

The Segal method: a lesson in building sustainable communities

The housing crisis has created new interest in the self-build method of a generation ago developed by Walter Segal. Committee member Kate Jordan considers the implications.

In July this year, The Building Centre in London hosted the launch of Alice Grahame and Taran Wilkhu's new book *Walters Way and Segal Close*. It is a personal and largely photographic study of two groups of self-build houses designed by the pioneering architect Walter Segal from a generation ago, very shortly before similar groups were built in Brighton.

The launch was accompanied by a panel discussion which included Grahame and Wilkhu; the architects John McKean (who provides the introduction to the book) and Jon Broome - both friends and colleagues of the late Segal; resident and original self-builder, Pauline Kennedy and Tom Dyckoff, TV presenter and Segal enthusiast. The event sold out and the room was packed to capacity with the growing number of Segal-devotees - largely architects, planners, historians and students. Beyond this audience, however, Walter Segal is scarcely known and, aside from an excellent biography (now sadly out of print) by the architect and historian John McKean, very little has been written about him.

Who was Walter Segal?

Walter Segal (1907-1985) was a German architect, schooled in the modern movement, who moved to the UK in 1936. He is best known for the 'Segal self-build method' in which he designed a construction system comprising prefabricated, lightweight elements (largely timber and glass) which could be relatively easily assembled by unskilled and inexperienced builders. The method was put into practice in Lewisham during the early 1980s, where a group, attracted by the prospect of low-cost home-ownership, established a trust and subsequently built Walters Way and Segal Close. Though Segal oversaw every aspect of the planning and construction until his death in 1985 (before the completion of Walters Way) the design had sufficient flexibility to allow each resident to adapt the building to their own needs.

As Grahame and Wilkhu's book illustrates, Segal's self-build houses in Lewisham have achieved something akin to cult status - Grahame notes that architects and students are regular visitors to the area. This, combined with the inexorable march of gentrification in London, is certainly shifting the demographic of residents - the attractive, privately-owned houses in Walters Way and Segal Close are no longer positioned at the affordable end of the market.

Segal's self-build method in Brighton

Though only 200 or so Segal self-build homes were completed, the method has been influential. Brighton offers an excellent example at Hog's Edge in Bevendean, developed by the Hedgehog Housing Coop. The development was born in 1996 when four founding members, inspired by the first Brighton Segal self-build project (the Diggers Housing Coop) and motivated by their own housing need, lobbied the council. They were eventually offered a plot of land to build ten timber eco-houses using the Segal method.

The houses took two and a half years to complete and the residents worked on each other's houses, all of which were owned by the housing association and subsequently rented. This helped to cement a sense of community and collective ownership which has endured. The site today is pleasing, extremely well-maintained and testament to the strength of Segal's legacy. [Kevin McCloud's Grand Designs programme about it was recently reshow on Channel 4.](#)

Self build and pre-fabrication: appropriate for our time?

As the Hedgehog Housing project suggests, the Segal self-build method has an abiding and enthusiastic fan-base. In recent years, however, it has started to attract wider attention, largely as a result of the need to explore low-carbon and cost-efficient methods of house-building that meet new demands and challenges. While it is broadly recognised that self-build is a niche method of construction, key elements of the Segal method - pre-fabrication and flexibility - are now being re-assessed.

Walters Way, Segal Close and Brighton's Diggers and Hedgehog Housing are micro-developments built as a limited response to individual housing needs, with an emphasis on humane planning and long-term investment. They have continued, decades later, to be valued and cared for as homes and as examples of quality design, by residents who actively foster a sense of community - even where, as at the Brighton projects, the tenants do not have a financial stake in their properties. To thrive, such developments require long-life sites and dedicated householders with a shared commitment.

A sense of community and long term vision - on a small scale

The kind of pre-fabricated housing that authorities in London and the South East are currently contemplating, on the other hand, is designed to meet different challenges to those that inspired Segal. Councils must now house ever-swelling numbers of homeless people as cheaply as possible while simultaneously devising ways to move quickly when developers find more lucrative land uses. Budget cuts mean that councils must exhaust all possibilities in tackling these problems but if potential pre-fabricated, 'flexible' schemes are to last fourteen years or more then community cohesion as well as design quality and cost-efficiency will have to be a consideration.

In the final analysis, what made Walters Way, Segal Close and the Diggers and Hedgehog co-operatives work has less to do with construction methods, affordability, environmental standards or the aesthetic qualities of Segal's design and much more to do with security, stability and a collective long-term vision. What his method offers is an exemplary model for small-scale, alternative developments and an insight into the vital role of shared values in carving out successful communities. What it plainly does not offer, as July's panel were quick to point out, is a wide-reaching solution to the chronic shortage of affordable homes in the South-East. Only major reform of land-ownership and development can do that.

A rounded context

Alice Grahame and Taran Wilkhu's book is a unique record of the views of residents and self-builders and as such is a welcome addition to scholarship on innovative building techniques. But where John McKean's study offers a comprehensive and balanced account of Segal's work, politics and objectives, Grahame and Wilkhu's glossy pictures and glowing testimonials run the risk of fetishising the architecture. There is a danger that, without a full and rounded context, the rising popularity of the Segal aesthetic may be exploited to champion production-line developments that end up being little better than shanty towns. The moment has surely arrived for John McKean to revisit his work on Segal.

[Read more about the Hedgehog Co-operative](#)

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[See the article by Rowan Moore in the Guardian on Segal self building \(July 2017\)](#)

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[*Walters Way and Segal Close* by Alice Grahame and Taran Wilkhu. Park Books. \(£34\). ISBN 978-3-03860-049-7](#)

Learning from Segal by John McKean. Birkhäuser, 1989. ISBN 3-7643-1999-2