Mapleton Crescent: the London high-rise factory-built in Bedfordshire

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Wandsworth, London
This stylish new 27-storey residential tower is an exemplar of innovative modular housing, each flat built and fitted out off-site, then craned into place at the rate of one storey a day.

It’s a beautiful chimera, now more than a century old, that a house might be built in the same way as a car. It has long seemed so practical, so sensible and at the same time inspiring and progressive that the benefits that Henry Ford discovered in the production line – speed, efficiency, cheapness, quality – might be applied to the places where we live. Le Corbusier had a go in the 1920s. So did Buckminster Fuller, with the aluminium yurt he called the Dymaxion.
Somehow, their machine-age nirvana keeps on not quite happening. The world is not covered with Dymaxia, nor the many other variations on the theme. The nearest Britain came to living the dream was with the postwar prefab – quick and cheap, for sure, but rationed in their comfort and beauty, modern nostalgic revisionism notwithstanding. In the 1960s, government promotion of factory-built housing tended to produce results that were not particularly cheap, or functional, or good-looking, but were at least numerous.

Still, nil desperandum. Since the 1980s, office buildings have been built with extensive prefabrication, or modularisation, to use the preferred contemporary name – facade panels and toilet blocks built under cover, away from the wind, rain, muck and hazards of a building site, and craned into place with the satisfying simplicity of a child’s toy. If Britain’s housing shortages are seriously to be addressed, they will require not only land and funding, but also an expansion of the construction industry’s capacity to build. Which, if it is not to entail limitless supplies of labour coming to Brexit Britain from eastern Europe, will require the aid of factories.

As in the 1960s, politicians are urging. Last year the London Assembly published a report arguing that off-site manufacturing (as they called it) would be essential to meeting London’s need for at least 50,000 new homes a year. And, possibly, there are at last signs that this holy grail of housing (or the philosopher’s stone, or Fermat’s last theorem, or theory of everything – take your pick among things and solutions that are legendarily hard to find) might be found.

Among the reasons to be hopeful is Mapleton Crescent in Wandsworth, south London, a just-finishig 27-storey development wrapped in aqueous green-grey faience. Billed as “Europe’s tallest modular residential tower”, it is designed by the architects Metropolitan Workshop for the developer Pocket Living, who specialise in reducing the cost of housing by producing flats that are small but, they hope, perfectly formed. They aim to compensate for the reduced dimensions of their units through careful design and by adding such shared benefits as a roof terrace, cycle storage and a residents’ lounge.

The tower stands on an awkward little site, in spirit part poetic and part functional. One side is the uncompromising flank of the Southside shopping centre, on another the fast-flowing river Wandle, one of those secondary London rivers that are sometimes mentioned and rarely seen. It’s an unlikely spot for a tall building, even in a city where they can now sprout almost anywhere, but with the help of modularisation the developers and architects found a way to do it.
Mapleton Crescent is made up of storey-high units, each the size of half a flat, that arrived on site complete with plaster, paint, windows, doors, wiring, plumbing, bathrooms and tiles, and were then craned into place, one on the top of each other, at the rate of one storey per day. These boxes are structural too, meaning that they hold each other up without the need of an additional frame. The factory-made units, built in Bedfordshire by Vision Modular Systems for their contracting business, Donban, saved time – which, as developers like Pocket borrow to build, is money. By going up almost as soon as they arrive, they reduce the problems that come with a small site, which is that builders have nowhere to keep materials that are waiting to be erected.

The units require, say Pocket, 60% fewer truck journeys than conventional construction. They produce 90% less waste, which, as refuse from construction sites accounts for a large proportion of landfill, is no small matter. They are better built in small but appreciable ways – tiles and power points that are well aligned, for example – than conventionally built flats. Their efficient structure enables ceiling heights to be a little higher than the standard.

Where Mapleton Crescent differs from past visions of factory-made housing is that it feels no need to proclaim its futurism – indeed it’s all the better for making its mechanical DNA feel both domestic and urban. Early prophets such as Buckminster Fuller thought that a home built like a car should look like a car. Here the flats are of a type basically familiar from conventionally built homes. The exterior faience cladding, its precise shade developed by the ceramic artist Loraine Rutt, is itself a factory-made modular material, but one that has been commonplace on London buildings since the 19th century.
The building has architectural qualities that are nothing in particular to do with the innovation in its construction. It has a pleasantly slender profile, with shifting rhythms and a nice balance of verticals and horizontals. There is a considered relationship to the river, and an entrance hall that, by bringing the external materials inside, has a durable and well-made feel. The textured surfaces of the faience give a sense of depth and liveliness you don’t get in most cladding systems. Mapleton Crescent is – and never mind that the bar is low – one of the best-looking examples to come out of London’s boom in residential towers.

It is plausible because it doesn’t proselytise. Modular units are used not as prophecy but as the best available means in a given circumstance. It must be said that this project is singular. The cost and complexity of building a tower on this site means that Pocket have included 36 homes at full market price (£600,000-£730,000 for two- and three-bedroom flats) to subsidise its 53 cheaper units (at £225,000-£330,000 for a petite, 38 sq metres one-bed – cheapness in London being a strictly relative concept). The same techniques, however, are now being applied to other tall building projects, with a better proportion of affordability.

Mapleton Crescent is not alone. The financial services company Legal & General promise to “revolutionise” housing by investing in factory-built houses, the exact nature of which remains to be revealed. The developers Urban Splash have tried their hand at it in their New Islington development in Manchester. Some of the big housebuilding companies are also having a go.
There is formidable inertia to be overcome. Most homes are realised by the big housebuilders, who have well-established ways of building involving fleets of sub-contractors, all of which would have to be reinvented to accommodate modular building. It also requires investment in factories and production lines, which require confidence that future demand will be at least steady, which in the booming-and-busting British housing market is hard to find.

Building in factories is not a magic bullet. It will not solve the housing crisis, so long as bigger questions such as the supply of land and public investment remain unresolved. But it's an eminently sane and beneficial way of constructing homes, with less waste and better quality, whose time might finally be coming.