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A house like no other?



Span's K-Type homes amid typical landscaping. Photo: © Tim Crocker

By Dominic Casciani
BBC News

With huge demand for new homes to be built today, a new exhibition sheds light on an innovative housing movement from the 1950s and 60s that could be a timely model for the 21st Century.

In 1969, a little boy called Patrick Ellard thought he had arrived in paradise. Moving into a radically different home, utterly modern in its design, was fun enough.

But then young Patrick found the indoor space of the home merged almost seamlessly with the outside space - space he suddenly found himself sharing with other children all around him.

Playing outside at New Ash Green, a Span development in Kent, did not mean the back garden - it meant something different. And it was all largely down to one man, an architect called Eric Lyons.

"I was four-years-old when we moved in to New Ash Green. It was idyllic, no exaggeration. A magical place. What Eric Lyons attempted to do was build a modern village and it just seemed to strike a chord with the times."

Thirty years later, Patrick, his sister Juliet, their partners and parents Liz and Lyle, all have their own homes back at New Ash Green.

"I think in all honesty it conditioned my life, my entire outlook," says Patrick. "I lived in other places when I went to college but there was nothing like the design and space of Span."

Eric Lyons remains one of the most respected British housing architects of the 20th Century. But he is little known outside professional circles.

Some 25 years after his death, the Royal Institute of British Architects has launched a book and exhibition to explain how Lyons and the associated firm,



Interiors: Maximise light, minimalist design. Photo: © Tim Crocker

Span, completely rethought how homes should work - and has left lessons that could be important in the current rush to build.

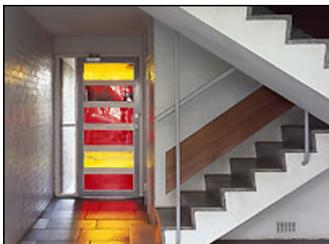
Lyons and his Span team built some 2,100 homes in 73 developments between 1948 and 1969.

He placed three basic principles at the heart of the Span projects:

- community as the goal
- shared landscape as the means, and
- modern, controlled design as the expression.

Many developments focus only on the creation of private domestic space - they treat the area beyond the front door as incidental.

But Eric Lyons turned this on its head. Each development found ways of building the homes around central or shared green spaces. The architect's aim was to engineer a sense of community by forcing people to interact.



Modernist: Eric Lyons insisted on elegant simplicity. Photo: © Tim Crocker

Jan Woudstra, an architect who teaches landscape, says Lyons was a British architect with "European sensibility".

"Span thought about a community first and the buildings second. They used the placing of the buildings to shape the communal space," he says.

"In Span you park your car and you walk through part of the estate to your own home. You have to talk to each other. The interaction is arranged through the landscape. It's landscape first and landscape last.

"This is an approach to housing that we see on the Continent - but in this country the landscape has tended not to be valued to the same extent."

So does the practice live up to the theory?

On a daily basis Span residents say they find themselves walking past neighbours' front doors as part of their ordinary business.

The transfer of what would elsewhere have been private garden or parking space into open public greens creates meeting places for adults and a play ground for children.



New Ash Green from the air: How Eric Lyons reworked housing estates.

Researchers at University College London have used mathematical theories to show that how spaces are connected - such as the placement of paths from one home to another - does indeed influence a measurable level of integration.

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All of which sounds too good to be true.

Despite their iconic feel, Span homes can be found suffering many problems seen in speculative projects.

Some "K-Type" homes, pictured at the top of this story, are notorious for condensation. Other terraces have such thin party walls that you can hear every cough and squeak.

Renovations can be very expensive because Span homes do not fit into an easy mould of the local building suppliers' products.

And then there are the residents' societies. Each homeowner becomes a shareholder in the estate. The society is the defender of the Span faith and a residents' covenant discourages any customisation - right down to hanging baskets.

This means your neighbours have a final say on any changes that affect a property's external look.

Some former residents complain of almost impossible restrictions, particularly over proposed extensions that meet planning criteria - but not subjective architectural judgements.

Eric Lyons died in 1980 - and for the next 20 years it appeared his ideals of community and shared space had been swept away by the desire for individualism and privacy.

But today, architects are looking again as we ask questions about the quality of new communities being built right across Britain.

Stephen Procter of Procter and Matthews architects, has been reviving Span principles at the Abode development in Newhall, Harlow. Eighty homes have been built to national acclaim that bring together contemporary design and a sense of space.



Patrick Ellard: "Idyllic childhood"

"I don't think we give enough choice to people about how they want to live," says Mr Procter.

"There was never a suggestion that everyone should live in a Span house - but they plugged a gap in the market with very thoughtful use of domestic space.

"It's a struggle to find support for these ideas - but it is up to us to make sure that it works."

Back at New Ash Green in Kent, Liz Ellard, Patrick's mother and a retired school teacher, has no doubt that these homes work.

"I remember watching our children play outside, running along the paths to see the others. We're so happy to see younger couples having the same experience as we had."

The Eric Lyons and Span exhibition runs at Riba in London until 22 December. An accompanying book is also available from Riba Publishing. Dominic Casciani lives in a Span Developments home.

Some of your comments on this story:

"Maximise light, minimalist design" has been the mantra of architects for the last four decades, creating dull lifeless homes can only lead to dull lifeless people. Give me the rich enchanting interiors and architecture of yesteryear any time. Why does "modern" design have to be so sterile, dull, lifeless, industrial, concrete and devoid of any character.

Shaun Wallin, London

Can anyone beat us, having lived in three Span houses? The Templemere Span estate and its lovely grounds are a real university of life. Children come home from school and immediately out onto the lawns, the older ones to the woods, and there have been five or more marriages between the Templemarians - one of them was our own older son celebrating their silver wedding last year.

Minda and Stanley Alexander, Richmond, then Weybridge

Society these days lacks community and everyone belonging. I

believe going back to close-knit communities would eradicate a lot of vandalism and hooligans on estates where there is no interaction between neighbours.

Dawn, Ashington Northumberland

This highlights the need for national debate on the subject of housing in Britain, and just how we are going to accommodate the needs of a growing population largely focused in one area of the country. When I look at the massively overpriced housing available in Britain, I mostly see ill-conceived estates, constructed of cheap materials and conforming to unimaginative designs for easy planning permission. More houses are built, with little or no consideration of the infrastructure needs to support them.

Steve, Nottingham

I almost fell off my chair when I saw the photo with this article. We live in a very similar looking house near Inverness designed by a local architect and built in 1969. Where we clearly differ is that we are detached and in the country but the feeling of light & space and the living-at-tree height impression is evidently the same.

Richard Jenner, Inverness Scotland

I lived in New Ash Green as a young child as well - it was fantastic. The problem was that there was nothing to do once you got a bit older... There was no culture, no decent restaurants, just crappy modern pubs and a tiny selection of shops.

Mark Davies, London, UK

Today it seems to be about cramming as many tiny, impractical houses into one site as possible. There doesn't appear to be any care for the residents of those properties as to whether they will be big enough, light enough or create a good community

Helen, Bristol

I like these ideas of 60's housing and we should bring most of it back into fashion. I like the colours and shapes.

Georgie Ann Cooper, Rochdale

Both my children were with a childminder in New Ash Green. It was wonderful. It meant they were able to play out in a rural environment without the risk from cars. This has meant that they are far fitter and less inclined to be couch potatoes than most of their peers.

Ann Storey, Dartford UK

As a person who lives alone, I'd to have greater interaction with neighbours. Such a development in Birmingham would be very welcome.

Mary, Birmingham, UK

There is also the other side of the coin when a community green is in close proximity to housing. Little children grow into teenagers who, in the current climate of non-parental discipline, tend to loiter in these spaces. My neighbours and I experience football games at all times up to midnight, if we complain we have stones thrown at our windows and cars

damaged.

Ken Fryer, Bedfordshire

If only planners got their priorities right, and rejected the acres of mediocre standard speculative houses which have not been 'designed'. Maybe there would be pressure for design to matter a bit more than just profit.

Heloise Wood, Manchester

I was born and grew up at The Hall, a Span Development in Blackheath. It was a wonderful, idyllic place to live, with safe streets, great play areas, great landscaping and a light and airy house. Now, I am an architect incorporating many of the concepts that Eric Lyons pioneered 50 years ago.

James Thomas, London

Architects no longer have authority to design buildings. The mighty developer in concert with planners now leads the

design of housing. The architect is now relegated to the role of CAD operator. Do not expect radical solutions in the current climate.

S Hay, Saffron Walden

These open plan, purpose built slum estates have caused nothing but trouble. They are a muggers' and rapists' paradise. They share nothing in fact with the European model. It is the continental model of life that helps to create communities, not these badly built estates.

Francis, Cranfield, Bedfordshire

I have been a chartered surveyor for more than forty years. My experience is that the majority of "architect " designed pedestrianised estates have been an unmitigated disaster. Architects tend to design housing estates in away in which they think people should live not how they want to live. This produces houses that are in the main not practical or desirable.

W G Paynter, Welwyn Garden City

Why do architects still think they can build communities? As a child of 1950's Glasgow I watched communities destroyed as people began living in concrete jungles. It looks like Span houses create round-up-the-wagons enclaves.

Bill MacFarlane, Hove, UK

This article celebrates the very same concepts that are regularly criticised when the same model is applied in deprived areas. Communal areas in areas like New Ash Green give an opportunity for people to interact with each other, communal areas in less well-off areas are indefensible spaces where anti-social activity can occur without being challenged due to the lack of private ownership of the land. It is not the architect who should be celebrated or blamed for the success or failure of these schemes.

Michael Bruce, Nottingham, UK

This is only suitable for Middle England areas where there is little crime and everyone knows everyone's business. I would hate to live in one of these places unless all of the other residents were already friends. What's wrong with a bit of

privacy and a space that you can actually say is your own?

Phil Harrington, Newport

Our home shares a central courtyard with others. It was odd at first but the privacy combined with the sharing works really well. We are always mixing, sharing food and often leave doors open so people can go in and out as they please.

Stuart Millinship, London

As a small child, I lived with my family in a Span house on a small development in Teddington, Middlesex, called The Cedars. I am now 50 but I remember so clearly that it was indeed idyllic, with all the children playing outside on the pavements and on the open green spaces. I can still remember driving away with my family on the day we moved away to another part of the country.

Ann Oates, Cambridge

They were brilliantly designed homes and New Ash Green a good place to live. In the end, we wanted more space, but for bringing up a young family great. The footpath network was very well designed. Obviously you had to buy into the concept of village government so it was not for everyone - but you knew exactly what you were buying into. There were no pigs in pokes.

John Barnes, Etchingam