

Making sure live/work as a concept doesn't die

Yuda Ambalo discusses the slings and arrows developers must face if they're to deliver a successful live/work project.



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The original live/work units grew out from existing commercial and industrial buildings that had become disused. Their big open spaces, especially those with lofts, were ideal for entrepreneurs that needed a lot of space for their work. Creatives such as photographers and painters flocked to the properties, bringing once derelict sites back to life and creating hubs of activity.

The concept has come a long way from those early days. As time has passed and developers have looked to recreate live/work schemes, a lot has changed. It's meant we've arrived today at a crossroads.

No longer seen as the regenerating force they started out as, many planners now simply view them as a tool in the armoury of the opportunistic developer out to sidestep planning restrictions. Too many of the latter have looked to use live/work as a smokescreen for essentially residential developments.

It's meant that, on occasion, areas have been flooded with residential tenants rather than schemes that provide employment and more concrete economic value.

Despite this, live/work as a concept remains one of the simplest and effective ways that we can structure our lives. Its virtues have become increasingly apparent as the world becomes ever more crowded and environmentally aware. It's not my place to detail the various benefits of live/work, but suffice to say that they range from the environmental to the psychological, from the aesthetic to the financial. Despite the "bad examples" continuing to drum up bad press and ruffle feathers in planning departments, the benefits of live/work continue to win admirers and people willing to take up the cause.

The frustration for genuine live/work developers is that thanks to the poor examples, it's become

increasingly difficult to get any such scheme off the ground. It seems harsh to tar all these developments with the same brush – after all, just because *Stairway to Heaven* is regularly murdered at karaoke nights, it doesn't make the song itself fundamentally bad – but that's the reality of the situation.

So what should developers be doing to make sure their live/work scheme avoids the scrap heap of bad examples and aborted attempts? What planning hoops should they jump through and why?

Hurdles

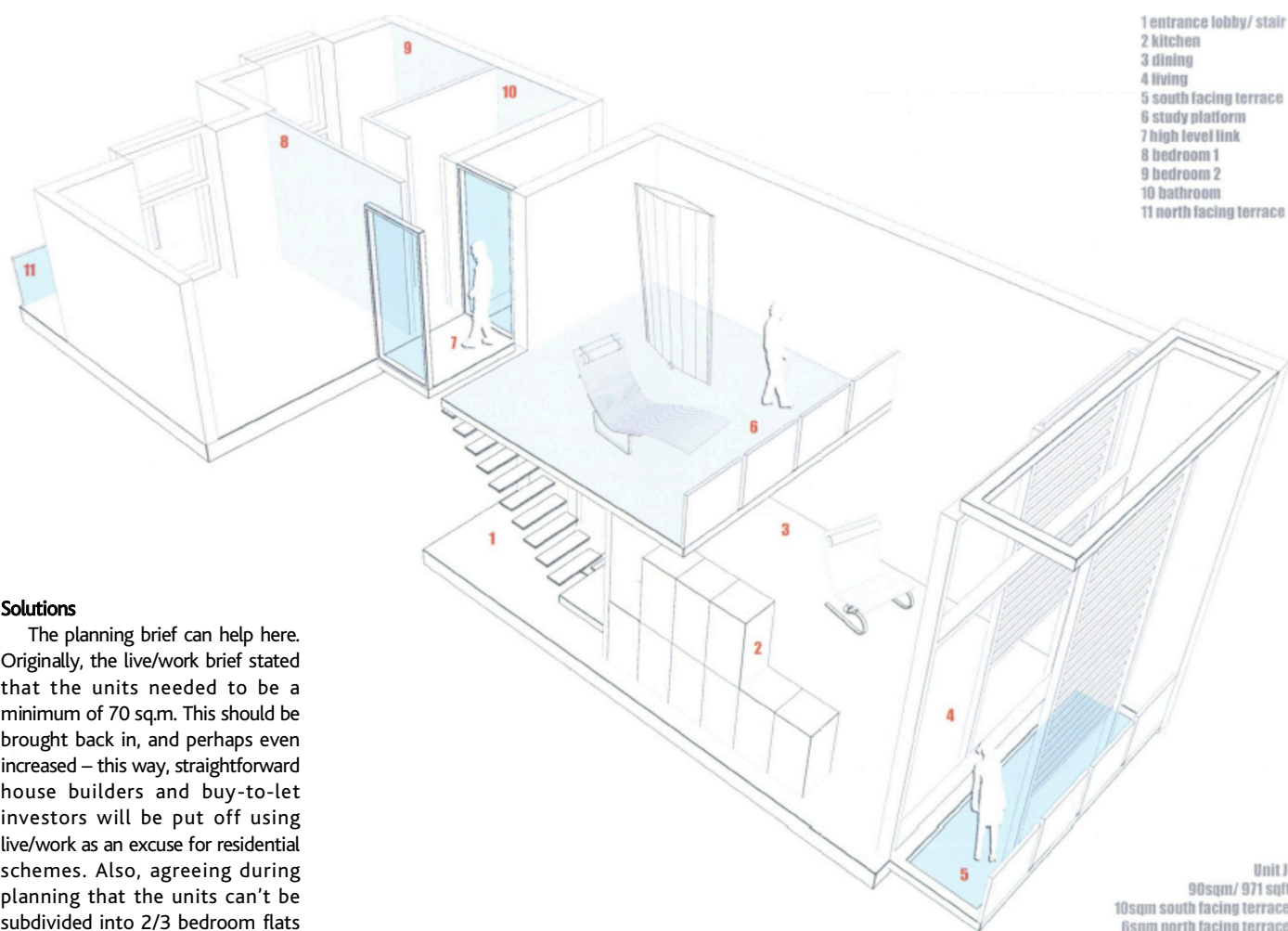
Whilst there's no simple answer to these questions, there is a simple starting point: make sure your project is actually a live/work development. It may seem painfully obvious, but it's a hurdle that a lot of schemes have barely stumbled their way over.

A live/work project should provide all the assurances possible that it will be used as a genuine place of work as well as provide residential space. Distancing a scheme from those that are thinly veiled residential projects is a must. Live/work is firmly planted on many planners' radars, and with so many bad examples it's no surprise. Answering this major concern from the word go is essential if any scheme is to make it past the drawing board.

Like most challenges, this is of course much easier said than done. How on earth can developers make 100% certain that their tenants are going to be both living and working in the units? The simple answer is that they can't. However, there are a number of things that can be done to scare off more traditional house builders and buy-to-let investors from building pseudo live/work projects. What's more, developers can even make reasonably certain that only genuine live/workers become tenants.

Investland's latest project, SoDa Studios in Hackney. Architects: Thinking Space; for Benyon Wharf overpge: JCMT Architects





Solutions

The planning brief can help here. Originally, the live/work brief stated that the units needed to be a minimum of 70 sq.m. This should be brought back in, and perhaps even increased – this way, straightforward house builders and buy-to-let investors will be put off using live/work as an excuse for residential schemes. Also, agreeing during planning that the units can't be subdivided into 2/3 bedroom flats would also help dissuade more residential tenants taking hold of a live/work development. Creating big, open, one bedroom units will instantly make a scheme commercially unviable for any would-be house builder.

As for encouraging only genuine live/workers to the schemes, design is the major tool. Working with talented architects helps, and I've been lucky enough to unearth a few, but developers need to be very strict about the brief. It's vital that there's a definite split between what are the "live" spaces in the unit and what are the "work" spaces.

Incorporating separate entrances or splitting the live and work components into separate floors are simple ways to do this, but any number of options are open if a creative mind is employed from the outset.

A useful approach is to initially set aside thoughts of creating live/work units at all. The starting point needs to be the same as the original live/work schemes - industrial or commercial buildings. High ceilings, lots of daylight, etc are all important factors. Essentially, developers should set out to design a commercial building and incorporate residential

aspects, not the other way around.

Affordable housing

Affordable housing is another thorny issue that can rear its head during the planning process. Indeed, a recent case in Hackney has seen some existing live/work units converted into four affordable flats – the loss of employment space apparently outweighed by the need for affordable housing. Of course, individual cases have individual circumstances, but affordable housing and live/work schemes should be entirely separate consider-

ations.

The reason is simple. Tenants of live/work schemes will by their very nature have their own business. Anyone in such a position will almost always not qualify for affordable housing. Therefore, it follows naturally that to have affordable housing in live/work developments is a no-go.

This, of course, flies in the face of current planning laws for any development which includes a significant residential element, and thus the thorny issue becomes a fully fledged problem.

Unit J
90sqm/ 971 sqft
10sqm south facing terrace
6sqm north facing terrace

Aside from issues of the types of tenants live/work attracts, the fact is that live/work developments are not residential schemes but rather are sui generis and so can't include affordable housing – if there's no traditional residential element, how can an affordable residential element be added? Nevertheless, this perhaps remains one of the principal reasons why live/work developments in the capital have, thus far, been done on a relatively small scale.

It's an issue we've come across in our own projects and it needs a closer examination if live/work is to thrive as a concept in London. Affordable housing is vital, perhaps especially so in London, but it has no relevance for live/work developments. It would be a shame if it became the reason these sorts of schemes were rejected in the future.

Business communities

One aspect of live/work that I've already touched on, but seems to get little attention, is their regenerative impact. The best live/work schemes will not only provide housing and employment in one stroke, but will also give the surrounding area an economic lift.

This needs to be measured by looking at more than just the amount of jobs that are created. Instead of measuring the number of employees per square metre, a much more useful figure would be the value added per square metre. Live/worker businesses tend to operate in high added value areas of business, such as law or architecture.

They also tend to use local services when running their business, so banks, post offices, newsagents, courier services, etc., will all benefit. All of this adds up to an economic boost that goes beyond simply creating employment space.

The alternatives for these sites also need to be taken into account.

Live/work developments are often sited in industrial buildings that have become disused. It's true of our own scheme at Quebec Wharf in Hackney, which was formerly a granary, and equally of a number of other schemes. Live/work breathes new life into these sites and brings in more than simply people; it corrals entrepreneurs and business owners that add a commercial boost to the surrounding area.

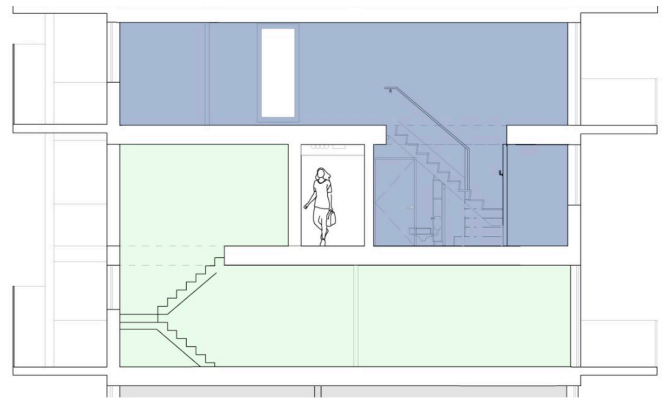
For our part, we followed up Quebec Wharf with two further live/work developments on the same street in Hackney. This created a hub of economic activity and brought the type of value to the area that simple residential or straightforward commercial units would have failed to deliver – essentially growing a business community from scratch.

Final word

The bottom line to all of this is that it should be possible for people to live and work in the same place. The benefits for the individual are beyond doubt, and it can have a huge positive impact on whole communities.

Bad examples and misuse have given live/work a bad name and thrown up major blocks for new schemes. Whilst the slate shouldn't be wiped completely clean, it's important these hurdles don't get in the way of genuine developers looking to create live/work projects.

Planners should maintain an open mind rather than simply rejecting any live/work scheme out of hand, working with developers to make sure live/work as a concept doesn't die.



typical unit section - 1st-3rd floor @ 1:150

