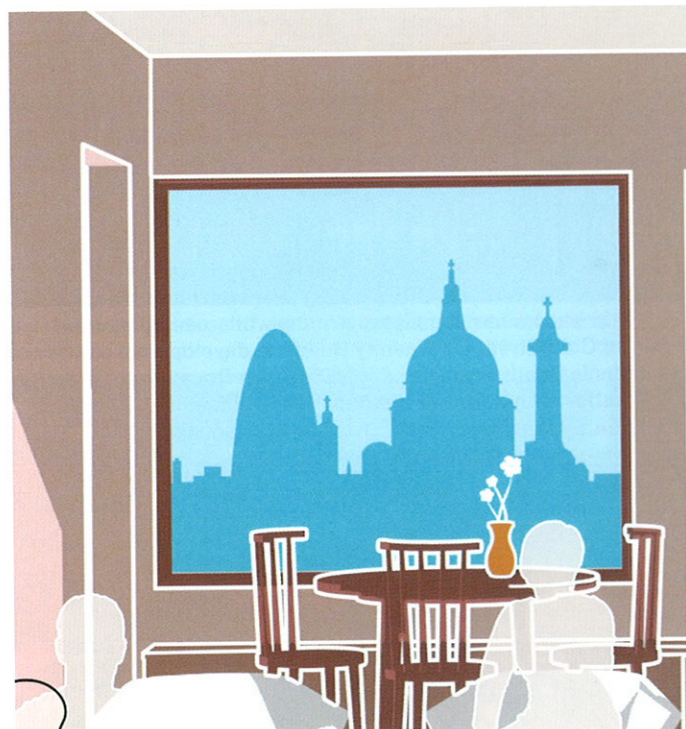


MICRO-HOMES: PART OF THE SOLUTION OR PART OF THE PROBLEM?

We asked some of the country's leading housing experts what they thought of micro-homes, such as Pocket's new ultra-compact concepts (see page 22) and what part they might play in tackling the UK's housing crisis



ONLINE
Interview With Pocket founder Marc Vlessing
Survey Take the AJ Housing questionnaire

LEFT: HENLEY HALEBROWN RORRISON

This week micro-flat developer Pocket revealed the finalists in its contest to design a new model for a compact two person, two bedroom home. The smallest proposal is just 51m² (see page 22).

Given the calibre of the architects taking part and the high standards of the resulting designs, is it time to reassess the role of the micro-home?



Gerard Maccreanor, founding director, Maccreanor Lavington

The housing discussion in London is often centred on the shortage of homes and meeting the needs of Londoners. However, London's growing, dominant world city position is generating a complex housing market, which needs recognition. An increasing number of 'stayover' commuters, a growing transient work force and more students add to the pressure on the existing housing stock. These groups, along with many young professionals, use the city as their public living room; their domestic requirements are different and micro-units can be appropriate. As a part of the housing offer within a cosmopolitan London, micro-units certainly have a place.



Julia Park, head of housing research, Levitt Bernstein

The scale of the crisis, and the lack of political will to do anything about it, means that there probably is now a case for micro-flats. But, be in no doubt, if they are part of the solution, they are also part of the problem. Smaller homes lead to higher densities; higher densities lead to higher land prices and higher land prices lead to crazy purchase prices. Each time a micro-flat is sold, it sets up a chain reaction that nudges up the price of everything else.

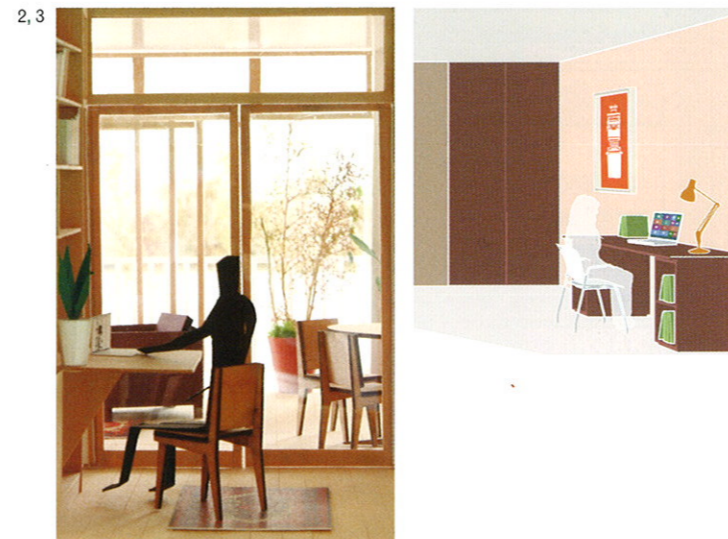
Pocket's recent design competition is a worrying

preview of where things seem to be heading. One of the two-bedroom flats has a master bedroom with no window. In another, described as a family home, you have to choose between a bath and a wardrobe. With two double bedrooms squeezed into a floor area of 51m² and an unremarkable and under-furnished layout, where is the 'exceptional quality' that supposedly makes up for having nowhere to play or put anything? The designs claim to be compliant with the London Housing Supplementary Planning Guidance, Lifetime Homes and the Code for Sustainable Homes. But they fall short in terms of space, accessibility, daylight and more. Standards exist to prevent one beds from masquerading as two beds, to ensure decent storage space and they require that rooms have space for furniture, natural light and a view. Is this too much to expect?



Sally Lewis, founding director, Stitch Architects

There is most certainly a role for micro-homes as one of myriad options for tackling the housing crisis. But they come with a big caveat about quality. Many people will compromise on the size of their home to get a foot on the ladder and this could be hugely exploited if micro-housing becomes mainstream. An organisation like Pocket has quality at the top of its agenda and will continue to innovate, with the assistance of excellent architects. But if this model gets into the wrong hands, we are in trouble. I'd widen the discussion to include the whole customer experience, not just the detail of the home itself. The journey from street, to front door, to living space is all-important. While it is very reassuring to see the attention to detail inside the [Pocket] homes, we need to see more about the part these buildings will play in creating good streets for London.



1. Pocket No 2 by Mikhail Riches Architects 2. Hall Home by David Kohn Architects 3. Pocket Rotunda by Henley Halebrown Rorrison 4. Pocket Living 2 by Weston Williamson + Partners 5. Pocket Loft by HAT Projects



Andy von Bradsky, chairman, PRP Architects

There is a place in the market for homes that are smaller than the minimum space standards [but only if] they are well designed, well managed and targeted at a specific housing need – for example at young people and key workers. Pocket targets its product at a specific market sector, prioritises good-quality design and, most importantly, ensures affordability at point of sale and into the future. It is appropriate that space standards are regulated under planning, rather than Building Regulations, so applicants can explain their reasons and make a case for departing from national space standards. It is essential that the consumer is provided with good information about space standards and how products perform against national standard benchmarks, so they can make informed choices. This is the case for home performance labelling.



Meredith Bowles, director, Mole Architects

By a combination of excellent design and marketing, Pocket is translating a negative perception [of micro-homes] so small there's not enough room to swing a cat into a positive: ie perfectly designed, compact urban living. It doesn't alter the fact that London has the smallest flats in Europe, or that even these flats cost more than five times the combined income of two people on an average salary. Levitt Bernstein's *Housing Design Handbook* beautifully analyses the effect of reducing space standards on living conditions, demonstrating what successive reductions mean in real terms. When all we have left is what is essential, what is lost are the spaces that simply make life easier to live. Micro-apartments sound cute, but have nowhere to put a pram,

store your skateboard, put your ironing, or hang up your bike. They're an intelligent response to a broken system.



Matt Ollier, co-founder, Ollier Smurthwaite Architects

England is a small land mass and the most densely populated of the larger European countries. Homes have to become more compact to avoid losing more countryside. These micro-homes work. They are well-designed, with efficient layouts and minimal circulation. They are also combined with good communal space, which helps foster a vibrant community. Pocket also provides housing that people can afford. There is a role for micro-homes.



Marc Vlessing, chief executive, Pocket

Pocket made a name for itself developing a 37m² one-bedroom home for the intermediate affordable housing market. We sell them at a discount with the caveat they are only sold to people who qualify for affordable housing. Some local authorities began asking for two-bedroom apartments. The only way we could do that was with the 61m² standard for two-bedroom, three-person homes. So we looked at two-bedroom, two-person homes. It would make a huge difference to viability – the extra 10m² costs the market £30,000-£40,000. There are about 750,000 people in London who would be in the market for this sort of two-bedroom home. Ten years ago it was key workers, but the landscape is more diverse now and policy hasn't caught up. We're talking about public and private sector employees and not necessarily nuclear families: singles working from home, gay people, and older people looking to downsize.