

As we emerge from a tragic pandemic, let's catalyze action among professionals in the fields that shape the physical housing and communities where we live. This series of case studies shares innovations that are advancing a set of **guiding principles** for built environment professionals—from creative ways to redress inequities and engage the public in participatory planning, to unique housing and community models that enable every resident to thrive.



Students at Abbey Primary School during Clarion's annual Regeneration Week, where young people work with architects to build models and co-design play areas in the public realm.

Regenerating Affordable and Enabling Housing for All Ages— at Scale

Clarion Housing Group, UK

By Stephanie Firestone and Esther Greenhouse

One of the UK's largest developers, the nonprofit **Clarion Housing Group** (“Clarion”) believes it has a responsibility to lead from the front, driving a broad view of social value in the nation's housing sector. Thus, Clarion's business model includes developing private-sector, market-rate homes in order to generate profits that subsidize the addition and regeneration of social housing. The values embedded in the regenerated homes and communities are creating, for the entire industry, a model centered on both a human-centered approach as well as design that addresses demographic change and builds in resilience.

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Needs/Challenges

Population aging and changing preferences are major issues shaping current and future needs, services, and budgets in the UK. Paul Quinn, director of regeneration at Clarion, believes this requires a systematic, consistent, and widespread response. “Demographic change is just as inevitable as climate change, but no one is preparing for it,” he says.

In the UK, five developers build 80 percent of the homes. Their involvement typically is limited to the two-to-five-year building stage, meaning they have no further responsibility or connection to their buildings or residents following that brief period. As a result, they rarely design for people’s changing needs over their lifespan, or for shifting living patterns and preferences. Additionally, communities and households undergoing regeneration often find themselves displaced to make way for new homes and infrastructure, disrupting individuals’ lives and the fabric of a neighborhood. In some instances, developers offer residents a “right to return,” but the timescales often make this impractical for residents.

Innovations

As the largest housing association and landlord in the UK, Clarion owns 125,000 properties that house 350,000 people. Clarion is a nonprofit charity, building over 2,000 new homes a year while investing in and regenerating its existing stock. Regeneration¹ happens when properties are in such poor condition that they go through a review process to determine whether they should be comprehensively refurbished, replaced entirely, or even demolished and disposed of (i.e., sell the site).

Serving its client base, which is people at the bottom 20 percent of the socio-economic strata, Clarion remains true to a mission that has driven the work since the organization’s founding by Victorian philanthropist William Sutton over 100 years ago: to deliver good quality and affordable homes and neighborhoods to people failed by the market. Because Clarion owns the properties, it aims to design and build homes to have an extended life, in some cases up to 100 years, and it makes good business sense to incorporate priorities like ease of adaptability, resilience, and a minimal need for resident relocation.

Age-Friendly Strategy

Clarion spent a year developing and recently adopted an age-friendly strategy, which commits to three key principles: using design and building schemes that enable residents to live longer, healthier, happier lives; ensuring residents have the right home at the right time; and empowering residents to shape their lives and communities, no matter what their age. They are committed to this all-ages approach, which Clarion refers to as intergenerational living but residents know in much simpler and concrete terms: being able to live with their friends, relatives, and neighbors in *their* community.

Our age-friendly commitments

OUR OVERARCHING MISSION IS:
Enabling people to live well in our communities.

Over the last 12 months, we have been collaborating as a cross-business working group to create a set of commitments focused on how we will ensure our communities are places where residents can age positively.



¹ Similar to what is called in the US “renewal.”

At the core of Clarion’s human-centered approach is good design. Architects develop design patterns with a focus on getting it right from the start, considering from the outset such elements as corridor widths, adjacencies, Universal Design, and other health-supporting features, such as daylight exposure. They prioritize making spaces flexible and adaptable to lifestyle changes; this may be as simple as “just oversizing a bit,” so a downstairs bathroom can be converted later to a **wet room**.

An intergenerational community

PRP

MULTIGENERATIONAL HOMES

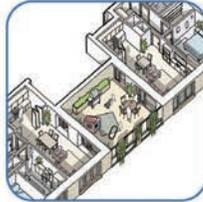
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ONE FOR ALL UNIVERSAL



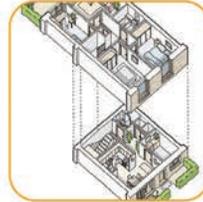
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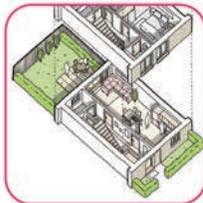
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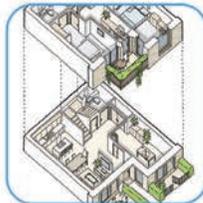
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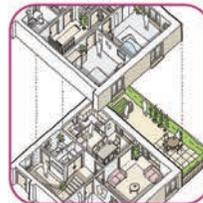
TERRACE LIVING



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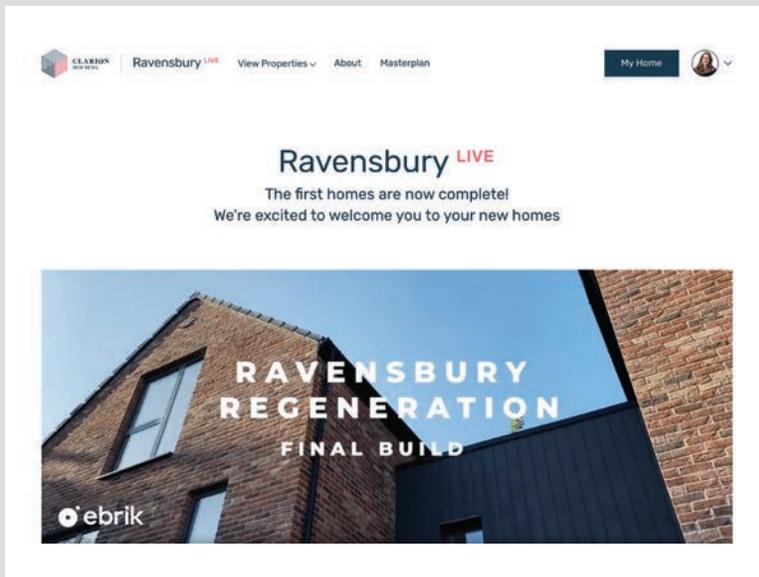


FLEXI MULTIGEN



Adaptability + Customization

Quinn’s view is that 90 percent of Clarion’s work is the face-to-face interaction with people—that is, understanding and supporting their needs. The Regeneration team engages directly with residents during the planning phase—ascertaining every individual household’s needs, aspirations and concerns—and throughout the regeneration process. The team reviews the needs of each resident based on their mobility, any disabilities, concerns about decline, and an assessment by an occupational therapist. All these considerations inform customized home designs that will support the residents’ abilities and enable them to be as independent as possible. When they move out, the residence is modified for the new resident, if necessary.



During construction, resident engagement is augmented through the use of the construction-site technology platform eBrik. Beyond enabling Clarion to better monitor the site and communicate with contractors, eBrik is made available to residents, so for example, when it is time to select appliances, residents can view the options in the context of their new home. From foundation laying to move-in, the eBrik system maintains resident engagement and keeps morale high throughout a process that takes two or more years to complete. For all these benefits and with a cost of only £30,000 (approximately \$42,000), Clarion is now embedding this technology and approach in all of their regeneration projects.

Blacksmiths Lane in Bromley, London, is Clarion’s first site to include age-friendly design principles from the outset. The design team (led by Fielden Clegg Bradley) is undertaking a feasibility study of a 150-home site, where they intend for both homes and the community as a whole to be designed for multigenerational living. In addition to homes that work for all, irrespective of age or mobility, the homes will offer ease of operation and adaptation for changing needs, thus building resilience into the homes and making adaptations cost-effective.

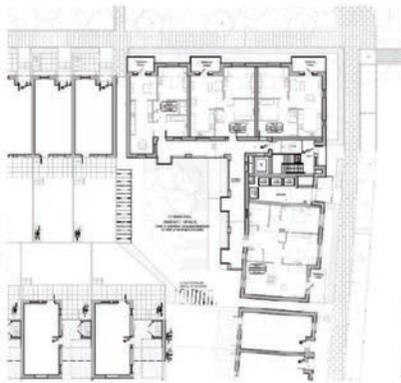


In Ravensbury, Clarion will demolish and replace all the homes. While the planning predates the more recent age-friendly strategy, it reflects a kernel of interest in that approach. Larger, two-story units can be subdivided into smaller spaces and flex as needs change: stairwells are designed to accommodate stair-lifts and the dining room can become a ground-floor bedroom. The homes are orientated to allow and encourage social connectedness; they also sit on short streets with green spaces nearby that provide opportunities for community stewardship. The block specifically designed for older adults does so discretely; elevators and stairwells have slightly more width and space to allow for easier adaptation if needed, without suggesting vulnerability. This adaptability addresses another major housing trend present in several developed countries—the increasing need for one- and two-bedroom housing units, reflecting a rapid rise in the number of single person households; much of the existing housing supply does not match this demand.



Regenerating Ravensbury

- Flexible and adaptable homes;
- More space for future needs;
- More light;
- Easier to keep warm—affordable;
- Generous private and shared amenity;
- Community facilities.



A Focus on Community

There is a heavy investment in maintaining and supporting community in every project. This priority is partly reflected in design principles, such as Jane Jacobs’ tenet that spaces that work, perhaps counterintuitively, are spaces that are overlooked. At Ravensbury, for example, flood risk demanded the need for exterior steps, which designers seized as an opportunity to further engender connectedness: they incorporated oversized steps based on New York City’s front-stoop model, creating another space for people to inhabit, engage, and be part of the community (while also providing on-level access, usually through a rear ramp). Quinn contends that developers must think early on about elements to encourage social connectedness, because “you can’t retrofit this stuff.”

Putting people and community first also means keeping residents together and avoiding their displacement. One way this is done is by limiting resident disruption to only one move—once their new, permanent homes are ready for them. Sometimes this necessitates purchasing sites near or even adjacent to their current homes, in order to build the new homes before moving residents and then demolishing the old ones. Clarion recognizes that they could move people off site and rebuild in half the time—but at the cost of community.



Successes to Date

Clarion employs architects to develop practical designs that have been and will increasingly be used in upcoming developments. The first 21 Ravensbury homes that include some intergenerational design elements are built, with another 50 underway in September. These homes serve not only as a model for how Clarion is increasingly building, but also as pilots for learning and tweaking the master plan for Ravensbury (which will be delivered in four phases) and continually improving the design from an intergenerational perspective.

Ravensbury is part of the larger Merton Regeneration Project, which will demolish and replace 1,260 homes. Of these, 499 homes are not owned by Clarion but by private homeowners. Clarion has addressed this with an innovative, large-scale homeowner offer to effectively “swap” these old homes for new ones at no additional cost to residents, who retain ownership.

Quinn works closely both with the team from Clarion Futures (the organization’s charitable arm, to which Clarion gifts 10 percent of their operating surplus every year) and the Housing Association board’s chair, David Orr, who is a leading proponent of housing for the aging population in the UK. The Regeneration team promotes this approach through urban design workshops and external conferences and seminars; a conference report from work with the Agile Ageing Alliance (which collaborated with AARP to develop the built environment guiding principles document) will be published in September 2021.

Despite the context of operating during Brexit and the pandemic, in 2019-2020 Clarion completed an additional 2,101 new homes; 86 percent of the new units were affordable housing, with the remainder at market rate.

Still to Come

The Regeneration team is advocating to incorporate age-friendly design and flexibility into Clarion’s pattern book by the end of 2021. They also plan to develop a pattern book of typologies on *play strategy*, from toddlerhood through end of life.

New sites currently in the feasibility stage will incorporate an intergenerational living approach. Clarion included experience with this approach in its scoring rubric for selecting contractors (the design team in particular) and is running relevant workshops as part of the design process.

Clarion’s new 2040 Standard demands a higher threshold in areas such as environmental performance, the quality of the public realm, safety, crowding, and strategic location for affordable homes. All new and existing Clarion homes will need to meet these standards, including necessary interventions in existing homes. According to Quinn, the 2040 program “will drive our asset strategy for the next 20 years, as we upgrade and invest in our homes at scale.”

Replicability

Nationally Described Space Standards in the UK set a relatively high bar, but they do not incorporate the important need for flexibility, which is an increasing priority for Clarion. Since flexibility often means larger, and larger means more expensive, at present in the US, public housing authorities or public-private partnerships may be the only groups that could reap benefits from this type of long-term investment.

In the US, approximately 1.1 million public housing units primarily house older adults, children, and people with disabilities, which are managed by over 3,000 public housing authorities. The number of units is declining and most were built more than 45 years ago, so there may be substantial opportunities to incorporate some of these lessons for renovations in addition to new builds. Clarion’s model of simultaneously operating in many different housing spaces (e.g., private sale, build to rent, regeneration, refurbishment, disposals and buy backs, construction and managing agents) and incorporating these approaches may also help inform more flexible and entrepreneurial models of public housing management.

For more information: www.clarionhg.com.