Londoners build own homes to beat the housing crisis

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Families in southeast London are moving into homes they designed and built themselves with a local community housing group. The capital's biggest community-led self-build housing project was coordinated by the Lewisham-based organisation, the Rural Urban Synthesis Society (RUSS). The group was set up to address the lack of suitable affordable housing in the area.

The block of 36 homes has taken 15 years from conception to completion. Local volunteers organised by RUSS have driven all stages of the process, from forming a group, acquiring land, raising funds, supervising architects and contractors, getting planning permission, and building and landscaping together as a community.

The homes are part of a community land trust, meaning they are owned by a non-profit organisation, which keeps them affordable. Units are offered in various sizes and tenures: full ownership, part rent-part- buy, London Living Rent, and social rent. This means the homes are available for everyone, including lower-income families. Residents determine how their housing is managed with regular meetings in an on-site community hub built by volunteers.

RUSS was set up in response to the lack of suitable affordable housing in London. The group worked with key partners, including the Greater London Authority, the London Borough of Lewisham, the Cooperative Development Society, Triodos Bank, and Big Issue Invest.

The principal architect is Shepherd Epstein Hunter, with contributions from Architype and Jon Broome Associates. The building includes innovative social and environmental features. RUSS volunteers, including future residents, co-designed the development, and occupants had the choice of self-building or self-finishing their homes.

The building is fitted with an air pollution sensor that will measure the effect of trees and plants on air quality in the area.

The Chair of RUSS, Anurag Verma, said: "This has been a momentous and challenging project, but this community-led organisation has succeeded in creating a sustainable neighbourhood and unique housing model. This shows what can be achieved when ordinary people work together with a shared vision and determination. The project has been led by the community from the outset through the design, planning and building processes. The result is 36 homes with four tenure types, fully tailored to the needs of the residents. We hope that other community groups will be inspired to learn from this model and create their own housing to meet their needs."

A new public riverside garden and play area is being built as part of the project. It was made possible by a crowdfunding campaign and a grant from the Veolia Environmental Trust.

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