



SPAN Developments Ltd. A Brief History

Span Developments Limited was a development company formed in 1957 by architect Eric Lyons and property developers Geoffrey Townsend and Leslie Bilby. Ivor Cunningham was employed with special responsibility for the landscape design. According to early promotional literature, the name was derived from the intention 'to span the gap between the suburban monotony of the typical speculative development and the architecturally designed, individually built residence that has become (for all but a few) financially unattainable'. What I think makes Span unusual is that it was seeking to bring modern architecture to middle class, middle income people, at a time when in Britain at least, modern architecture was either for large council estates or one-off houses for the very wealthy.

Span houses can be said to be 'modern' in their use of new construction techniques and features such as open plan interiors, large windows and flat roofs. However, the use of materials such as brick, tile-hung walls and timber panelling show the intention to create housing more in keeping with the context and traditions of the English suburbs.

Span's vision went beyond just designing and building individual houses. It aimed to create the right conditions and environment that would make the estates attractive to prospective buyers and enjoyable places to live.

The design of the landscaping and layout was seen as being particularly important. Houses were placed in the landscape in response to the conditions of the existing site, and grouped so that communal spaces were created between the buildings. These spaces were seen as being as important as the buildings themselves. Estates were usually designed to separate car and pedestrian access with garages grouped together in one area rather than being placed next to each dwelling. Particular care was taken to preserve existing mature trees wherever possible, and a lot of effort was put into new planting.

Covenants were put in place that protected these common areas and restricted the changes that people could make to their individual houses. The aim was to ensure that the appearance and character of the estates were preserved. Span set up residents' associations which gave people a say in how the estates were managed. These organisations were responsible for maintaining the common parts of the estates and enforcing the covenants, but most importantly, helped to foster a sense of community.

Span focused on building small estates in leafy surroundings on the suburban outskirts of cities. After the war, the Cator Estate in Blackheath was a collection of late 18th and early 19th century terraces and villas but many of the houses had been damaged beyond repair by bombing. The land around Blackheath Park and the roads to the north and south were therefore ideal for speculative housing development. The Priors was the first Span development built in 1956. Most of the Span developments met with opposition from Greenwich Council and local residents, on the grounds that any modern building was inappropriate to the Georgian character of the area. In the 1960s, higher density developments were placed in more difficult backland sites. However, Lyons' determination to defy the planners eventually won through, and he was rewarded with around 20 housing medals from the Ministry of Housing and Local Government. But it's the continued success of these developments into the 21st century that is the true testament to Span's vision for modern housing.