

## ARCHITECT IN THE EMPTY (GREEN) HOUSE



### Not So Grand Designs

If you live in a house that was built over 20 years ago, it is odds on that it will be extremely inefficient in terms of energy usage. It will cost far too much money to heat and keep thermally stable, costing hundreds or thousands of pounds for gas and electricity; not forgetting ever increasing (metered) water bills. It will leak heat through ill-fitting doors, windows, walls, floors and roof. In short it will probably (mal)-function like a thermal sieve and as you may imagine, this situation is extremely difficult to improve. So gloom and doom prevails with holes in your pocket, holes in your property and holes in the Ozone layer???

Well not necessarily and not any more. It is now possible for a home owner to invest quite modest sums of money in their property, making them more thermally stable by improving insulation levels, installing renewable energy generating systems; solar hot water panels, ground source heat pumps, rainwater harvesters, smart metering systems, etc, thereby reducing fuel bills. Although the knock on effects in regards to improving the environment are generally perceived to be quite modest or even insignificant; every small step counts on the long journey and if every home owner understood the benefits and was enabled to gain access to available grant funding then small scale individual participation could add up to a monumental collective endeavor.

Stephen Donald Architects are working in association with the CE of the Empty Homes Agency, David Ireland on an initiative, whereby we provide a free package of architectural consultancy to owners of empty properties, helping them to understand the benefits of bringing their property back into use.

Our experience shows it is often difficult for owners of empty homes to organize refurbishment works themselves. This initiative helps by offering a free preliminary consultation providing architects' expertise and advice, (in lieu of a small donation of £50 to EHA) helping to unlock intractable problems.

Empty property owners could benefit very significantly from our SDA-EHA Architect In The Empty House initiative. We understand there are many and varied reasons for a property becoming empty and then unused. It is also a common factor however that a perception of inadequate grant funding lies at the bottom of the problem. We are in the process of having our proposal for the SDA - EHA "Architect In The Empty House" Initiative 2009 endorsed via, the Policy Office for Housing & Homelessness @ GLA. We have already commenced issuing our SDA-EHA information pack entitled, "Working With Stephen Donald Architects Ltd on your Empty Property" and also a copy of our proto-type project template, "Architect In The Empty House 2009 Initiative - Sustainable Housing Solutions" to each local authority's Empty Property Officer, requesting their feedback in time for the EHA Empty Homes Forum scheduled for July.

SDA have made contact with every Sub Regional Coordinator of local authority Empty Property Officers within the GLA and Kent in order to move our initiative forward. We have made preliminary presentations to the South London Sub Region Group and our initiative has been welcomed with a high degree of enthusiasm. We are investigating a number of partnering principles whereby we will work in tandem with Empty Property Owners via Empty Property Officer's offering an initial package of free complimentary consultancy services to any receptive Empty Property Owner.

Our services are aimed at complimenting the Empty Dwelling Management Order procedures, however we feel our services would be more effective if provided in advance and as a preliminary alternative to the formal serving of EDMO notice. As an independent agency, we are able to assist Empty Property Owners who are unable to organize the improvement of their property themselves, or who are apprehensive of direct action imposed by the local authority.

The preliminary consultancy services would include providing a co-ordinated package of information aimed at informing the Empty Property Owner of the benefits of the Architect In The Empty House initiative This comprises an hour's visit to the property, discussing the EPO's requirements and carrying out a detailed photographic survey. We will produce project notes, and if available annotated floor plans, making an assessment of the procedures and potential cost of refurbishment. We will produce a schedule of appropriate professional services with an associated fee schedule, all of which would be provided to the owner, and also be copied to the local authority. The initial service is provided without obligation but SDA are fully qualified provide all necessary professional services that the EPO may require and confirms our appointment.

Overall the collaborative benefits for all parties seem very obvious; by working with SDA, Local Authorities will bring more properties back into use and improve the likely hood of meeting targets, thereby improve the chances of securing ongoing funding revenues.

Some ways in which the SDA - EHA Architect In The Empty House initiative could be progressed in partnering arrangements with Local Authorities;

- The empty property managers in each borough, through their existing contact with empty property owners, would have an idea of clients who might benefit from this service and who would be receptive to our initiative. This was generally thought to be the best way forward.
- Boroughs are not able to recommend specific organisations to clients, nor would they advertise the service generally e.g. on their websites; however they could inform clients of the availability of our initiative.
- Many local authorities already have SDA's contact details on a list of architects, surveyors, etc, which can be provided to owners. The advantage of SDA's scheme over other architects was that the zero cost of the initial 1 hour service was known in advance, in lieu of a small donation to the EHA.
- Another possible way of putting clients in touch with SDA would be for boroughs to refer clients to the Empty Homes Agency, and the EHA could then put them in contact with the architects.
- Boroughs thought it would be very useful for the SDA project information pack provided to the Empty Property Owner to be copied to the relevant local authority – they would then have a record of the approach and the advice given, which could be useful if further action was needed with the owner.
- The service is available immediately.

**Stephen Donald Architects Ltd 29th May 2009**