

ULTRA

Positions and Polarities Beyond Crisis

TO CITE THIS PAPER | David Kroll. "The Other Architects Who Made London: Building Applications in Richmond 1886 -1939." In *Proceedings of the Society of Architectural Historians, Australia and New Zealand: 38, Ultra: Positions and Polarities Beyond Crisis*, edited by David Kroll, James Curry and Madeline Nolan, 215-226. Adelaide: SAHANZ, 2022. Accepted for publication December 1, 2021. DOI: 10.55939/a3987pr6js



Image: Michaelmore, Roeger & Russell, *Chester House*, Belair 1966, State Library of South Australia BRG 346/28/6/2.

PROCEEDINGS OF THE SOCIETY OF ARCHITECTURAL HISTORIANS, AUSTRALIA AND NEW ZEALAND (SAHANZ) VOLUME 38

Convened by The University of Adelaide, School of Architecture and Built Environment, Adelaide,
10-13 November, 2021.

Edited by David Kroll, James Curry and Madeline Nolan.

Published in Adelaide, South Australia, by SAHANZ, 2022.

ISBN: 978-0-646-85443-4

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The Other Architects Who Made London: Building Applications in Richmond 1886-1939

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Keywords

London
Housing design
Victorian
speculative housing
Pattern books

Abstract

Successive house building booms from the late 19th century until the Second World War shaped London's built environment decisively. In terms of the sheer size of area covered, the dispersed, suburban London of terraced, semi- and detached houses that we know today was to a large extent created then, and much of it was built speculatively - by private firms for an assumed demand. Despite this legacy, the questions of who those involved in the design were and how they did it is an under-researched topic surrounded by assumptions that are often difficult to substantiate. Speculative housing of the period has long been regarded as an example of vernacular architecture, made by craftsmen using standard templates, so-called pattern books, without architect's or otherwise professional involvement. The idea - in its extreme, 'ultra' form - is that designers were hardly necessary, as builders could simply copy house designs found in popular books and build from these. This idea of house building without architects or designers is also reflected in some of the literature but has been questioned more recently in academic research.

This paper will discuss the key occupations involved in the design and planning of speculative housing 1880s - 1939 through a survey of Building Applications for Richmond. These can only be understood in the context of its working world where boundaries between building and design roles were often less specialized than today. The evidence suggests that housing design was not as standardised as it appears, by simply reusing templates, but that much of it was in fact designed, usually for a number of dwellings at a time - by builders, architects and also by other professionals. These were the other 'architects' who made the London we know today.

Introduction

1. Nikolaus Pevsner, *An Outline of European Architecture*, rev. edn (London: Thames & Hudson, 2009).

2. MacCormac Jamieson Pritchard, "Sustainable Suburbia: Work in Progress" (London: MJP, 2005).

3. Will Hurst and Marguerite Lazell, "Government Fails on Pledge for Good Design," *Building Design*, October 3, 2008, 1.

4. Edwardian or inter-war housing was not featured as one of the options in the survey. However, Victorian housing is illustrated by a photo of terraced housing which is probably Edwardian, because it features rectangular window bays. It seems to suggest that in the survey these two periods were perceived as one and the same.

5. Alison Brooks, Matthew Lloyd, and Alex Lifschutz, "Talk: My London Vernacular" (Centre for London's Built Environment, June 26, 2009).

6. Stefan Muthesius, *The English Terraced House* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1982), 251.

7. This view was also reiterated at the aforementioned talk on the influences of housing history on London. Brooks, Lloyd, and Lifschutz, "Talk: My London Vernacular."

8. Richard Russell Lawrence, *The Book of the Edwardian and Inter-War House* (London: Aurum Press Ltd, 2009), 12.

9. Kitt Wedd, *Victorian Housebuilding* (Shire Publications, 2012), 18.

10. Donald J. Olsen, *The Growth of Victorian London* (London: Batsford, 1976), 158.

11. Process 1866-1914," *Construction History* 1 (1985): 13-24; J.W.R Whitehand, "The Makers of British Towns: Architects, Builders and Property Owners, c.1850-1939," *Journal of Historical Geography* 18, no. 4 (1992): 417-38; Michael Andrew Johnson, "The Sunderland Cottage: The Favourite and Typical Dwelling of the Skilled Mechanic," *Vernacular Architecture* 41, no. 1 (December 1, 2010): 59-74.

Architectural history is still often shaped by Pevsner's binary proposition of architecture versus building, of the cathedral versus the bicycle shed.¹ Under Pevsner's definition, speculative housing of the late 19th and early 20th century in London would be closer to buildings than architecture. Yet, its impact on the city has been significant and there is much to admire about it, both in terms of its urban design or arrangement, as well as its detailing and simple construction. The urban planning of Victorian and Edwardian housing aligns in many ways with ideas of a compact, walkable city.² The architectural quality of Victorian housing has also not been without controversy but even critics cannot deny its lasting popular appeal. Among architects today, Victorian housing has often been praised for its robustness, adaptability, and liveliness of design. In a survey among architects in the UK, 'more than half hailed the Victorian era for producing the greatest legacy'.³ In comparison, only 3.5 % favoured recently built housing.⁴ Prominent contemporary housing architects such as Alison Brooks also draw inspiration from 19th- and early 20th-century precedents for their own work.⁵

Despite its legacy, the question of who the designers of speculative housing of the period has still been surrounded by hard-to-substantiate assumptions. Muthesius points to this lack of research on 'the designers' in his book *The English Terraced House*.⁶ London's speculative housing of the late 19th and early 20th centuries has long been regarded as an example of vernacular architecture, made by craftsmen using standard templates, so-called pattern books, without architect's or otherwise professional design.⁷ Lawrence states, for example, that 'builders did not need architects because they could find designs in pattern-books and publications such as the *Illustrated Carpenter and Builder*'.⁸ In *Victorian Housebuilding*, Wedd states that a 'second influence on mass-market house design was the absence of professional architects'.⁹ Olsen echoes these views and explains that 'the design of speculative housing lay with the builders, whose views on architecture remained traditional'.¹⁰

This assumption of house building without architects has been questioned more recently in academic research. In particular Frank Trowell's research on speculative house building in Leeds, J.W.R. Whitehand's and C.M.H. Carr's research on Birmingham and London, M.A. Johnson's study of the 'Sunderland Cottage', and research by the Survey of London have shown that architects were in fact more involved in the design of speculative housing than previously thought.¹¹ Despite this new evidence, it still seems poorly understood who those responsible for the planning and design were. For one, there is a lack of research addressing this question in relation to London. Furthermore, the research to date does not seem to sufficiently consider the working world in speculative housing at the time. The literature is, for example, often focused on a distinction of architects versus builders, but neglects the involvement of other construction occupations. This perception seems to be based more on relationships in today's construction industry rather than a historical perspective.

This paper investigates the question of who designed speculative housing from 1886 to 1839 through a study of building applications that have recently become available for the London Borough of Richmond. In other words, this paper aims examine who these other, largely unknown 'architects' and designers responsible for a large part of London's residential fabric were. The study also helps to elucidate the working world of speculative housing of the period where boundaries between building and design occupations were often less clear. It shows that housing design was less standardised than often assumed, by simply reusing templates, but that the design drawings appear to have been created by builders, architects and by other professionals, usually for a number of dwellings at a time.

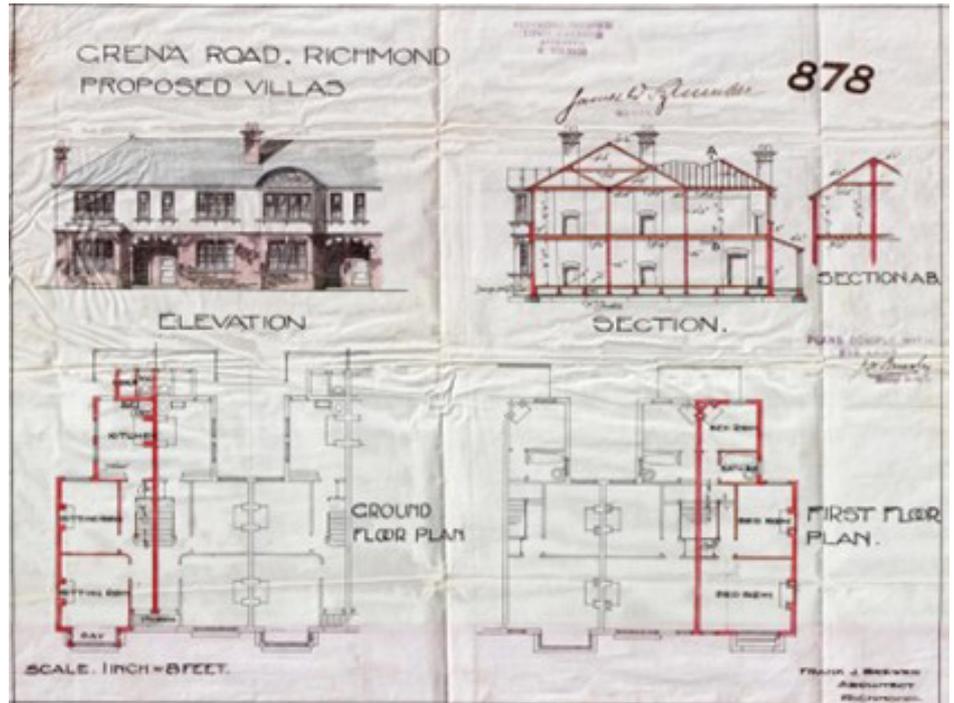


Figure 1: Application drawings for 12 terraced houses in Grena Street, 1901, by architect Frank J. Brewer, also a prolific local architect. In the 1910s, he formed Brewer, Smith and Brewer, who were responsible for around 200 applications in the area (Richmond Local Studies Archive, PLA/03468).

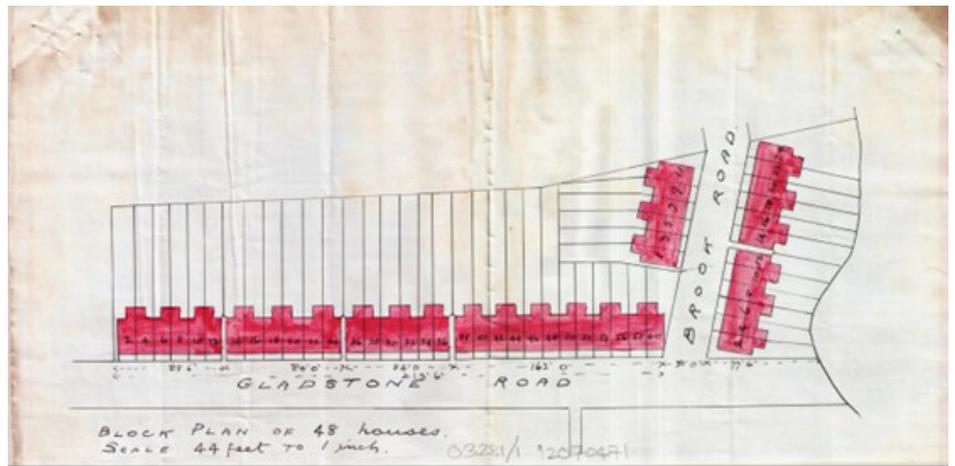


Figure 2: Block plan for a larger application of 48 houses, prepared by local surveyor Ernest Pennington, 1898 (Richmond Local Studies Archive, PLA/03468)

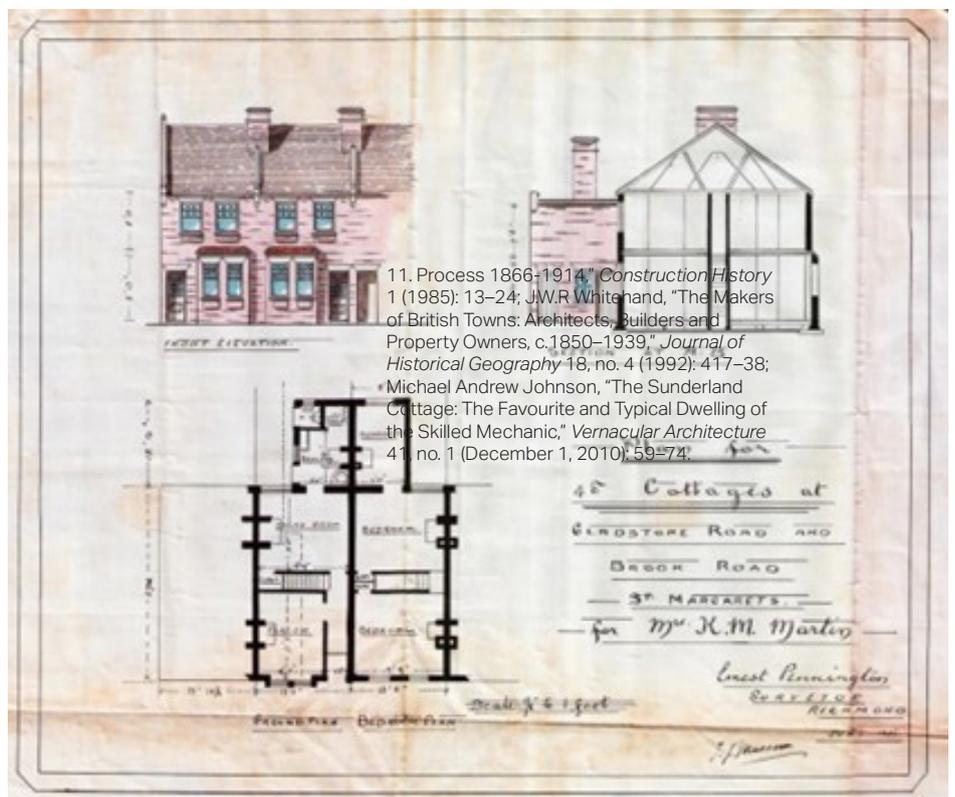


Figure 3: House design for same application by local surveyor Ernest Pennington, 1898 (Richmond Local Studies Archive, PLA/03468)

Methodology and sources

12. Most of the application contain a completed application form, a block plan and design drawings of the houses at a scale of 1/8" to 1'-0" (close to metric scale 1:100, figure). Richmond Local Studies Archive, "Collection of Building Plans, 1878-1968," Richmond Local Studies Archive, accessed May 28, 2013, <http://www.calmview.eu/Richmond/calmview/>.

13. The boxes of the collection are in alphabetical order of street names. The boxes that were chosen have applications for streets starting with the letters A, D, E, F, K, L, M and S.

This study is based on the evaluation of a sample of building applications from 1886 to 1939, 205 in total, which are held at Richmond Local History Archive. Figures 1 to 3 show examples of drawings for houses that were included with many of the applications.¹² This collection of building applications has only recently been catalogued and was chosen because it is unusually comprehensive among those that survived in Greater London. To be representative, it was important that the sample applications would not all come from the same area.¹³ Figure 3 shows the locations of the surveyed building applications, which confirms that the sample is evenly spread throughout what is

today's London Borough of Richmond. While there is scope for further research with a larger sample, this sample provided telling results and is the largest sample studied to date, as far as the author is aware.



Figure 4: Map of today's London Borough of Richmond. The pin markers show the geographical spread of the building application sample, 1886–1939 (www.maps.google.co.uk, Richmond Local Studies Archive).

Richmond cannot be considered typical for the whole of Greater London in every respect during the period, but for the purpose of identifying key occupations, the area covered is still sufficiently indicative for a wealthier growing Greater London suburb of the time. Table 1 shows that there were active speculative housing developments throughout the period, and that most of the surveyed applications in the sample were for terraced, semi-detached and detached houses. The borough is affluent on average, but it also comprises areas as diverse as Barnes, Sheen, Twickenham and Teddington, which each had their own local council then.

Table 1: Breakdown of sample by dwelling types and decades

Dwelling type	1890s			1900s			1920s			1930s		
	No of Applications	No of dwellings	%	No of Applications	No of dwellings	%	No of Applications	No of dwellings	%	No of Applications	No of dwellings	%
Terraced houses	13	199	81%	18	161	41%	9	54	32%	5	52	14%
Semi-detached houses	11	42	17%	31	162	42%	13	81	49%	20	161	43%
Detached houses	5	5	2%	19	27	7%	17	24	14%	12	26	7%
Tenements	0	0	0%	3	40	10%	0	0	0%	2	60	16%
Flats	0	0	0%	0	0	0%	0	0	0%	4	73	20%
Bungalows	0	0	0%	0	0	0%	6	8	5%	0	1	0%
Total	29	246	100%	71	390	100%	45	167	100%	43	373	100%

14. Andrew Saint, "Whatever Happened to Jonathan Carr?," *London Journal* 12, no. 1 (1986).

To begin, it should be acknowledged that the occupations responsible for the design of speculative housing typically differed depending on the stage in the planning and design process. The first stage, the site layout of the housing, was often planned by a surveyor, usually for the purpose of selling the individual building plots at an auction (Figure 4). The next stage, the overall appearance of the houses, was designed by various occupations such as architects, surveyors, architect-surveyors, or builders. The following analysis of building applications focuses on this second stage of the design of the buildings. During construction, it seems to have been rare at the time for architects to be involved in speculative house building - not even in such a pioneering and high-quality speculative development as Bedford Park.¹⁴ The detailed

15. David Kroll, "Speculative House Builders as Designers: The Case of the Reader Brothers 1898-1939 in Greater London," *Construction History*, n.d.

16. These main stages are reflected in literature of the time, and also in every estate development. See for example: Francis Howkins, *An Introduction to the Development of Private Building Estates and Town Planning* (London: Estates Gazette, 1926).

design seems to have been typically managed by speculative builders themselves or so-called builders' managers.¹⁵ Some large house builders, such as Ideal Homestead, were an exception as they began to establish their own architects' department in the inter-war period.¹⁶

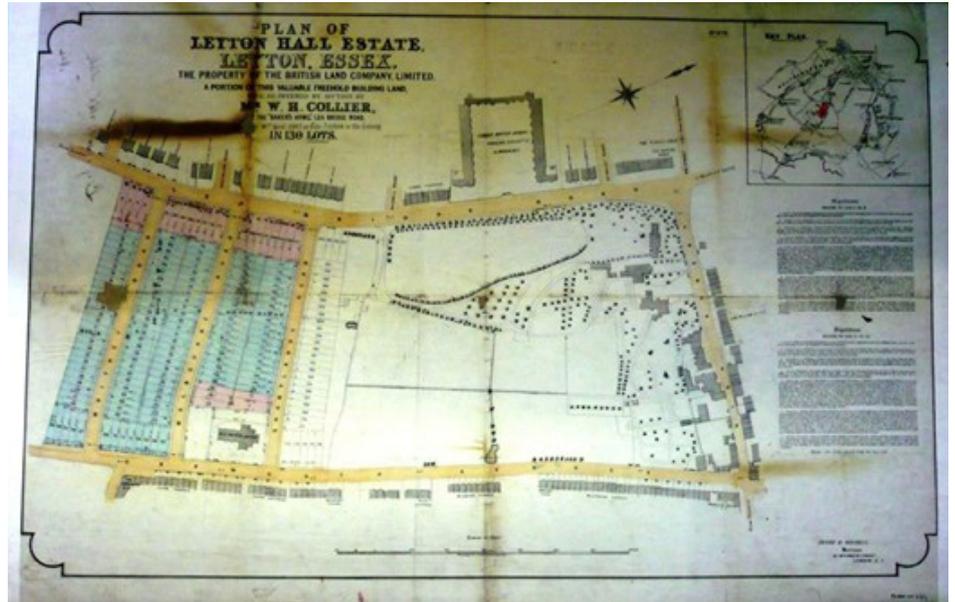


Figure 5: Auction catalogue map from Leyton Hall estate, Leyton, 1883 (Walthamstow Local History Archive, W72.2).

Key Occupations

The analysis of this application sample shows that a large share of the housing, the largest overall share, 26% in total, was designed by 'architects', in terms of a firm or person that identified their occupation as such on the application and drawings (Table 2). The share of those describing their occupation as 'surveyor' is 4%. However, many of those with a surveying background would have described themselves as architects & surveyors for the purpose of these applications, which at 17% also constitute a significant proportion. Roughly half of the total submitted drawings, 47%, could clearly be identified to have been prepared by architects, surveyors, or architect-surveyors. The proportion of design drawings prepared by builders stands at only 9%. The 'Other' categories mean that it was not possible to clearly identify the occupation of those responsible for the design of the buildings. A proportion of those in the 'Other' category may also have been designed by builders, but it is not clear to what percentage. These results suggest that architects played a key role in the design of speculative housing 1886 – 1939 and at least indicates to what degree. The table, however, also shows that surveyors and in particular architect-surveyors, whose background and training could come from either profession, were equally important.

Table 2: Occupations responsible for the design of housing in Richmond, 1886-1939

Occupation	Application sample	Percentage
Architect	54	26%
Architect & Surveyor	34	17%
Surveyor	9	4%
Builder	18	9%
Other (without title) ^a	40	20%
Other (drawings unsigned) ^b	50	24%
Total	205	100%

Source: Sample of building applications held in Richmond Local Studies Archive (see list of applications in appendix)

^aApplication drawings are signed, but without occupation title. Most of these were prepared by or for the builder, but authorship is still generally unclear, and they have therefore been listed separately.

^bApplication drawings are unsigned and authorship cannot be established.

17. Mark Crinson and Jules Lubbock, *Architecture: Art or Profession?* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1994).

As telling this table is for the whole period, it does not, however, take change over time into account. Table 3 shows that there was significant change over the period and that the share of housing designed by architects and surveyors in the sample gradually increased from a total of 35% in the 1890s, to 39% in the 1900s, to 45% in the 1920s, to 66% in the 1930s. Architect's involvement also increased from 14% in the 1890s, to 20% in the 1900s, to 27% in the 1920s, to 42% in the 1930s. The share of architect-surveyors in the 1890s was as high as that of architects, which reflects that those involved in housing design in the late 19th century would have been prudent to call themselves 'Architect & Surveyor'. It would increase their potential client base, irrespective if their main source of income was surveying or architectural design. The changes apparent in Table 3 reflect a process of professionalization in house building over the period, and they also mirror the rise in professional qualifications and classroom education.¹⁷ The high share of professionally designed housing in the 1930s shows that the division of architectural design as a specialist occupation separate from construction had already been taking place before the legal protection of the title 'architect' in 1938.

Table 3: Breakdown of application sample by occupation and decade

Occupation	1890s		1900s		1920s		1930s	
	Sample	%	Sample	%	Sample	%	Sample	%
Architect	4	14%	14	19%	12	27%	19	42%
Architect & Surveyor	4	14%	14	19%	3	7%	9	20%
Surveyor	2	7%	0	0%	5	11%	2	4%
Builder	0	0%	4	6%	9	20%	4	9%
Other (no title) ^a	9	31%	19	26%	5	11%	3	7%
Other (unsigned) ^b	10	34%	21	29%	10	23%	8	18%
Total	29	100%	72	100%	44	100%	45	100%

Source: Sample of building applications held in Richmond Local Studies Archive (see list of applications in appendix)

Note: For the 1880s and 1910s, the sample is too small to draw meaningful conclusions and has therefore been omitted.

^aApplication drawings are signed, but without occupation title. Most of these were prepared by or for the builder, but authorship is still generally unclear, and they have therefore been listed separately.

^bApplication drawings are unsigned and authorship cannot be established.

18. These were the kind of architect's commissions for affluent owner-occupiers that Creswell describes in *The Honeywood File*. Harry B. Creswell, *The Honeywood File: An Adventure in Building* (London: Faber & Faber, 1929).

19. For more about the role of builders as designers of speculative housing, see also: Kroll, "Speculative House Builders as Designers: The Case of the Reader Brothers 1898-1939 in Greater London."

Relating the application sizes to occupations, further conclusions can be drawn about those responsible for the design of the dwellings (Table 4). The involvement of a professional was more common either for very small building applications for only one house, or for the largest applications. This may be because some of the applications for only 1 house would have been for owner-occupiers (admittedly not actually speculative), who were generally less experienced in house building and more likely to rely on experts to design the house for them.¹⁸ Equally, an individual or firm building at a large scale, for example a whole estate, one or several streets, or a block of flats, would also be more likely to appoint a professional for the design. In fact, a total of 70% of applications for over 10 dwellings can be identified to have been submitted by architects or surveyors. Applications with a few houses, such as 2-5, would have been the typical size of building work undertaken by the small speculative builder; it is no coincidence that the identifiable share of builder-designed dwellings is the highest in this category (13%), with the unknown share in 'Other' likely to increase the real figure even further. These enterprising small speculative house builders were presumably less likely to engage a professional and were more likely to either rely on their own design and drawing skills, or to appoint a draftsman or relative for example.¹⁹

Table 4: Breakdown of sample by application size and occupation

Occupation	Houses or flats per application							
	1		2 to 5		6 to 9		10 or more	
	Sample	%	Sample	%	Sample	%	Sample	%
Architect	19	32%	16	19%	8	33%	9	26%
Architect & Surveyor	8	14%	7	8%	5	21%	14	41%
Surveyor	1	2%	6	7%	1	4%	1	3%
Builder	4	7%	11	13%	2	8%	1	3%
Other (no title) ^a	6	10%	26	31%	2	8%	5	15%
Other (unsigned) ^b	21	36%	19	22%	6	25%	4	12%
Total	59	100%	85	100%	24	100%	34	100%

Source: Sample of building applications held in Richmond Local Studies Archive (see list of applications in appendix)

^aApplication drawings are signed, but without occupation title. Most of these were prepared by or for the builder, but authorship is still generally unclear, and they have therefore been listed separately.

^bApplication drawings are unsigned and authorship cannot be established.

The occupations involved in the housing in Richmond were also related to where their business was based (Table 5). Those businesses listed on the application form as 'architects' that were based in central London, 17% of the applications, were almost always architects or surveyors, usually registered with a professional body, rather than builders or amateur architects. However, the majority of those listed as 'architect' on the application form, 49%, were based locally. 12% of the businesses were spread around other areas of today's Greater London with only one outside. The impression that speculative house building of the period was largely a village industry seems to also hold true for the design of the housing.

Table 5: Business locations of those acting as 'architects' on application sample

Business location	Number of applications	Architects/Surveyors ^a
Local ^b	102	51
Central London ^c	34	31
Other non-local	23	14
Unknown ^d	46	0
Total	205	96

Note: Table shows all those who filled in their name on the application form under the heading 'architect', even if this was not their occupation, or if they would not generally describe their occupation as architects

^aColumn shows only those businesses that clearly identified themselves by title as Architect, Surveyor or Architect & Surveyor on drawings or application

^bBusinesses based in or within 2 km of today's LB Richmond

^cBusinesses based in or within 2 km of the City of London or Westminster

^dNo address available

Limitations and Complicating Factors

This survey of building applications provides an overview of key occupations involved in housing design at the time. The reality of the working world at the time, however, was more complex than this survey may suggest at first glance. The boundaries between occupations were generally less clearly defined than today. The design stage could not always be clearly separated and attributed to a specialist occupation

and involved reusing, adapting, and collating information into a form comprehensible to local authorities, buyers, and builders.

20. For more about the role of the architect-surveyor, see for example: David Kroll, "Architect-Surveyors as Designers of Speculative Housing: The Case of Norfolk & Prior 1901–1923," *The London Journal*, 2017.

The fluid boundaries between occupations working in housing construction and design are also reflected in the letterheads of correspondence sometimes attached to the building applications. Figure 6 shows an example of a local business, Edwin Evans & Sons, who combined the role of surveyors, auctioneers, estate agents and valuers with providing an architectural service to design the houses. The planning of housing estates and designing houses was part of the traditional role of surveyors as land agents, who were often responsible to design and oversee the construction of farm buildings for example. The letterhead in Figure 7 shows an example of a builder, W. H. Pecover, who also provided drawings and specifications for his own work, essentially acting as his own architect. Figure 8 shows a letterhead from a prolific local architect R.B. Rowell (1875–1966) who was responsible for the design of several hundred houses and entire streets in the area. He often described himself as architect & surveyor, rather than simply as architect, presumably to increase his client base.²⁰



Figure 6: Letterhead of Edwin Evans & Sons, an example of a business combining varied services, 1923 (Richmond Local Studies Archive, PLA/05306).



Figure 7: Letterhead from a building application submitted by a builder who also provided architectural services, such as plans and specifications, as indicated on the letterhead (Richmond Local Studies Archive, PLA/05304).

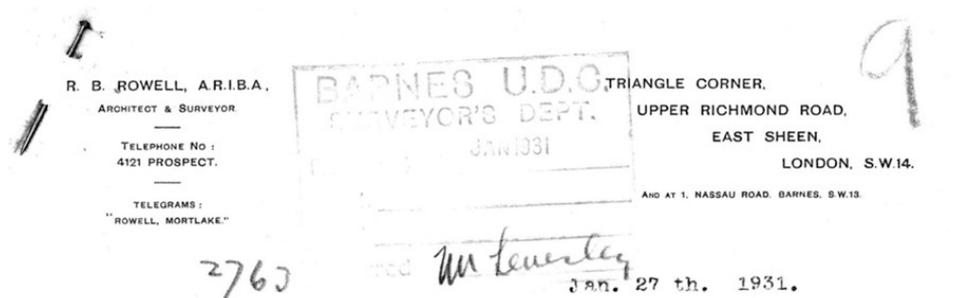


Figure 8. Letterhead by Reginald B. Rowell (1875–1966) who was the most prolific architect in Richmond in the first half of the twentieth century. His work was largely residential, much of it for speculative builders, but he also designed the Chapel for East Sheen Cemetery, 1906, and the Picturedrome cinema in Sheen Lane, 1910.

As evident in these building applications, drawings were widely used for the houses and had become part of statutory requirements, whether they were prepared by the builders themselves, or by a surveyor, architect, or draftsmen (e.g. Figure 9). It is still conceivable that some houses were built with only very basic drawings or sketches, or by copying from published examples, but this is difficult to verify. While drawings were used and often included in the applications, it can also be assumed that design continued during construction and that details were influenced by available building parts and by agreeing details with trades such as plasterers or carpenters.

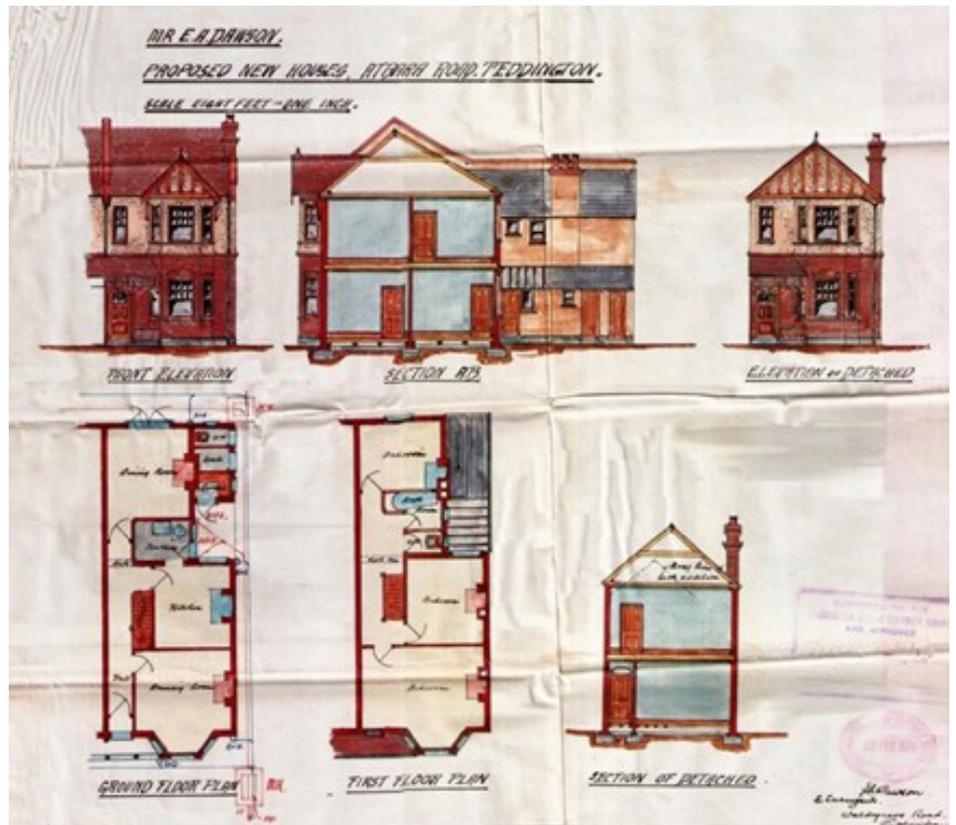


Figure 9: Drawing by builder-architect E.A. Dawson, based in Teddington, for terraced and detached houses in Atbara Road, 1904. (Richmond Local Studies Archive, PLA/00175).

Conclusion

This survey of a building application sample helps to identify occupations involved in the design of speculative housing at the time. This survey can be seen as part of a larger body of emerging research that suggests housing of the period was based on design drawings rather than simply built from reference books. The sample also confirms that architects contributed to the design of housing during the period. Additionally, the study shows that surveyors played an important role, and even more so the crossover occupation of architect & surveyor. The change over time in the sample aligns with a general process of professionalisation at the time, with the share of architect- or surveyor- designed housing increasing steadily throughout the period. Furthermore, the sample suggests that the scale of house building had an impact on which occupations were involved in its design. Small speculative builders constructing a few houses at a time were more likely to prepare their own drawings. Professions were more involved at a large scale, or at the scale of only one house. It is also interesting to note that the firms were largely based locally. The share of architects and surveyors, however, was the highest for those based in central London.

The reality of typical speculative housing design of the period appears to be somewhere in between popular assumptions and two 'ultras' - somewhere in between the idea of the master builder, at one extreme, who miraculously constructed a house without drawings, only based on his superior expertise or with a pattern book as a guide, and, at the other extreme, an exclusively architect-led design with the builder simply executing instructions from drawings.

There is still much scope for further analysis of building applications, of a larger sample for example. And overall, there is also much scope for case study research of estates and housing developments to better understand the planning and design processes of the time. The case studies that have been undertaken so far show that the planning process was more carefully considered than often suggested in the literature.