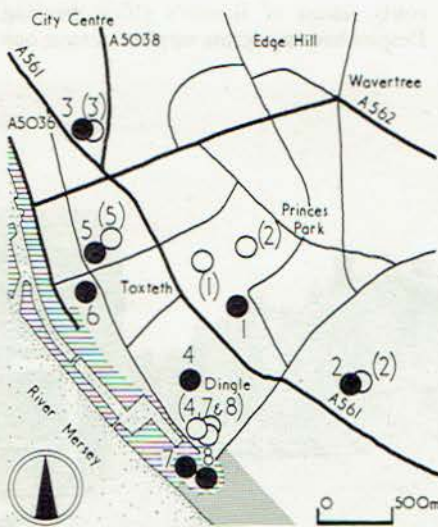
Liverpool's first new-build co-operative scheme of 61 homes was funded by the Housing Corporation and is now two-thirds occupied. Nine more, involving 341 families, have been approved and are at various stages of design and construction, and several more are in the pipe-line. All but one are being funded by the city council, 1.

It works like this. Local authority tenants living in slum clearance areas or deteriorating tenements organise themselves into groups—so far ranging from 19 to 61 family units—and obtain the management services of one of Liverpool's co-operative development agencies: Co-operative Development Services (CDS), Merseyside Improved Houses or Neighbourhood Housing Services. With its assistance they register as a 'non-equity' housing co-operative with limited liability, locate a suitable site and negotiate to buy it. (So far nearly all the land has come from Liverpool City Council or the Merseyside Development Corporation.) They then select a firm of architects with whom they design a scheme which is submitted to a funding body. The scheme is then submitted to the DOE for subsidy and yardstick approval as on all local authority funded housing association schemes.

When the houses are built, the co-op members become tenants of their homes, paying standard fair rents, but they are also collectively the landlord, responsible for management and maintenance.

The full significance of events in Liverpool has not yet been grasped nationally. The need for participation by tenants in public housing has been talked about for years.

There have been endless research studies and experiments. Occasionally, as at Byker in Newcastle for instance, architects for new schemes have worked closely with the tenants, but they have always remained accountable to the local authority.



1 The spread of new-build co-ops in south Liverpool. Solid dots show sites of those already approved, open circles indicate where co-op members are moving from—invariably close by. Merseyside Development Corporation's area is shown hatched, with the International Garden Festival site in tint in the south.

Co-ops in order of formation:

- 1 Weller Streets, 61 units, nearly complete
- 2 Heslith Street, 40 units, on site
- 3 Prince Albert Gardens, 19 units, on site
- 4 Dingle Residents, 32 units, on site
- 5 Grafton Crescent, 30 units, on site soon
- 6 Southern Crescent, 40 units, design stage
- 7 Mill Street, 54 units, design stage
- 8 Shorefields, 46 units, design stage.

Two other schemes (Leta Claudia and Thirlmere) not shown on the map are on site in north Liverpool.

But the Liverpool new-build co-ops are totally different. The tenants are not being asked to participate or be involved—they are actually and firmly in control: they choose the professionals they want to work for them, they choose the site, the layout, the floor plans, the elevations, the brick colour and the landscaping—albeit within the normal yardstick restrictions—and, when built, they manage and maintain the estate. The implication of all this for architects and other professionals is immense. Only a handful of firms are involved in the work so far but already they have developed a unique new style of working. Instead of being accountable to council committees or housing association managers, they are accountable to the consumers who are making very different demands on their talents. The architect's vision, technical expertise and design skill are as important as ever, but, in addition, a new range of knowledge and skills has to be learned.

In place of riots

The venue is a church in Toxteth, Liverpool 8, Wednesday 14 July 1982 at 20.30. One section of the church has been cleared of pews, and grouped around trestle-tables covered with house floor plans are over 70 men and women of all ages. Reflecting the area's 35 per cent unemployment level, many of them are unemployed, the remainder mostly in low paid manual and service jobs. All of them are currently living in some of Europe's worst housing—crumbling six-storey municipal tenements, often without hot water.

This is the Mill Street Co-operative and its members have met in the hall two or three nights a week for over three months, designing their 54 new 'dream houses' with architect Martyn Coppin of Brock Carmichael Associates. Even when the World Cup match between England and Spain was shown on television, there were

no absentees from the co-op meeting. Tonight they are finalising details of their floor plans. Some people are opting for a combined kitchen/diner, others a combined living room/diner, while some want three separate rooms. Coppin moves from table to table, pointing out problems and suggesting ideas on each person's layout:

'If you want a carpet in your dining room, the last thing you want is french windows into the garden as that's your only access.'

'Why not switch the sink round so that you can reach the drainer better?'

'You'll get more space in the living room if you turn the staircase round the other way.'

Mostly his advice is heeded, occasionally ignored—it's up to the future occupant to decide—unless the co-op as a whole considers the chosen design so bad as to seriously jeopardise future lettable. In the end, the Mill Street Co-op opts for six basic house types with 16 variations.

Design meetings have become a regular feature of Liverpool 8 nightlife. The previous evening, a few streets away, 10 members of the design committee of the Shorefields Co-op were deciding on brick colour and elevations for their 46 new homes with three architects from Innes Wilkin, Ainsley, Gommon. Dave Ainsley displayed coloured Pantone drawings with a range of options, 7. After discussion, one banded brickwork solution was rejected because it looked too 'Noddy-like'. Another suggestion was ruled out because it was too 'Corpyish', that is, too much like Liverpool City Council housing.

The first thing that most co-ops tell their architects is that their homes must not look like those built by the council. 'Council housing is the worst housing ever,' said



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34-year-old unemployed bricklayer John Bailey, chairman of the Shorefield Co-op. 'It's boring, pathetic, inhuman—like someone went into the architect's department and said, "I want 400 houses—get the drawings in by half-three." They're not houses for people. I think the council housing thing is going to die out and more houses are going to be built like we're doing it. It's more personal—each one personally designed—and it doesn't cost any more.'

Reaction to 'Corpy' housing has indeed been the major spur for the housing co-ops, and few cities better demonstrate the tragic and costly failure of Britain's public housing. Despite having a 'gross surplus', almost one-

2 John Bailey, chairman of Shorefield Co-op, surveys the site of the co-op's 46 new homes from a fifth floor access balcony of doomed tenements in Liverpool 8 where most of the co-op members now live. They will be the first new homes built on land controlled by the Merseyside Development Corporation. The site for the International Garden Festival is in the distance.

3 The last days of back to back terraces around Weller Street where 61 families formed Liverpool's first new-build co-op. Their new homes, mostly complete, are less than half a kilometre away.



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third of the city's housing stock of 75 000 units is now classified as 'hard to let', including much built since the war. Some 6000 homes are empty because no one will live in them. Much is scheduled for demolition, some is undergoing desperate last ditch surgery, like the '50s walk-up flats that are having their top floors cut off to form single-storey houses at a cost of £20 million. Only last month the council agreed to demolish some '50s low rise housing.

Co-op leaders put the council's failures down to the fact that tenants were not involved in design and, as a result, the council did not build what people wanted. Furthermore, tightly knit communities were broken up in the rehousing process, causing widespread alienation, which, coupled with irresponsible management and maintenance, led to uncontrollable vandalism and violence.

They are convinced that their new homes will not suffer the same fate. For a start, all the co-ops are building on sites close to their old homes (see map and picture) and, by moving *en masse*, the intricate web of family and kinship ties and local associations will not be broken. In addition, their involvement in the design and construction process will give them a pride in their homes which no council tenant ever has.

'Once you've designed it yourself you're going to look after it,' stated one co-op member. 'You're not just going into somewhere they've built for you. Council estates deteriorate, but ours aren't going to be like that. They're going to be the best.'

In a letter to a local councillor, the chairman of one co-op wrote:

'Apart from the ambition which comes from the very fact that we are doing something for ourselves... there are also prevalent feelings of being part of, taking part in, belonging to and being. It is a very healthy attitude that is positive and contagious.'

The community architects

Four Liverpool architectural practices are currently working with co-ops: Brock Carmichael Associates (two schemes); Innes Wilkin, Ainsley, Gomon (three schemes); McDonnell Hughes (one scheme); and Wilkinson, Hindle and Partners (three schemes). They range from small to medium-sized practices, engaged in a variety



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4 Some of the Weller Streets Co-op members pose for a picture to celebrate the beginning of work on site, August 1980.

5 The Thirlmere Co-op is addressed by its secretary, Mrs Martin, in the local church hall where it holds all its meetings.

6 Architect David Wilkinson discusses site layout with members of Leta Claudia Co-op.

7 Shorefield Co-op's design committee chooses brick colours with architect Dave Ainsley at an evening meeting.

8 Weller Streets Co-op members visit the Ness university botanical gardens with landscape architect Mike Padmore to help them choose landscaping for their scheme.



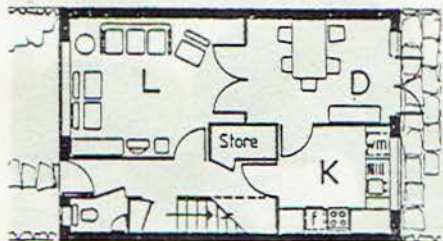
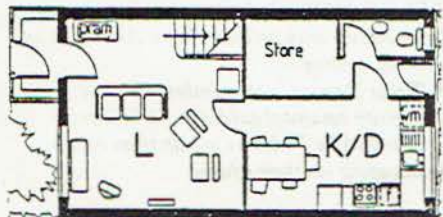
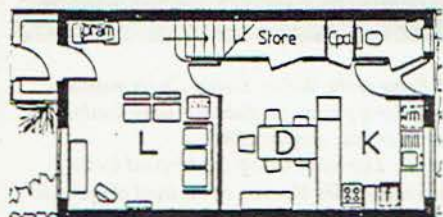
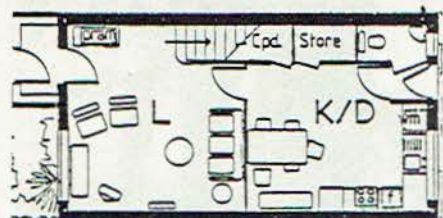
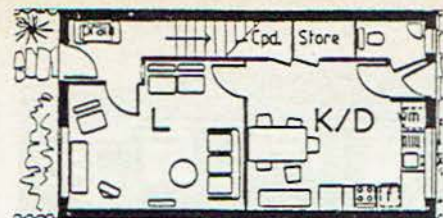
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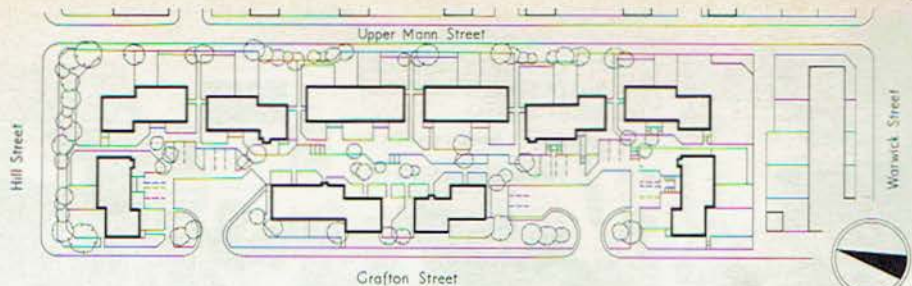
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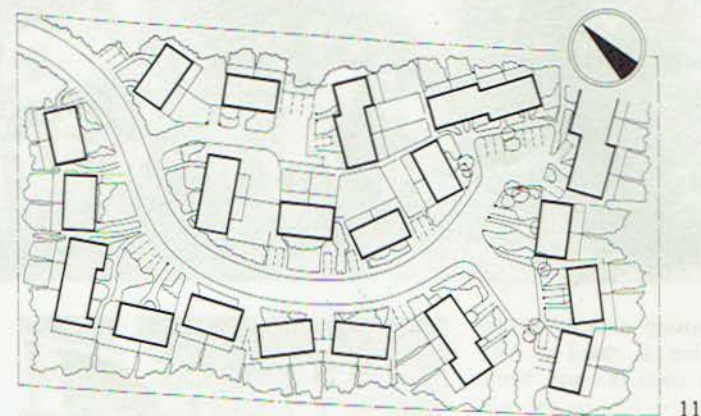
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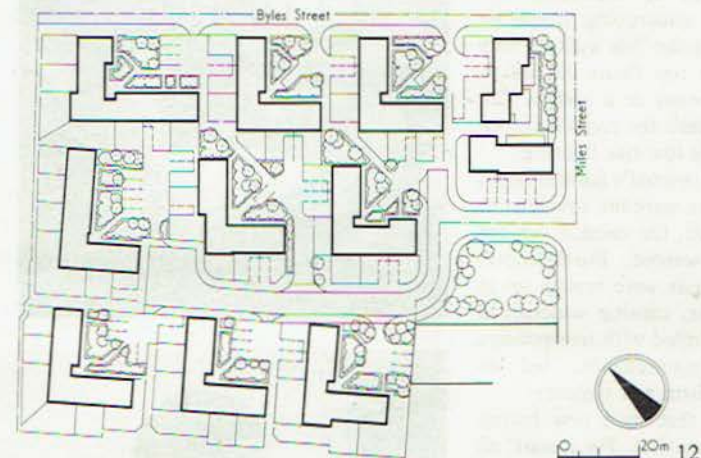
9 0 5m



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12 0 20m

9 Ground floor plans for the Shorefield Co-op. Of 20 alternatives drawn up by Innes Wilkin, Ainsley, Gommon, the co-op chose the top four shown. The bottom one was evolved with three families who wanted separate dining rooms overlooking the rear garden. A wide variety of site layouts has been evolved

by architects working with co-ops.

10 Grafton (Brock Carmichael). A central pedestrian spine and minimum car penetration provides an easily defensible core for the close-knit community.

11 Shorefields (Innes Wilkin, Ainsley, Gommon). Rejecting anything remotely

of work throughout the Liverpool area. In addition, Merseyside Improved Houses is doing one scheme in-house. Invariably the architects actually doing the work are in their twenties or thirties.

The starting point for architects is being interviewed by the co-ops, a process conducted with remarkable rigour. The co-ops usually insist on visiting previous examples of the architect's work, followed by an interview. One co-op interviewed no less than eight architects and made its choice by secret ballot using a non-transferable vote system.

Co-ops are advised by their co-op agency on how to select an architect. The most active agency so far has been CDS, a non-profit-making registered housing association with a stock of 900 houses in the area controlled by a voluntary management committee elected from tenants and co-ops buying its services. CDS has played a pioneering role in getting the new-build co-op movement rolling, and

services all but two of those currently in existence.

In a special pamphlet for co-ops called *Choosing an architect*, CDS describes the architect's appointment as 'one of the most important decisions that the co-op will take... The architect is the co-op's employee, agent, teacher, adviser, designer, negotiator.' It also stresses that 'the co-op and its architect will work together very closely for up to three years and the human or personality angle will be very important.' CDS provides co-ops with a list of firms it considers competent from which to short-list, although co-ops can of course add to the list if they choose. The pamphlet lists questions which might be asked at the interview, for instance: 'What was the worst mistake you ever made as an architect?' While advising on procedure, CDS plays no part in final selection: this is up to the co-ops. The chairman of one co-op described the judging criteria as:

- 1 The people must be the ones who tell the architects what should be built.
- 2 The architects' involvement with the co-op must be total.
- 3 The architects should act as advisers and scribes. (Tell us what is and isn't possible and suggest alternatives.)

Communicating and learning

Selection over, the first task is educational—for the architects to discover the needs and aspirations of the co-op (both individually and collectively), and for the co-op members to learn about architecture and the building process. 'It's like teaching the first three years of an architecture course to 70 people in 6 weeks,' said architect Bill Halsall, partner in Wilkinson, Hindle and Partners, 'but it's a mutual process. It is possibly more important for the architect to be able to listen and learn, and in the process unlearn previous professional preconceptions.'

make design decisions'.

All the architects have used models of various kinds, but in the end found that drawings are the most effective design tool which, perhaps surprisingly, people soon find easy to use and understand. 'At first we couldn't understand drawings,' said Francis Mogan, secretary of Mill Street Co-op, 'but once Martyn (the architect) had sat down and drawn little people and furniture on them, people soon got the hang of it.'

The architects have similarly found that people soon grasp the complexities of government yardsticks, Building Regulations and space standards, so that, as one put it, 'cost yardstick densities are bandied around as easily as the latest supermarket prices'.

Through developing a close working relationship, professional barriers are broken down. 'Professional people are no longer faceless. We've broken down the language barrier and learned how to handle the professional mystique,' said one co-op chairman. Another said: 'Professional people usually think they're better, superior. We didn't know what they were about at first; now we know they're people who can be very useful.'

'The co-ops have an enormous loyalty to their architects, vying with each other as to whose is best,' said CDS development officer Paul Lusk. 'People talk about "our" architect, which is incredible when you think how architects were thought of a few years ago.'

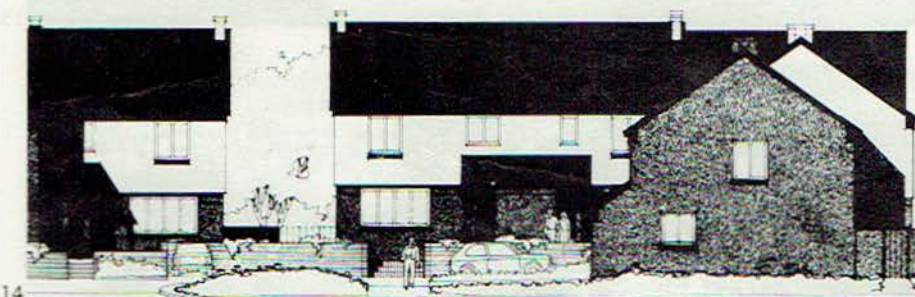
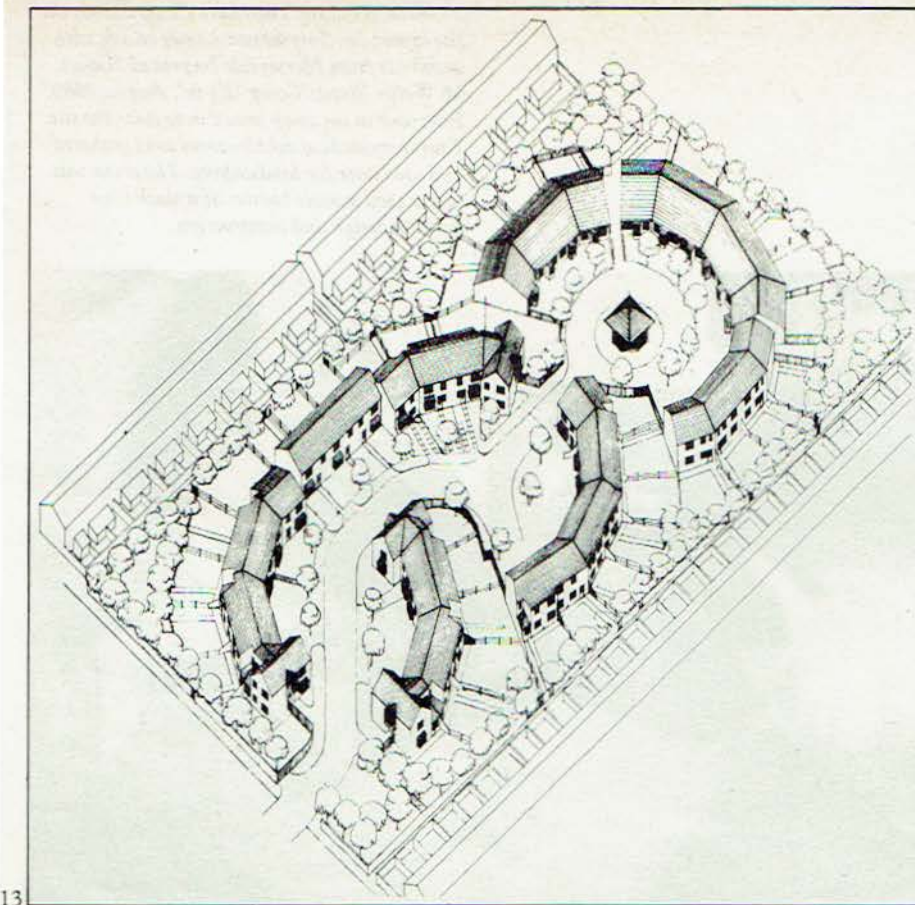
Each co-op has different priorities and these are reflected in the design solutions they evolve with their architects. The layouts of the schemes on the drawing board, for instance, vary considerably. Some have gone for semis, some for a more urban streetscape with small courts and alley ways. One scheme has old people in three single-storey houses, while another has integrated the old people in special flats which are deliberately indistinguishable from adjacent housing.

The co-ops also vary in the extent to which they encourage individual eccentricities. Some have restricted themselves to a limited range of house types; in others almost every house is different.

Same fee—harder work

Inevitably working this way involves architects in a great deal more work than they would have devoted to an equivalent amount of public housing in the past—an estimated 7 hr per week over two years, according to one architect. Yet, although it is too early for those involved to have made a final calculation, at 6 per cent of contract price the work is still thought to be profitable. CDS believes that this merely demonstrates that for 60 years architects of public housing have simply not been doing their work thoroughly. 'It's been money for old rope, designing council housing,' claimed Lusk. 'Architects didn't put anything in apart from reading design guides on what people were thought to want and producing standardised plans.'

CDS's main concern now is that architects should not try to save time by bull-doing through their own ideas instead of presenting co-ops with a wide range of choices. To avoid this they see competition between architects in getting the work as



'Corpyish', the co-op opted for semi-detached houses in spec-style arcadian layout, a solution made possible by a virgin unrestricted site. 12 Weller Streets (Wilkinson, Hindle). A courtyard scheme with six houses per court. 13 Leta Claudia (Wilkinson, Hindle). The solution for this long narrow site was evolved

using a flexible model. Unlike other co-ops, old people wanted to be separate from families and their bungalows are grouped at the top right round a communal room/co-op office.

14 Elevations for Grafton reflect a desire for a change, something different from normal council schemes.

The practices vary in their relationships with the co-ops and are developing and refining new techniques all the time. A common early ploy is to give everyone a tape measure. 'The most useful phase ever was when people measured the furniture in their own homes, cut it out in cardboard and fitted it on plans,' said Coppin. 'They were getting physically involved and it was the most useful device for getting past the threshold of people just thinking they were getting a new home.'

Architect Mike McDonnell visited all his co-op members in their own homes. 'It was invaluable. It gave me a tremendous insight into what people were like and really helped with discussions.'

local hall but regularly visit the architects' offices.

'An early breakthrough was to sit around a table—instead of round a room,' claimed Halsall. 'It was psychological—developing a workman-like attitude—and helped develop the idea of professionals and co-op members working together on an equal basis rather than the architect lecturing. The first architectural discussion is how you organise yourself in the room.'

A variety of techniques have been used to familiarise people with the design process and make them aware of the options and choices open to them. Kids have made models at school and taken part in painting competitions of houses. Examples of other work were shown using slides or an epidiascope. Coach trips to see other examples of housing and landscape are extremely popular and, according to Dave Innes Wilkin, are 'the most effective way of allowing people without design skills to

essential. An architect who skimped would never get another job, at least in Liverpool. On the other hand, the anti-social hours that architects have to work can create stresses within practices (and marriages), and the amount of extra work required would not be possible for practices paying normal overtime rates. Architects have to be dedicated.

An additional absurd financial difficulty is that architects are not guaranteed any fees at all until the site is purchased, by which time a substantial amount of work has already been done. Some firms have had to work for up to two years without receiving any income and with the prospect that if the project fell through they would never receive any.

Despite this, all the architects involved in the work are finding it extremely stimulating. 'Working with a co-op presents the architect with an opportunity to open design preconceptions to criticism from which to learn,' wrote Danielle Pacaud of Innes Wilkin, Ainsley, Gommon. 'There are obvious gains in users rather than managers having first call on an architect, not least the stirring of the imagination of the designer under pressure to consider primarily trying to live in his or her buildings rather than trying to organise the smooth management of them.' A report by Innes Wilkin, Ainsley, Gommon concludes:

'Working with co-ops is proving very enjoyable. It is the most rewarding experience in housing design that we have had as a practice or as individuals. It releases the architect's imagination from the stereotype of the building user conceived from a housing manager's point of view that determines local authority housing, as well as from the overriding emphasis on cost in developer housing. On reflection, the co-operative works so well that to return to other systems of housing production would seem for us a step backwards into contradictions whose resolution has been discovered.'

Paving the way

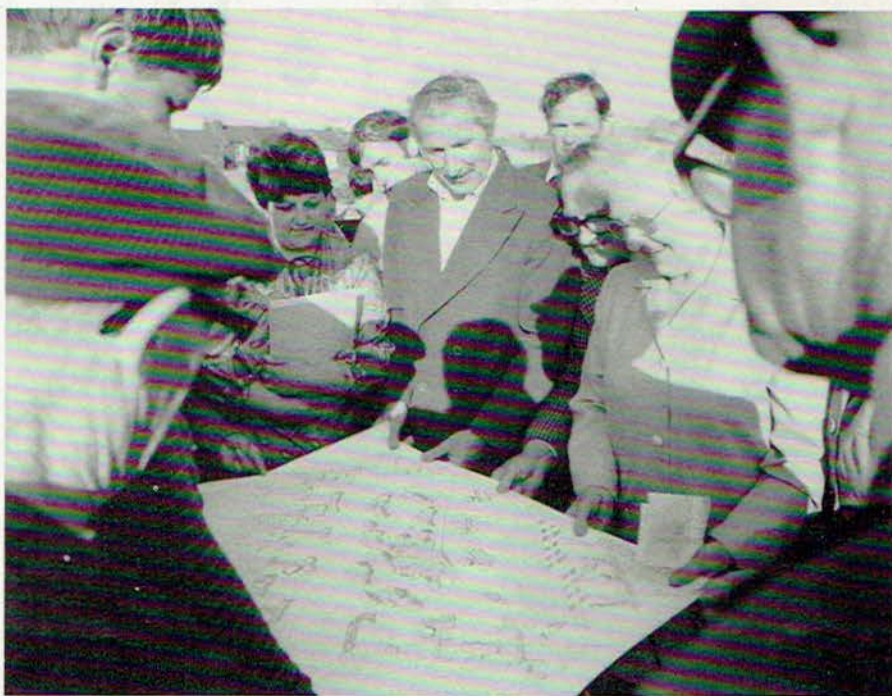
Whether the universal optimism by tenants and professionals involved is well founded will not be finally proved until the new homes have been lived in for some years. But the first new-build co-op scheme is already three-quarters built and provides grounds for hope. This is the Weller Streets Co-op which is also important because it is having a vital 'demonstration effect' in stimulating the growth of Liverpool's other co-ops. Much of the philosophy and techniques of communal design and participation which are now becoming widespread in Liverpool were evolved by the Weller Streets Co-op, CDS and architects, Wilkinson, Hindle and Partners. 'Weller Streets paved the way by showing that the seemingly impossible could be achieved,' said Walter Menzies, special projects manager of Merseyside Improved Houses—Liverpool's largest housing association—which is now moving into new-build co-ops and already has two under its wing in its role as an enabling agency.

The story of how 61 families living in sordid back to back slums, galvanised by their local milkman, fought bureaucracy and political inertia to make history by getting £1.3 million of public money to buy land in their

neighbourhood and build new homes designed to their own specifications to be owned, controlled, managed and maintained by themselves is a remarkable one for which there is not space here.

Now, though, the battles are over and most of the co-op members are settling down in their new homes and proudly showing visitors around, casually pointing out snagging details which would normally only be spotted by a trained building surveyor and monitoring the final construction process. 'What's going to happen behind this wall here, Bill (the architect)? If we don't fill it with earth it's going to become a rubbish trap.' Bill agrees, and a solution is quickly

15 Members of the Thirlmere Co-op discuss the site layout for their 40 new homes on site with architects from Merseyside Improved Houses. 16 Weller Streets Co-op 'dig-in', August 1980. Everyone in the co-op joined in to clear the site. Four lorryloads of cobble-stones were gathered and used later for landscaping. The event was also a good morale booster at a slack time between design and construction.



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agreed before we move on.

The scheme comprises 10 courts with six houses around each. 'We wanted it small and intimate,' said one co-op member. The courts were designed as the key to estate management, with decision making devolved to each court as much as possible. They are seen as communal rather than public open spaces, where toddlers can play freely, although they are linked by a network of paths and the public are free to wander through. However, care was taken in the planning to ensure that they won't be used as short cuts, 12.

Significantly the co-op had to fight hard for the courtyard layout because the city



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17 Liverpool's first new build co-op scheme, Weller Streets, completed summer 1982.

18 Co-op chairman Peter Tyrrel with his family one week after moving into their home.



18

engineer insisted there should be a hammerhead to accommodate articulated lorries turning in each one. This would have completely destroyed the co-op's concept by requiring 12 houses round each court instead of six. 'The whole point was that we didn't want articulated lorries turning in our courtyards,' said a co-op member. The city engineer stood firm, so the co-op decided to have the courts 'unadopted', which means it, rather than the council, will have to maintain them. It was a decision that no conventional housing association could possibly have taken.

So far this has not been a problem. 'Each courtyard has a cleaning rota to sweep up

litter every day. In practice, people take a pride in doing it,' said the co-op chairman. (The co-op symbolically got its own back on the city engineer by insisting on calling its new street 'Weller Way' despite his protestations about the 'obvious implications'.) The design is simple and almost utilitarian, 17. The same red brick is used throughout ('Everyone was in favour of using different coloured bricks, but everyone wanted red in their own courts'). 'Bay windows were thought to be a bourgeoisie irrelevance,' said Halsall. 'Instead they went for super insulation standards to cut down fuel bills.' High priority was given to quality fixings to reduce future maintenance, and to security,

defensible space and ease of management.

The scheme was designed with management very much in mind and the architects have provided each house with a manual. The co-op could have taken out a management agreement with CDS but, significantly, decided last year to dispense with its services altogether. 'We feel we've built up sufficient expertise to run it ourselves,' said a co-op member. 'If they hadn't designed their own scheme, they couldn't have managed it,' commented Bill Halsall.

Landscaping also received high priority, with co-op members visiting other landscaping schemes (notably Runcorn) and botanic gardens with landscape architect Mike Padmore of COMTECHSA (AJ 7.7.82 p74), 8. According to Padmore, the landscaping is 'a unique pilot scheme, exploring the possibilities of an environment designed by its users to be maintained by its users—a concept which could offer an alternative to the current choice between an increasing burden of landscaping maintenance or a featureless, bland environment attempting the unachievable goal of no maintenance.' Residents in each court had their own ideas and preferences, so that each will have a very different feel.

Weller Streets' houses are less customised than some of the co-ops' now on the drawing board, with only six different house types out of a total of 61 units. (Members picked out of a hat to decide, within each house type, who should have which house, but many people have since swapped.) A major



19 One of Weller Streets' 10 courtyards. There are six houses in each with those for the elderly indistinguishable from the rest.

row blew up when one member wanted a green bath, and in the end it was decided that everyone should have white.

This reflects partly the co-op's particularly strong egalitarian principles which are evident throughout the scheme, and partly the fact that it was the first and already had enough on its plate. 'The whole thing was touch and go,' remarked a co-op member. 'We only managed to sign the contract two months before the Government's housing moratorium. We could have fallen by a green bath.'

Tenants' control for real

In the long term the importance of Weller Streets' scheme is that it happened at all. It has demonstrated beyond doubt that tenants' control over the process of design and construction of their homes is possible, even efficient. Catherine Meredith, director of CDS, points out that despite delays due to being a pioneer, Weller Streets was the 'fastest housing association new-build scheme on Merseyside, from land registration to start on site. So much for the argument that participation slows the process down too much.'

As a result of Weller Streets' success, tenants' control is becoming a reality in Liverpool. That the co-ops emerged there is due to a unique combination of local determination, patient hard work over the last decade by a wide range of radical professional enablers, and oscillating party political control of the city council, which culminated in full backing by the ruling Liberal Party, with, significantly, active support from the Tories.

Since 1970 rehab housing co-ops have been making their mark in Liverpool, with some two dozen co-ops now having rehabilitated over 1000 properties (AJ 29.6.77 p1215). The co-operative servicing agencies (secondary co-ops) and many of the architects now doing the new-build work cut their teeth on the rehab co-ops and, having proved themselves, new-build was a logical development.

Liverpool's housing policy has three components, according to chairman of housing, Chris Davies: stopping decay through a massive programme of housing action areas

containing 30 000 properties; cheap developer housing for sale (2000 have been built, mostly by Barratt's and Wimpey's, and most of it sold to people who lived within 1 mile of the sites); and new-build for rent through housing co-ops and housing associations.

The most important breakthrough is that it is now official council policy that tenants shall be involved in the design of their new rented houses. The council only supports housing associations on that basis. 'It is the way forward for the public sector,' said Davies. 'We've got to have people involved in order to strengthen the community base and to give people more responsibility, self-control and self-respect.'

As the good news ripples through the city, new co-ops are forming faster than the professional services can cope. 'The trouble now is controlling the co-ops,' said Davies. 'We haven't got money for endless new-build co-ops.' He is in the process of turning one down and delaying another.

Whether Liverpool's lead will be followed is difficult to determine. Charles Barnes, a DOE principal architect in the North-West, who has dealt with the Liverpool co-ops, is personally enthusiastic about them. But he stressed the importance of local authority support: 'The local authorities are the key link in all this. They're providing the funds. This department can't do anything unless the co-ops have the backing of the local authority.'

Inevitably there are still many unanswered questions. Will the co-ops stand the test of time? Will they manage to maintain the current enthusiasm and involvement to handle maintenance and management effectively? What will happen when people start to leave, and others, who were not involved in the design process, take their place? If the public sector were to rely completely on co-ops for all new-build, will some people be left out?

The last point is the nub of Labour council's reluctance to be more positive about co-ops (or any kind of tenant involvement in design)—it does not secure rehousing in strict order of need.

Leaving aside the question of whether current waiting list procedure houses people

in strict order of need anyway, involving tenants effectively in design requires, by definition, preselection of tenants. This has always been the main stumbling block in the past in this country (although other countries like the Netherlands have been doing it for years (AJ 30.8.78 p374)) because Labour and other politicians fear that they cannot predict who will be in priority need sufficiently far in advance. Co-op members, they say, are jumping the waiting list. Liverpool has clearly decided that any injustice in preselection—and indeed a certain amount of self-selection—is far outweighed by the benefits of self-determination and involvement.

It is significant that many Labour councillors in Liverpool who were formerly opposed to co-ops are now starting to show more enthusiasm, and the council is attempting to allay some criticism by incorporating co-ops in a more comprehensive housing programme. One scheme with Merseyside Improved Houses now on the drawing board will entail offering everyone in a tenement clearance area the choice of either forming a new-build co-op or being transferred to municipal accommodation or moving into rehab property. 'It's a model of how local authorities should deal with housing,' said Menzies.

New horizons

Despite their achievement, the Liverpool co-ops have only just begun to explore the potential of user control. The current schemes are being conducted within an extremely tight framework of yardsticks and space standards, which leaves little room for experimentation, creativity and significant individual eccentricity. The present financial arrangements, for instance, are a deterrent to users doing any self-build, since it would just lead to a reduction in the grant. The tight restrictions and control over the form of public housing were introduced in part to protect users against architects who were working at arm's length. With architects working directly for users, many of the restrictions could be relaxed.

Regardless of whether new-build co-ops on the Liverpool model become more widespread, those involved think there are extensive possibilities for the lessons and techniques being developed there to be applied in other directions. There is no reason, for instance, why the close working relationship between architects and users existing in Liverpool's co-ops could not be equally successful in other forms of tenure—for instance equity sharing or even in the private spec market.

CDS might well be proved right in denying that Liverpool's new-build co-ops represent the end of council housing. 'It's the beginning of council housing,' it says. 'It's public sector housing phase 2.'

It may also signal the beginning of a new era for housing architects generally in which users, at last, become the clients.

PHOTOGRAPHS: CDS 4, 16; MIH 5, 6, 15; COMTECHSA 8; NICK WATES 2, 7, 18; JOHN MILLS PHOTOGRAPHY 3, 17, 19.