

INVESTIGATING SYSTEMS BUILDING

INTRODUCTION

HOW TO FIND OUT HOW YOUR ESTATE WAS BUILT ,HOW TO FIND OTHER SIMILAR ESTATES

These notes are mainly aimed at flats/maisonettes built using industrialised building systems ie systems where there is a high degree of prefabrication on or off the building site. However they are also very relevant to any other system or type of design that has been used in a number of places or also to a particular estate which has been built to a unique design, or using traditional methods and/or materials. In short we hope these notes are useful to anyone researching their estate as part of a dampness campaign although please allow for the fact that they are geared for industrialised systems.

These notes are based on the experience of YDIAG & SCAI. YDIAG, the alliance of 4 tenants groups in Hull, Nottingham, Sheffield, Leeds has been very successful in its campaign against dampness. 15 months ago the future looked bleak, but now Leeds is to demolish 1200 flats, Nottingham and Hull will probably demolish a similar amount and the remainder will receive major remedial work - we hope. We have been successful also in attracting national publicity and in bringing politicians from the 4 cities together to join with us in trying to force extra cash for dampness out of the government. Whilst we wouldn't claim that forming the Yorkshire Development Tenants Action Group has led to all this, it has certainly contributed a lot.

At the same time a basic knowledge of how our YDG system is built (and why) has helped us:

- a) to understand their official reports
- b) to begin to know what remedial measures to demand
- c) to see whether the remedial measures they propose are rubbish or not.
- d) to add to the credibility of our groups, so each council knows they cannot say anything and hope we'll buggger off.
- e) to walk round estates built in this system and know what to look for, what is significant or not.

Money and Time

Why should we do all this work? That's a good question and it is obviously important from the start to press councillors to instruct officers to provide the information you want and to have it presented in a clear and concise way. Even if they have done this, however you may want to try and get help from experts who will work for you and answer your questions and scrutinise what the council officers claim. Furthermore there are certain actions that only tenants can carry out to produce results eg contact unions or building workers, and these contacts can often produce some of the most useful material. So it can be a good idea at the start to identify what you think it would be useful to know and then who, and how, it is best to approach to get it.

Investigating a system does take time and a bit of money. Of course you can do it bit by bit but if you want to get as much information together as quickly as possible it could take one person 2-4 weeks. So before starting could you get a student to do the work for you? Would 2 or 3 members be willing to get on with it? Once started you'll probably find many loose ends, information or issues that could be followed up. But is it worthwhile doing all of these? One obvious danger is that researching your system becomes a major task in itself and hinders strengthening your group or developing your campaign.

Initially little money is needed. Just a lot of second class stamps. However phone calls can soon add up - can you get access to a local authority/community project/union phone to make your calls from? The biggest expense can be travelling to other cities. Again, can you find anyone who gets their mileage paid, know any long distance drivers, borrow a car, etc etc.

1. What system do you live in?

You may know. If you don't it should be easy to find out. Try the obvious first, contact the Council they shouldn't think it too classified information. Also ask for the date of decision to build (ie Council meeting) and the name of the builder.

Whether they give you the date of the Decision or not it's worth checking the Council Minutes and Reports for more details. Your main central library or archives should keep these. Some authorities just keep minutes available others leave the reports open for inspection. The Report to Committee will usually include such details as number of flats, different types, total construction fee, loan charges, builders name etc. Some systems changed during time, eg Mk1, Mk2, Mk3, make a note of which one you are in.

If you still don't know what system you're in, then your Stone Age Council needs ridiculing til it spits out the answer.

2. How to find out the maximum about the system

This is where the work starts. You can start with any section, but if you have time perhaps the best one to start with is the Building/Architecture Library.

a) The Building/Architecture Library.

Millions of pounds are spent on Polytechnic and University libraries yet they are rarely used except by students and academics. However, whilst your local Business section in the public library may be useful for some things, the best place to start is with the academic libraries.

There are a number of ways of getting access:

- a) walk straight in and use it.
- b) walk in and approach librarian, explain who you are and if they will help you.
- c) get a student to go in as well
- d) write in to the Chief Librarian, explaining what you would like to use the library for (and how trustworthy you are!) and asking permission to use library and/or borrow books.

How you get access depends on you, but it's worth remembering that some libraries do spot checks and do actually ban people for life if they are there without permission. There will be library police next!

If you have a choice of libraries, first try the one serving departments dealing with courses such as building technology, surveying etc. Within Nottingham the Poly library dealing in these subjects is better than the University library dealing with Architecture.

Then try looking at the following indexes and abstracts. Abstracts and indexes are fantastically helpful since it makes it unnecessary to search through hundreds of individual periodicals to find specific articles. An abstract is simply a very condensed version of an article giving the main points as shortly as possible, you can then decide whether to refer to the article or not.

The kind of entry you will see is illustrated below:

66.257.1 : 726.22(2), 3
MORRIS, A. E. J.
Life ends at forty.
In Building, v. 227, no. 0256, 15th November 1970.
P. 131-133.
Outlines how 550 system-built flats came to be built at Quarry Hill in Leeds, with a 1930's French housing system, and looks at what subsequently went wrong including cladding failures, and early misadventure of the individual flats.
KEY WORDS: Architecture; cladding; defective; External walls; flats; Frames; Prefabricated construction; steel; Structure
CDB/W

No index is perfect so it is worth checking 3 or more headings in each volume. For instance an article titled "YDG Mk 1: Shepherds industrialised building system planned for Hull" could have been entered under "YDG" or "Industrial Building" or "Shepherds" or "Hull" or any combination of these. So its worth checking: Industrialised building and Systems Building, name of system, cities you are interested in and buildres name.

I would personally start with i and then use vi.

- i. Architectural Periodicals Index. Published 4 times a year and then these 4 volumes are combined each year. Started in 1973, but preceded by a very similar publication called RIBA Annual Review of Periodical Articles, published 1965-72. Hundreds of journals are indexed by this Royal Institute of British Architects publication.
- ii. Department of the Environment/Library Bulletin. Started in 1970, issued twice a month, has abstracts. An annual index is issued which is best place to start looking.
- iii. Building Science Abstracts. Monthly with an annual index.
- iv. Construction References. Abstracts books, pamphlets and periodical articles. Published 6 monthly.
- v. Urban Abstracts. Monthly with index in each volume. Started in 1974.
- vi. Times Index. Started in 1966. Seems to take long time to wade through index. You then need to look at the Times on microfilm.

The most productive period to look at is the period when the system was first being used, since the firm would then issue glossy press releases on what is different about the system, how it is built, why it is so wonderful etc. The building press would then often reproduce this word for word or with some comment. Articles about faults in systems seem to appear more in the past 4 or 5 years.

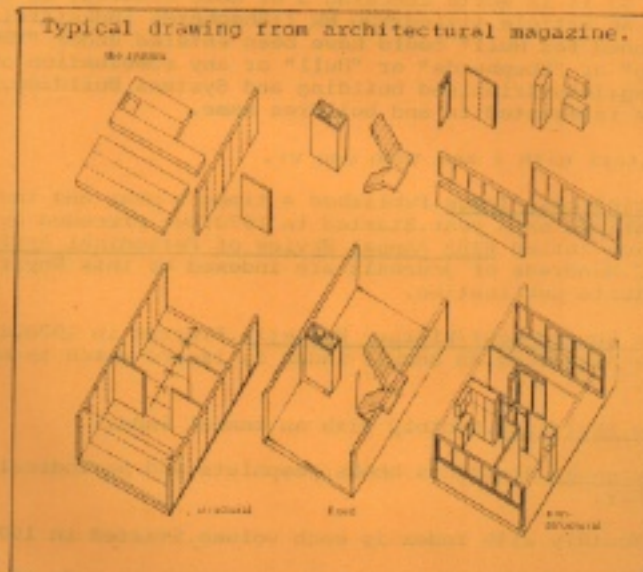
There are other indexes which might turn up the odd reference (eg British Technology Index and Institute of Civil Engineers Abstracts) but the 6 mentioned above should turn up almost every reference to journals, government reports, conferences, periodicals, books, etc that feature your system.

It is a long process this, so it'll help if a group goes down for a day (?) and does it together.

When you find a reference take it all down so you don't have to look it up again. Most of the articles etc will probably be stored in the library you're in but no library has complete sets of everything, so you may find it necessary to either:

- a) if you are a ticket holder to request an inter-library loan ie your library gets it from another library, or
- b) if it's an article from a publication that's still going to write to them and ask for a copy

Is it all worth it? Hopefully yes. The kind of information that was turned up doing a similar search (we didn't use the indexes above, it would have saved hours of time) included: names of key firms involved, names of architects, quantity surveyors etc; details of site, density of flats, thinking behind construction method and design, flat plans, site plans, plans for community buildings, drawings of how components meant to fit together, which bits structural and which not, details of insulation, details of heating system, costs of building and so on. A lot of it is glossy promises of a brave new world but there should be enough there to give you a far better understanding of your system.



D) BOOKS

Whilst in the library it's worth a quick look round the book section. There are 2 very good books worth finding by R.M.E. Diamant called Methods of Industrialised Building. Published by Ilife Books Ltd, this comes in 3 volumes and features 170 International methods. If your system is covered it gives a very good simple run down of each system with pictures. Definitely worth finding.

The other book is by Patrick Dunleavy, The Politics of Mass Housing in Britain 1945-1975. Clarendon Press 1981. This covers the whole country and in particular Bristol, Birmingham, Newham. Major firms like Wates, Laing, Concrete Ltd, Wimpays etc are listed in the index and their systems mentioned in the text, some in more detail than others, plus there are further references you can follow up. Besides being useful to look at your system, if its included, it is an excellent account of how construction companies and professionals pushed industrialised systems.

The British Systems Yearbook published by the National Federation of Building Trades Employers has far less information, about half a page on a system plus builders name. Most of the systems described in the copy I looked at were low rise. The same amount of information is available on a few systems in Systems Building by Thomas Schmid and Carlo Testa, published by Pall Mall Press.

Crusing around other books and looking at their indexes you may well find other material, for instance a book called Industrialisation in Concrete Building Construction by the American Concrete Institute has a very interesting article, 32 pages long, on Bison.

c) Housing Committee & Council Minutes

Still in libraries, though probably a different one, there are the Council Minutes to check. Even if only Minutes are available, it is worth checking these, for instance to see if they were talking about dampness 10 years ago and proposing remedial work. As a guide it took 4 of us just under 2 hours to check 13 years of Hull Housing Minutes and photocopy the right bits.

In other cities it could well take longer and whilst the Housing Committee is the obvious place to start you may find other Council Committees eg Planning, or certain sub-committees may provide information.

d) The Local Press

Local papers, and radio stations, keep press cutting files. Sympathetic journalists may be willing to copy the whole file, or bits or just tell you key dates and events. If they've been around sometime they will probably remember a lot about personalities, decisions, cover ups concerning controversial housing developments. They may also have confidential council reports in their possession.

Journalists, particularly any working on a free lance basis, may be particularly interested if your system has problems in other cities and if there is a chance of selling stories to the national media. They may therefore be helpful in getting contacts in other cities or information or in getting questions that you want answered asked by themselves.

e) Building workers

No-one knows more about how the flats were actually built than the building workers. Missing baffles, defective panels, botched joints, missing re-inforcement cover ups, botch ups, cock ups and anything else they know. In Nottingham 3 building workers involved in the flats 13/14 years previously were found and gave invaluable information. They were all found by members of the dampness group asking around or having relatives who worked on site.

Before even starting to make contact, you need to be clear about confidentiality. Most workers will be reluctant to make statements in public, they could get blacklisted, sued or victimised by the powerful construction employers. So any approach must take into account:

- a) whether worker is willing to give just background information or is willing to be quoted in print anonymously and in such a way that no story can be traced to them.
- b) that the name and address of the worker will be kept entirely secret and not passed on to anyone under any circumstances. If the press wish to get in touch, they can only do so through the group who will then get in touch with the worker to see if his name can be passed on. As few people on the group as possible to know name and address, preferably only one or two.

It may be that some workers are retired or willing to appear on TV, full face or in silhouette, but because of the 'explosive' nature of some of the stories there will probably be few people who will want to make them public themselves. Whilst building workers can outline some mistakes, they can also explain the building process, assess level of site supervision, know what fiddles went on etc.

Making contact could be difficult. Perhaps it's a question of keeping asking. Starting with the estate asking personally, in pubs, through newsletters, does anyone know anyone who...? Contacting the Union Offices for building workers eg. UCATT, TGWU, BEPTU, GMBU, may produce useful contacts although it's worth trying to find out first who would be most helpful, as it is when approaching shop stewards in the DLO. Even appealing on local radio, leaving a phone number to contact may produce results. In Nottingham's case it was relatively easy to find contacts, in other cities it may not be so quick, but the information gained, and the way it can be used, can make the search well worth while.

f) Resource Centres & Trades Union Research Units

A number of major cities have such centres who may well have kept files, or been involved in some way with the estate in the past. May also be very useful for extra contacts in the city. Try these early on.



'TELL ME HE'S KIDDING'

g) Council officials and councillors

It is not unknown for councillors or officers to pass on documents for copy, quickly or to allow you in to see plans etc but not to take anything away. Detailed plans may not seem very important to you, but should you have a structural engineer or surveyor who's willing to look at problems on the estate they may well ask if its possible to look at detailed drawings. So it may be worth thinking how, or who could help you, to get access to the plans. In Nottingham's case, plans definitely helped in that a structural engineer could simply say the flats weren't built to specification.

Talking to councillors, or getting local councillors to get information out of the Council can be helpful. Using the local history library or resource centre you should be able to find a list of the councillors who originally approved the scheme. A number may have left local politics but still live in the area. Using the phone book they may well be helpful. Also you may find councillors have asked awkward questions during question time at full Council meetings, these people can be followed up.

h) What about the technical terms

There's a lot of jargon in some reports, talk of 'cleats' and 'spalling' and 'nibs' etc. There are some basic dictionaries around which are easy to use eg the Penquin Guide to Building.

i. Local history library

Many libraries have a section with a title similar to this. Besides often keeping Committee Minutes etc, they often keep press cuttings and other information. Staff are often very helpful and can sometimes not only point to you to relevant material but may help with other personal contacts in the area who might help you on the history of the estate.

1. Researching past defects

Once a year you have the right to inspect the Council Accounts. A full article on how to do this is in Community Action no 53. In Nottingham last year 2 tenants groups argued successfully that repairs vouchers are logically vouchers relating to the accounts and therefore must be open to inspection. So hundreds of dockets detailing repairs orders were produced by the Council which gave a clear idea (even allowing for fact that many people don't report damp etc since they reckon on past experience nothing will get done) of how bad water penetration was, which flats were affected, how many faulty electrics needed repairing and so on. Excellent evidence which can't be contradicted and far easier to get than doing a survey on the estate.

3. How to find out more about the professionals involved

For various reasons you may want to know more about the professionals involved particularly the building company.

The first place to start is with the basic business books. The UK Kompass Register of British Industry and Commerce lists some 30,000 firms and contains basic information such as no of employees, subsid companies, directors. The Times 1000 gives very basic information on top 1,000 UK companies. More detailed information can be seen on Moodies Cards eg new acquisitions, new directors, quotes from annual reports etc and also on Extel Companies Service which covers companies quoted (ie quoted on the Stock Exchange) and unquoted companies. You're not meant to photocopy Extel, and probably not Moodies, so do it quietly.

You can try writing to the registered office of the company asking for an annual report. Public companies usually produce glossy ones, private companies often do not publish one.

Perhaps the richest place to look is at Companies House by obtaining a microfiche of the company accounts. All limited companies are meant to file their annual accounts here and for £1 you receive a copy of all of them which you then have to read with a microfiche reader which is available in large libraries. The accounts may be a bit of a mystery but you should be able to see the relative fortunes of the firm. You will also see other directorships listed in full, probably get an idea of other building contracts they are involved in if the accounts also include a small annual report, see the shareholders etc. In the case of YDG accounts it could be seen that Shepherds had spent some £600,000 on remedial work to industrialised systems, a lot of which had been written off as a tax loss.

Companies House is at 55, City Road, EC1 nearest tube is Old Street. Unless you live in London it's expensive to go and get one or two microfiches, so best to get someone who is going down, or who lives there to do it for you.

When you've discovered who the directors are you might want to look at them in more detail. The Investigators Handbook by Community Action (updated in issues no 33, 34, 35 & 36) spells out how to look at individuals further. It also suggests other sources for this section generally.

Other professionals

If you want to trace, or find out more, about the architects, surveyors etc involved you can turn to the professional yearbooks. For instance the RIBA Directory of Practices lists firms with qualified architects involved whilst there is also a RIBA Directory of Members. The RICS Yearbook lists members of the Royal Institute of Chartered Surveyors and there are many other yearbooks eg Institute of Structural Engineers, Institute of Civil Engineers as well as other relevant reference books such as Consulting Engineers Who's Who.

Once you have traced these professionals it's worth thinking how they can be of use to you. Is it worth phoning them and appearing naive? Or putting them straight on the spot? Or arranging a meeting? What they can tell you can be of use, if they refuse then you can obviously use this in your publicity and give the press their names to contact and put difficult questions to. Remember to keep a record of any conversation or meeting so that you can use quotes from it.

4. Making links with other groups and other cities.

This section simply deals with locating or starting another group, it does not go on to the way in which links are maintained and how they can be used.

First, contact the National Anti-Dampness Campaign. Affiliated groups have sent in details of their estate and it may be that other groups exist in your type of system. Then also write to Community Action and ask them to put in a small piece asking any group to write to you.

Hopefully your research should have identified a number of places where your system is built, so now the problem is making contact in a city which is probably completely strange. There seem to be 4 main ways:

a) using contacts you know in your area, asking them if they know of people who might help locate estate or make contact in the other city. For instance, asking Labour Party members, Union Officials, Journalists, Tenants Federation members, members of left political groups.

