BUILDING ■ Better together: co-housing by Henley Halebrown Rorrison

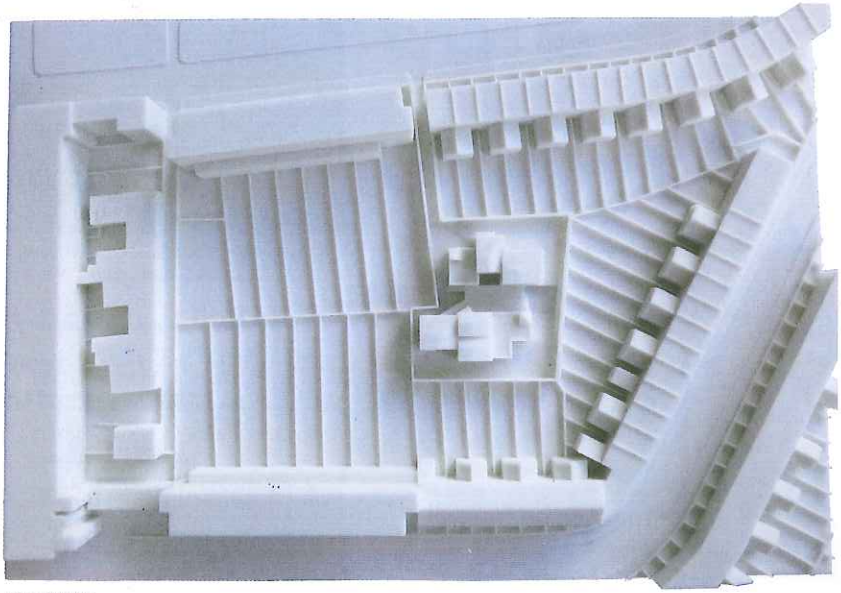
Pierre d'Avoine explores a carefully orchestrated 'intentional community'. Photos: Ioana Marinescu.

A few years ago I wrote a review of two semi-detatched houses in Stoke Newington, north London, by Simon Henley and Ken Rorrison, partners in Henley Halebrown Rorrison (HHbR). One was designed by Henley for a young family, the other by Rorrison for himself and his wife. The architectural 'tension' in that project came from balancing the joint design of the envelope of two houses while pursuing individual aims in the design of each interior. The same architects have now completed a larger development at Copper Lane, also in Stoke Newington, that is formally related to the earlier design in several ways.

The backland site off Green Lanes is surrounded by Victorian terraces. It had accommodated a nursery school and was formerly owned by an Ethiopian church which had ambitions to put a religious building on it. When that project foundered in the planning system, the plot was sold to a group of six families – seven adults and six children – who appointed HHbR to design a co-housing project: individual homes with some communal shared spaces.

The architects made several early studies for such an 'intentional community' with the aim of maximising external space. Layout types included a 'villa' comprising a single block, a 'scatter' of individual houses, houses arranged around a courtyard, a single terrace, and a proposal to cover the site with building and 'carve' gardens out of the mass. The final design is essentially two terraces of

Right, below *1–6 Copper Lane is a backland site surrounded by Victorian terraces. The design strategy was to maximise external space and to develop a building type that manifests the idea of communality. The cluster model places a court at the heart of the site, beneath which communal facilities are located and around which the six houses are laid out.*

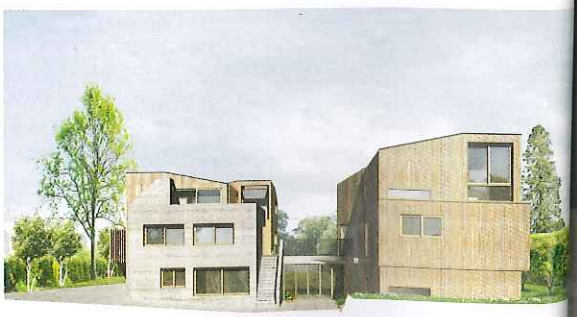


three houses accessed both from a large communal hall at ground floor and a shared terrace above. Outdoor space around the perimeter is also communal.

In an effort to keep costs down, floor areas are economical. The architects cite an optimistic precedent for micro-homes in Wells Coates' 1934 Isokon building in Hampstead, where 34 flats, some as small as 25 square metres, share a kitchen and laundry – while recognising that the application in mass housing of some Modernist ideas about collective living has led to forms of social engineering and dystopian monocultures.

The social ambitions of Modernism had some roots in the utopian socialist Charles Fourier's ideas about ideal communities. However while Fourier believed that poverty was the prime source of physical suffering in civilisation, he also believed that the most intolerable constraints of civilised society were those imposed by the institutions of marriage and family life. In his view, Jonathan Beecher has written, 'luxury was essential for the gratification of the five sensual passions; and it was equality – that "political poison" – that Fourier proscribed from his utopia'. His proposal for a Phalanx with its central building or Phalanstery was based on the idea of society as a melting pot, a gathering of diverse individuals whose common passion

Left *Four three-storey houses are clad in untreated vertical timber boards, while the two two-storey houses are faced in brick. Timber elevations to the court use wider boards and planted battens – a more 'rudimentary' detail intended to cast strong shadows and be more tactile than the smoother outward elevations.*
Below *CGI views from the north-east (top) and south-west. The Mayor of London's 2010 minimum space standards might pose a threat to such developments, suggests the architect, as some of the facilities enjoyed by residents of each home exist outside the compact individual dwelling.*

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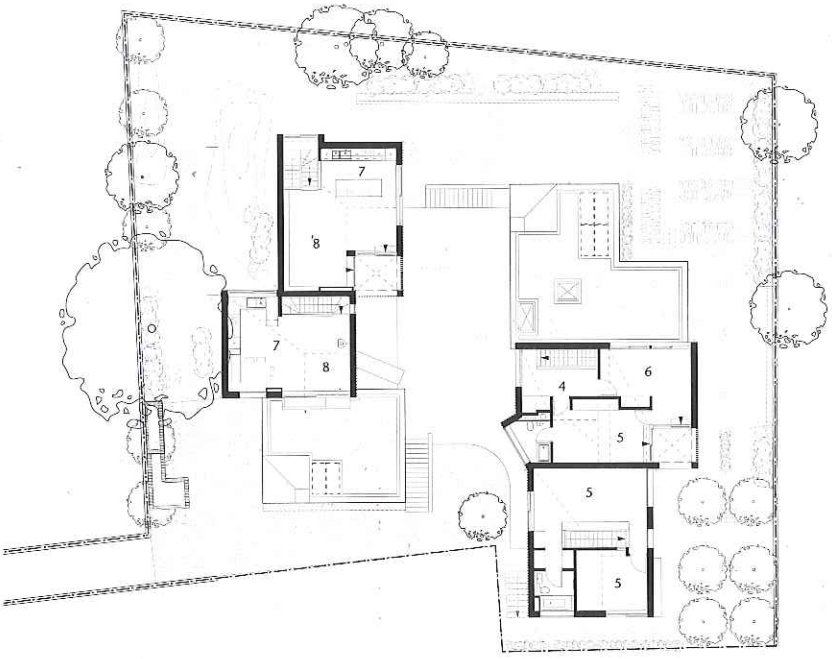
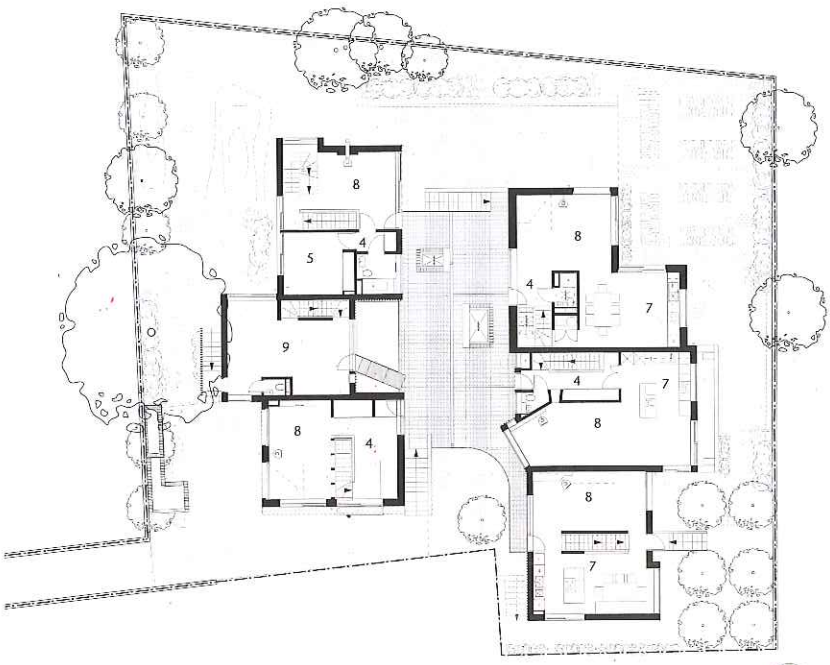
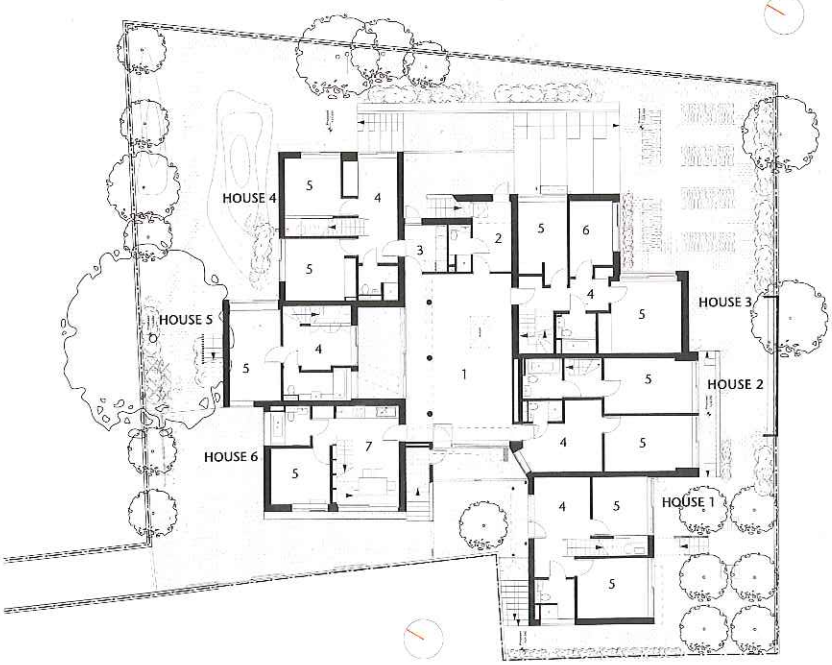


would enable them to forget distinctions of age, wealth, character and intelligence.

An early example of co-housing conceived in the radically sensuous spirit of Fourier was Rudolf Schindler's house on North Kings Road in Los Angeles (1921). The time and place is significant. Schindler had emigrated from Vienna to the USA infused with a pioneering spirit and inspired by the work of Frank Lloyd Wright and his mentor Adolf Loos. He arrived in California at a time when it was the promised land – ripe for experiment in architecture and new ways of living. The house was designed to accomodate Schindler and his wife, another young couple, and a guest apartment. The structure was set back from the street in the middle of a suburban lot, with living spaces opening onto the garden. Schindler abolished all conventional rooms and substituted a centralised 'utility room' for the family kitchen. He wrote that 'The basic idea was to give each person his own room and to do most of the cooking right on the table – making it more a social "campfire" affair than the disagreeable burden to one member of the family'. The room would also host special occasions, as well as all household work which needed expensive equipment, to be used by all inhabitants in common suggested Schindler: 'The "utility room" therefore must be the centre of the structure.'



The house was innovative in that it did not discriminate between the sexes and enabled inhabitants to enjoy both opportunity to withdraw individually or as families into smaller spaces, or to participate in a more communal lifestyle. Perhaps this is not so different to the



Right *Lower-ground, upper-ground and first-floor plans. Key: 1 shared hall, 2 shared workshop, 3 shared laundry, 4 hall, 5 bedroom, 6 study, 7 kitchen-dining room, 8 living room, 9 studio.*

'haveli' courtyard houses in north-west India or the traditional dwellings of pre-industrial tribal societies, but without their inherent patriarchal structures.

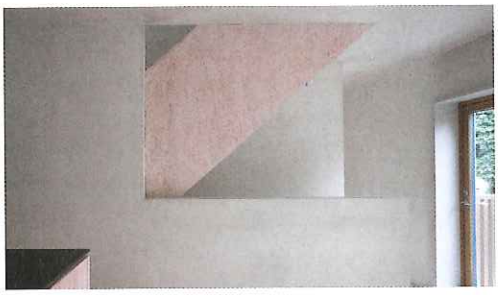
At Copper Lane HHbR has created the framework for a particular community. Its hidden location bounded by suburban garden walls sets it apart from its neighbours. Nevertheless, it is easy to imagine the site becoming a new means of circulation, away from the existing streets, which would enable the wider neighbourhood to mix in a more communal way.

The buildings have a 'presence', even though they are partly dug into the ground to reduce the impact on neighbouring houses, and their informal composition of brickwork and timber boarding and variation in storey heights are reticent against the dense formality of surrounding terraces. The new houses are positively architectural, yet have at the same time the quality of garden buildings without being ramshackle or picturesque.

Interiors have been tailored to suit individual owners through painstaking design development, and the houses have been conceived to accommodate these particularities without becoming overwrought. There are many beautiful spaces and places within each building, and the way they relate to each other and to the surrounding communal garden has been carefully orchestrated.

Internally, the material palette comprises unpainted plaster walls, timber floors and plywood balustrades and linings. Stained timber windows have been positioned to capture views and glimpses of the surroundings while trying to make sure that privacy is possible.

Above, left *The communal hall sits below a shared terrace. The six houses also share a workshop and a laundry. Construction began in January 2013 and took 17 months. The project was procured under a JCT Intermediate contract. It has a gross external floor area of 950 square metres, and a gross internal floor area of 795 square metres, and cost £1.6m. Carbon dioxide emissions are estimated to be 7,300 kg/annum.*



The communal room has a ceiling of ribbed concrete which gives it a greater formality than the domestic spaces. Two compact brick-balustraded staircases lead up to the 'court', a raised suntrap terrace which provides private access to each dwelling without the need to pass through the lower communal hall. A broad paved ramp leads up to the street between gable walls of the existing houses. A pair of steel gates controls entry.

The design has a generosity of space and spirit that I also found in the earlier pair of houses by Henley and Rorrison. The interiors have an almost luxurious quality created not by the use of expensive materials, but through careful and considered design and detail and the way that light is brought in to play on surface and form. Copper Lane is an exemplar of what can be achieved if both client and architect have the imagination and stamina to take on a difficult site and – with an economy of means – make a building of social and architectural significance. Its architects do not overtly espouse utopian aspirations, but the project signals a more optimistic way of thinking about the ways in which we may choose to dwell in the future.

Pierre d'Avoine directs Pierre d'Avoine Architects. His work includes Big House/Little House in London, and a cluster of houses in Umbria.

Project team
Architect: Henley Halebrown Rorrison; design team: Neil Rodgers (project architect), Simon Henley, Gavin Hale-Brown, Ken Rorrison, Claire Lutzow; structural engineer: Rodrigues Associates; m&e consultant: AJ Energy; qs: MPA; planning consultant: CMA Planning; main contractor: Sandwood Construction.

Selected suppliers and subcontractors
Windows: Olsen; brick: Wienerberger; single-ply membrane: Bauder; timber stairs: Douglas fir Tilly Tri-Ply; whole house ventilation: Itho; stove flues: Selkirk; Douglas fir flooring: Reeve Flooring; worktops: Richlite, Black Diamond; airtight membranes: Pro Clima Intello Plus; rooflights: Glazing Vision; paint: Little Greene; plaster finish: Ecos.