



The images used on this months newsletter are illustrations of the residential units being developed by ONE17 at Tolson Farm.

THIS MONTH : SUSTAINABLE - BUT FOR HOW LONG?

If you believe the media, the effects of the credit crunch and rising prices are really beginning to bite. Which, you may say, makes sustainability issues of even greater importance than ever.

As I hope you are by now aware, I tend to reach for my gun when I hear the word sustainable. No one has yet managed to explain to me what it means; if history teaches us anything it is surely that it is completely impossible to predict the future in any meaningful sense. Sustainability is surely proven by time and time alone.

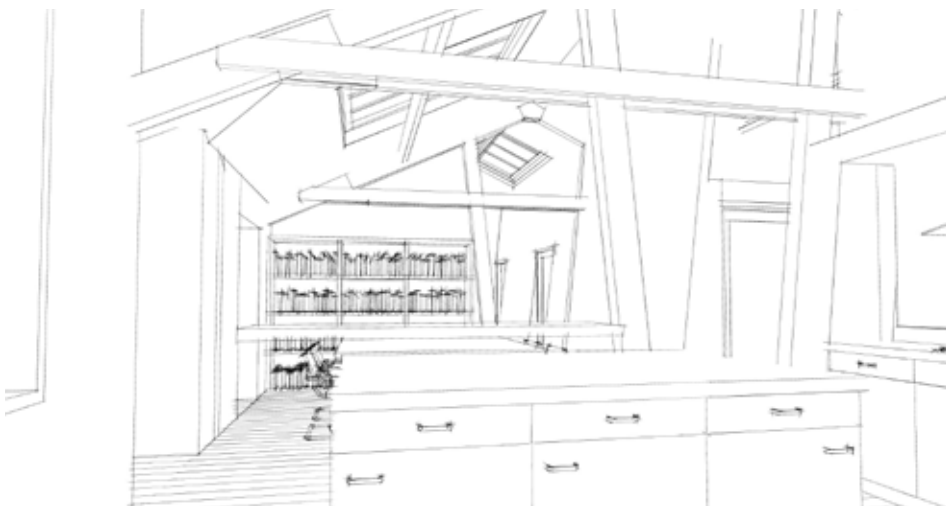
Is your building sustainable? How long does something have to last

to be “sustainable”? Come back in a century or so and we may have the answer.

During June I was lucky enough to have a few days off and took a trip to the west coast of Wales. The landscape of central and west Wales is absolutely stunning, and the trip was genuinely revivifying. However, in the entire time I was there, I did not see a single recent building that raised my spirits in any way. Now this was not a busman’s holiday and I was not seeking out the undoubted architectural gems of the area. But simply observing the twentieth and twenty first century buildings along the route as we passed through this fabulous

landscape, I came to see it as the land of the numb bungalow. Dumpy, badly proportioned, squatting on their sites, these buildings did their best to contrast unfavourably with the beauty surrounding them. And yet. If someone were to follow in my footsteps a century hence, would they see those same sad excuses for architecture? I suggest there is a strong chance they would. And if so, would it make those buildings “sustainable” and, by contemporary definition, good? *(Incidentally, if you really want to depress yourself, I recommend a brief – very brief – visit to Newtown.)*

Back in the office I turned my attention to a couple of commercial projects we have on the drawing board *(Yes, I know it’s actually on the computer screen but that doesn’t have quite the same ring to it somehow)*. These buildings will have high levels of thermal insulation, energy efficient services installations, and a significant proportion of their power will come from renewable energy sources (see below). Green travel plans will be developed for them and there will be provision for building users who wish to cycle. Will all this guarantee that these buildings are “sustainable”?





Regardless of the answer to that you may be interested to know that the latest Yorkshire and Humberside Regional Spatial Strategy, published in May this year (and which local planning authorities are obliged to observe), sets out policies relating to development of land within the region, with some interesting implications for major projects. Major projects are defined as housing schemes with 10 or more dwellings, and non-residential schemes providing 1,000 sq.m. or more of new floorspace.

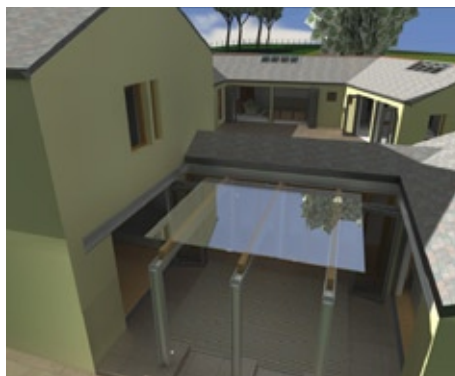
In these cases, policy ENV5 of the strategy requires all such schemes:

“to secure at least 10% of their energy from decentralised and renewable or low-carbon sources”

There is something of a get-out clause attached but I would not place too much hope in it. The days of simply plugging into the mains are fading.

As we contemplate the future we might remember that just a few years ago many architects were involved with urban regeneration projects, designing the apartment blocks needed to house our burgeoning generation of young urban professionals. The same

apartment blocks that are today half-empty, festooned with estate agents boards. How quickly the economy makes a mockery of our plans. This, despite the fact that the government target for construction of new dwellings remains at nearly a quarter of a million a year to meet demand.



In the course of my coastal break I ventured into a bookshop and picked up a copy of a lavishly produced tome which proclaimed the joys (and virtues) of ‘slow living’. It listed various idyllic hideaways around the country where you could stay with real people in real homes, enjoying sumptuous cooking using organic (often home grown) ingredients and generally getting back to a simpler way of life. In almost all cases the buildings that formed the focus for these ventures were at least a hundred and fifty years old. There was an implicit message

that old was good, new(ish) was bad. Should we simply bulldoze all houses constructed since 1895? If only the carbon footprint of most old houses weren’t quite so big.

Now I have no wish to denigrate the principles of slow living, which I believe have much to recommend them and many of which I strive to follow, but two particular aspects of the book rankled with me: first of all, the unspoken suggestion that this could be a model for a way of life for the nation; secondly, on reading more deeply into the life stories of the proprietors of these guest houses, it transpired that nearly all had been merchant bankers or advertising executives or city solicitors who had decided to use the not inconsiderable fortunes they had amassed over years at the coalface of high finance, to fund their new lives.

The subject of sustainability will, I fear, be with us for a long time to come. I will end this month with a quotation from Richard Buckminster Fuller, the visionary American architect who died in 1983 and who was, incidentally, the second president of Mensa:

“There is no energy crisis, food crisis or environmental crisis. There is a crisis of ignorance.”