

WELLS CIVIC SOCIETY: Meeting of 8 March 2023



Jackson Moulding explains the work of SNUG Housing to Wells Civic Society.

Picture: Philip Welch

How would you like to buy a city house for, say, £110,000?

Well, it must be in a rough, old area, then.

No, it's within a particularly friendly community, actually.

Then it must be a dilapidated, old place, needing lots of renovation.

Not so. It's brand-new. With fully fitted kitchen and bathroom. And it's eco-friendly and highly energy efficient.

This begins to sound interesting. I'd like to view it.

Well, it's not actually built yet.

OK. I'll meet with the builder then.

Ah, you are the builder.

Well, that's entirely out of the question. I couldn't possibly take that on.

But you'd have loads of help: manpower, because all your neighbours are also building their houses, and everyone helps each other; and there's loads of advice, including financial, and skill training available.

How do you arrive at £110,000?

£35k for the plot and £75k for build costs.

Has anybody ever done this?

Certainly have. Quite a lot of people in Bristol for instance, at Fishponds Road, and Merry Hill in Lockleaze, and Ashley Vale in St Werburgh's.

So might a conversation go between anyone, especially someone who was having difficulty with the finances of buying his or her own home, and the speaker at the March meeting of the Wells civic society. He was Jackson Moulding, a director of SNUG Housing, which “creates carbon positive homes that benefit people and the planet”. Highly qualified and a much travelled researcher, Jackson has been deeply involved with and led housing projects focussing on environmental sustainability, practical design, energy efficiency and, last but by no means least, affordability. Also, his presence was, in a sense, particularly apt, following on, as it did, the last Civic Society meeting, which took a hard look at modern development within a heritage setting. The projects Jackson leads are not-for-profit, and to a degree the houses, although definitely privately owned or rented, are seen as part of new communities by virtue of integrated, but not identical, designs, and also in the way that everyone is pulling together to create new houses which are private homes but, ideally, also contributors to new community relationships.

Those who buy into these projects financially and, generally, socially as well, tend to be particularly couples in their thirties with a young family who wish to have a home they can call their own but can't seem to ever afford it. They are happy and excited to join in with the corporate ethos of everyone working together to build their properties. Some will opt for largely community living but others may choose to be entirely independent once the houses are completed.

It may be that a contractor builds the shell of the house, installs the drains and vital items of that ilk, which is where the self-finish model then takes over, as the would-be residents all work together, and have training, in installing the bathrooms, kitchens, flooring and providing a myriad of finishing touches. There is also an off-site pop-up production unit

Planning permission is, of course, a vital consideration, and building a positive relationship with the local authority is extremely helpful. Planning authorities can be persuaded or encouraged to be sympathetic towards self-build and in making plots, or even old buildings, available. Examples are a former scaffolding yard at Ashley Vale, while the Fishponds Road project sits on the site of a former chapel cum school. It has been known for the planning board to overturn the recommendation of a planning officer to enable a project to proceed.

At Ashley Vale about 100 people now live in 41 self-build or self-finish homes, at Merry Hill there are 50 properties of 1, 2, 3 and 4 bedrooms, and at Fishponds Road there are 12 homes in a mix of ownership and affordable rent. There is evidence that residents are very happy with their houses and the big decision they made in committing to this way of acquiring a home. Twenty years on, 50% of the original occupants of Ashley Vale still live there, Jackson still lives in the house he built 20 years ago, and an assessment in 2012 indicated that residents of the new community had more friends and acquaintances on average than those in Ashley Vale in general.

Accompanied by splendid pictures, ranging from site and building plans to action photos of soon-to-be-residents engaged on building or finishing tasks, Jackson had spoken with both expertise and enthusiasm throughout. His belief in harmonious communities shone through, as well as his emphasis on the human need for a home where we can feel safe. Co-production of the building of one's own house brings forth a tremendous feeling of personal satisfaction, it saves money, and it builds a warm, inclusive community.

Further context was given to Jackson's presentation in the concluding comments and questions. It was said that quite recently in Somerset there were 9540 people on the affordable housing waiting list, while chair Chris Winter posed the so-pertinent question, “What is happening in Wells?”

How neatly that ties in with the next meeting of the society, entitled The Future of Wells. This will be a panel discussion with a number of Wells city councillors, focussing particularly on the newly

acquired Bishop's Barn, Recreation Ground, and Portway Annexe, more generally on planning matters, and more broadly still, the new unitary authority. This will be held on Wednesday, April 12 at 7pm, with some refreshments available before, at the museum on Cathedral Green. For more information about this or the society in general, please contact the chair, Chris Winter, on chris.f.winter@btinternet.com or see wellscivicsociety.org.

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