

ECO HOUSE

I no longer know whether my attempt to turn a derelict shell into a house that generates 50% more energy than it consumes is a folly, a vision, an obsession...or all three. I may know more when it is finished in the summer. To make sense of it may require a different starting point.

Much of my politics is rooted in housing and property. This was added to by the obscene numbers of people who were dying in Britain's 'cold homes' each winter, and by a recognition that the climate change agenda will force us to re-think all the ground rules of how society works.

The government has done much to force us to address the fuel poverty issue, but progress is slow. Only 16% of our current housing stock meets today's thermal comfort level of SAP rating 65. The easy properties have been done first. Loft insulation is going in, so too is draught exclusion, cavity wall insulation and double glazing. At a slower pace, boilers are being replaced, but the awkward question was 'what happens when we get to more difficult structures?'

No point in preaching to others what you don't practice yourself. This was what led me to a derelict shell, a visionary architect and 3,000 pigeons I had to persuade to move.

The place itself will work on high levels of insulation, an entire south facing roof of photo-voltaic panels, a self-balancing internal ventilation system and a micro-CHP generating system. Internal walls of compressed straw panels replace the conventional plaster ones, and the last bit we are trying to incorporate is a wind generating pillar along the lines being pioneered in Woking.

I can already hear a sharp intake of breath. 'Woking? What the hell is happening in Woking?' The answer takes us into some remarkable changes that are being driven far more at a local level than a national one.

In Woking, Croydon, Leicester, Merton and many other local authorities there are visionary examples of a whole new approach to housing and energy systems. My house will have two-way metering and should never receive an energy bill. But on a wider scale, towns, cities and boroughs are looking at housing in radically different terms. The challenge is not just to conserve energy but to see properties as the producers of energy rather than just consumers.

Many are now seeking to make self-generation of energy a pre-condition of all new development. Some are looking at local energy systems at arms-length from the National Grid. Others are looking at including water recycling within the requirements of all development applications (in the same way that my own place will seek to do).

At the start, I thought I was being bold and adventurer. Now I discover that, on a bigger scale, the same things are happening in Greece and Germany, Spain and Portugal. A team from the UK are also in China, discussing with local authorities how towns, villages and cities can work in the same way.

At the start, I was excited about (maybe) being a 'big fish' in this change process. Now that I know better I am excited about just swimming in the same direction.