

## FUTURE WATCH

# The experience of microhousing

James Potter, director of WG+P Architects, explores how ‘microhousing’ could be a panacea for the housing crisis, in a future based more on experiences than possessions, and open the door to smaller, better housing

**M**icrohousing is a relatively new term bandied around by some in the industry to describe an old problem: how to fit people into ever smaller living spaces in a way that benefits all. For occupiers this could be affordability in the right location, for planners it’s the regeneration of otherwise difficult brownfield sites to meet housing targets, and for developers it is the return for their investors as they fit more units into smaller spaces.

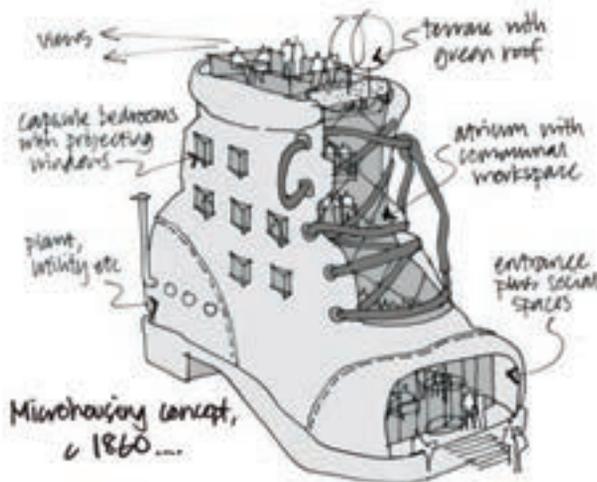
So if microhousing is the panacea to a widespread problem of housing shortage, why aren’t we seeing more built examples? And is it really going to take off? Waind Gohil + Potter Architects (WG+P) have been closely involved in the debate and have looked at numerous designs for small homes that could provide good quality living standards and shared amenity facilities. Here we offer some observations and comments on the current key aspects under discussion.

Microhousing is touted as a way to solve, in particular, London’s housing crisis by the provision of sub-30 m<sup>2</sup> homes in inner London to bring affordability to people priced out of their neighbourhood.

Solving London’s housing shortage is a huge and complex subject and no one fully knows what effect resolving one element of the problem will have on others, or what the measurable outcomes ought to be. Is it simply a numbers game; build more to cool the housing market? Or is the issue one of longer term affordability and tenure, to manage built projects to ensure they benefit those most adversely affected by the housing boom? And should we be wary of providing very specific house types that could have a ghettoising effect by attracting only a very specific demographic?

Finding a way to house everyone adequately is certainly not a new problem. Your average London terrace house would have met housing demand 170 years ago by accommodating a family in each of its four rooms, but without proper sanitation and with only the most rudimentary heating. Nowadays, the housing crisis has become headline news, but it isn’t a problem we’re going to design our way out of – yet that’s what makes microhousing fascinating.

Due to its diminutive scale, microhousing is being swept into the



### COP OUT

According to the author, it would be a “cop out” for microhousing to be “limited to providing funky starter homes for millennials in town centres”



## Living in smaller, de-cluttered homes could symbolise a lifestyle biased towards the future currency of status – namely experiences

wider debate about housing shortage, specifically about housing provision for the least privileged. Granted, it could be limited to providing funky starter homes for upwardly mobile millennials living in town centres, but that feels like a cop out. Our aspirations should be higher in terms of what small but well designed and built homes can offer.

### Inviting the family

A house in isolation simply provides a roof over someone's head. Many houses together form a community and a housing mix is an essential link to growing healthy diverse communities. So there's one question that hasn't yet been addressed in the debate: how can the microhouse cater to the needs of a family? I am biased, having recently become a father, but you don't need to be the Old Woman Who Lived in a Shoe to understand that children change things. When kids arrive, space becomes precious commodity; they need it and you need it – you cannot 'mute' a newborn in your 24 m<sup>2</sup> micro-home as you would the flat screen TV.

Microhousing thus far seems biased towards single occupancy, which inevitably leads to a familiar minimising of space that we have seen in parallel sectors, from capsule hotels to student studios and collective living experiences. It would be interesting to consider how a microhouse for a family of four could be implemented.

What can we architects offer by means of advice? Perhaps obviously, but most important of all, you cannot cram more people into the same volume without addressing how to increase the quality of the areas they live in and the amenities they share. But quality isn't to be defined by the specification of the shower or some real wood flooring. This is a ruse.

Quality is derived from the fundamental approach to detailing and specification of the tactile building elements and external envelope; the ventilation and cooling systems that must make up for the lack of aspect, and the intensified use of each square foot as well as the acoustic separation. Of course minimum standards exist for all the aforementioned factors, but arguably these standards are not geared to microhomes and the densities possible. Everything becomes more

intensive and greater redundancy is needed to protect the building's longevity and – ultimately – the wellbeing of the users.

### Damaging deregulation?

This subject leads to the somewhat uncomfortable comparison between the aspirational vision of interesting and enriching micro-homes and what is already being provided in office to resi conversions of a comparable size under the General Permitted Development Order (PD). Bearing in mind that microhousing as currently conceived falls short of complying with statutory minimum space standards applicable to design made under the Town and Country Planning Act, PD allows the conversion of commercial premises into flats without the need to comply with such space standards or residential amenity requirements.

So if we simply define a microhome by size alone then ironically it is already happening – and receiving a drubbing in the national press. Not all PD conversions are bad, but it does offer a means to build housing of the worst kind, where the environments created are stiflingly inadequate. Apologists for microhousing will be quick to distinguish that these uninspiring potential sites of future social polarisation are not in the spirit of microhousing. However, there is greater evidence that PD conversions stack up commercially whereas the majority of microhousing schemes do not.

### Decluttering & 'dematerialising'

Somewhat negative though this may seem, there is one final twist that supports the future development of ever smaller homes, and that is our fading reliance on possessions as means to signal status and a move towards a post-material world, where the focus is on experience rather than possessions. These are the views of futurist and author James Walman who provided an interesting new slant on the relevance of living in smaller spaces at a recent debate we attended.

In his book 'Stuffocation', Walman observes and demonstrates how our value systems are moving away from materialism to, as he calls it, experientialism. Years of mass production allied to waning consumption mean that while it is very common to have a lot of material possessions, people are asking they can rise above the melee. Walman's answer is through experience, and how that's shared on social media.

This rejection of materialism would mean we need less space to keep our possessions and, therefore, smaller homes. Significantly, living in de-cluttered homes could symbolise a lifestyle biased more towards the future currency associated with status – experiences. It's a fascinating prospect and one which could become widespread in the years to come. Walman's visions should not be dismissed either, as he applies widely accepted measurement principles on which to support his predictions – and has been employed by some fairly un-whimsical multinationals to assist them in staying ahead of the market curve.

Irrespective of whether experientialism will be the new materialism, one thing is certain; we evolve, our behaviour evolves, and this change will sooner or later be manifest in the physical development of the spaces we live in. Just look at the massive swing towards open plan areas in family homes – if one ever needed proof how our attitudes have affected the configuration of the home, then that's it. Perhaps this is what separates microhousing from the current office-to-resi conversions under PD: microhousing isn't about now – it is about the future, and how in an ever more populous world we can find ways to make smaller but better homes. ■