

A progressive scheme for elderly living

Will Wimshurst says that Somerville House is a new approach to socially led 'independent living'

Somerville House is a new approach to socially led 'independent living' which has been given the green light after a two year wait for planning permission. In July 2018 The London Borough of Richmond upon Thames unanimously approved the Somerville House development designed by Wimshurst Pelleriti. The project will provide 24 one-bed units located on a suburban site of 1830 sqm in north Twickenham.

In 2015 local housing association Richmond Housing Partnership (RHP) ran an architectural competition seeking a new concept on which to base the redevelopment of a number of their independent living sites with Somerville House nominated to be the first. The competition sought a new benchmark for Independent Living, based on the HAPPI standards, seeking to challenge traditional perceptions and raise the aspirations of socially led housing and for older people to demand higher quality, more sustainable homes.

Somerville House was of prime importance owing to the need to upgrade the existing building which was mainly studio units and shared bathing. The only feature residents wanted to keep was the 'Del-Boy' styled electric blue and silver trimmed drinks bar complete with a line of well-stocked self-service optics.

Through the course of the concept development RHP's Living Standard for Independent Living was refined and adapted. The aim at the outset was to create an aspirational scheme with residential units clustered around shared spaces and landscaping in order to create a feeling of wellbeing, community and to combat loneliness. This was developed through listening to and understanding the existing residents, scheme managers from this and other local schemes and RHPs leadership team, talking through their aspirations, as well as the issues with the existing building and their learning from previous projects.

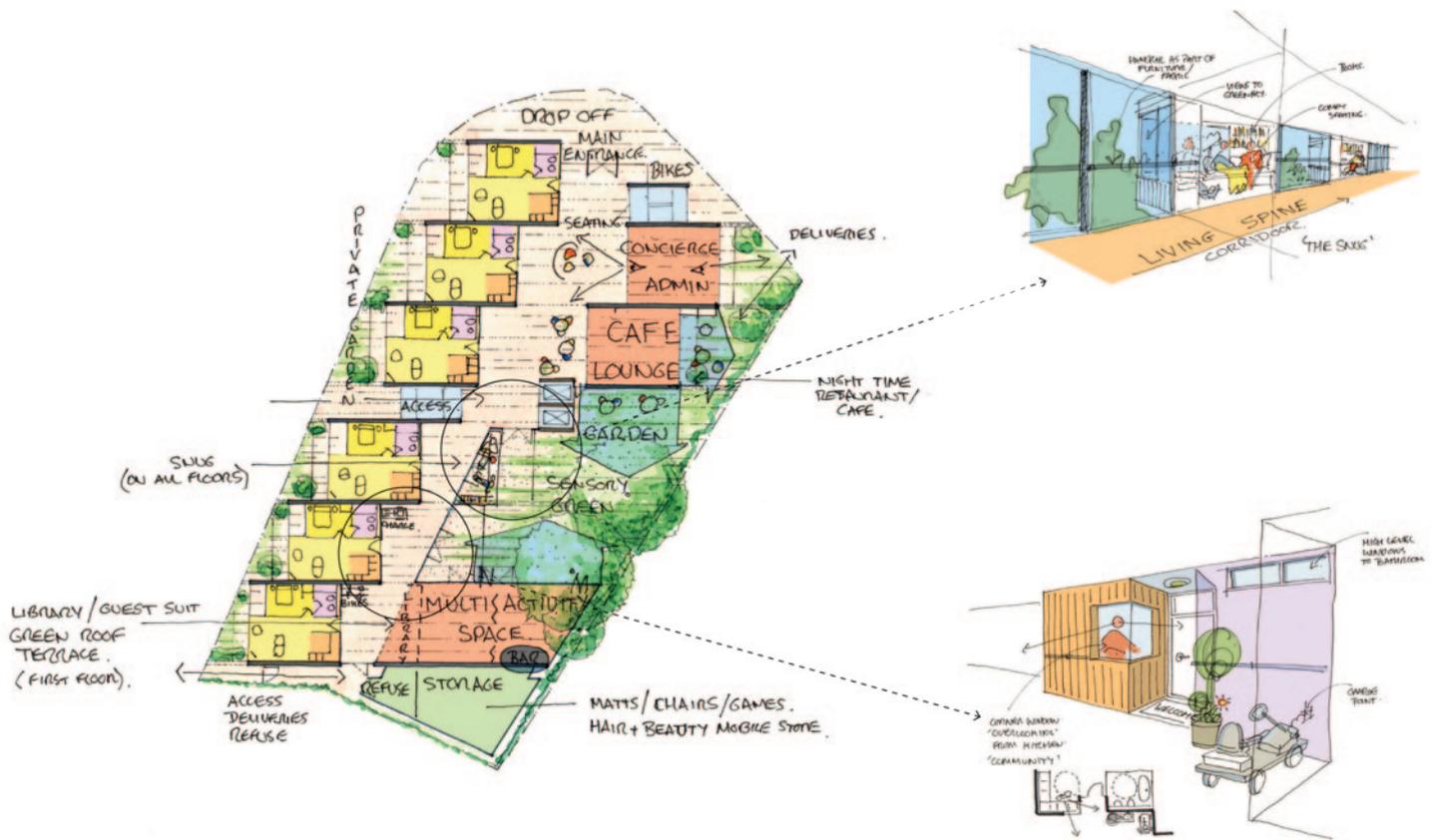
With the age of eligible tenants starting from the age of 55+, the building needs to cater for a significant age group with a wide disparity of requirements. This meant that the units all needed to allow for adaptability going beyond lifetime homes (now incorporated in the Building Regulations under M4(2)) and confronted the issue that only providing 10 per cent wheelchair accessible or adaptable units wouldn't work, as in order to provide for independent 'lifetime' living, adaptability needed to be built in to each unit from the start.

Perception of these units was also a key driver as often both the layout and equipment (grab rails, WC back rests etc) immediately indicate frailty and decline which subliminally hasten a



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person's decline and depression. This is shown in research and through buildings such as the Maggie's Centres that clearly prove how one's environment affects one's feeling, mood, behaviours and overall life satisfaction.

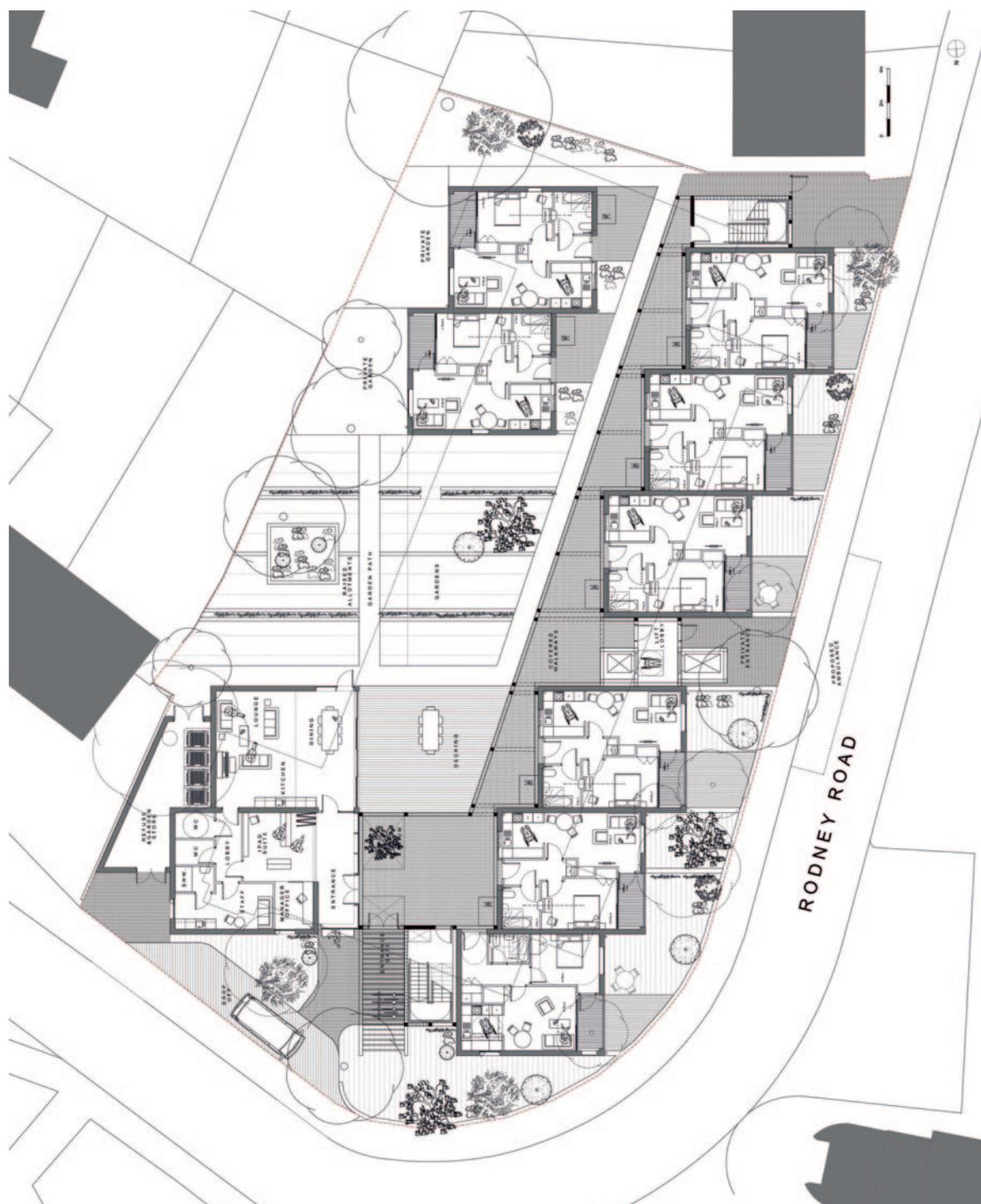
The units are all planned to be dual aspect, specifically moving away from the institutional 'corridor' feeling many such housing projects have suffered from in the past, and also allowing for much more light and ventilation to penetrate the spaces. The key aim in this regard being to have a very positive affect on residents' wellbeing and also to provide an overlooked front door and parking space for a mobility scooter, bike or tricycle. The architects also looked to redesign the concept of accessibility, working with David Bonnet Associates to ensure that every unit was dementia friendly and fully wheelchair accessible without needing to be oversized, meaning no resident will need to leave their flat as their needs change. In the same light all units are adaptable, meaning that no complex building works will be required in order for the units to cater for residents' changing needs as they age.

Maximising the areas of landscape and the use of timber was also a conscious decision with regards to wellbeing and sustainability. The natural warmth and calming nature of planting and timber have been shown to shape mood with studies such as that by the Joanneum-Institute in Graz that showed in a year long study of a timber school, that children's stress levels reduced and heart rates showed significant falls while achievement and concentration significantly increased.

The result is a scheme that focuses on creating a truly aspirational environment – different in every way to the many institutional feeling blocks built in previous generations. The timber clad three storey blocks are arranged around a 'village street' on each level, forming a 'Living spine to the clusters of units with winter gardens and seating arranged to encourage residents to come out of their flats and be part of the community – with the aim of reducing the loneliness that is so often a feature of elderly life. The 'street' borders a landscaped garden to the centre of



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>>> the plot and communal facilities arranged around the entrance specifically designed to encourage a community feel without it feeling forced upon the residents.

The planning application

Despite the good intentions and high quality design of the scheme, gaining planning permission was not straight-forward – due both to delays within the local planning authority and also the complex process of establishing viability which required a certain density on the site that the planning authority were not initially comfortable with. Viability is often at the heart of difficulties in planning applications for housing the elderly. The net to gross ratio which developers typically look at is never as positive for such schemes as against a typi-

cal residential scheme. Schemes for the elderly require larger spaces generally, more communal areas and often more expensive M&E, all of which add cost and reduce the efficiency of the schemes. Such schemes ideally require different treatment in planning terms to account for financial viability, so that they can work on sites compared with the the option of building a typical residential scheme. Changes in this regard are coming slowly through the planning system, and the GLA in particular is looking at how the process of differentiating older age living from typical residential schemes can be made easier, but it was this question that delayed the Somerville House scheme as the viability proved difficult to establish.

The scheme was originally designed with two 2 bed flats creating a partial 4th storey, partly to provide a mix of accom-



modation on the site, and to cater for downsizers and those with live-in carers, which in terms of viability allowed for the scheme to accommodate the communal and community spaces which are so important to the scheme. However, the 4th floor proved to be a sticking point in massing terms – so eventually other solutions to maintaining the density had to be found. In addition, the client RHP found from reviewing its other stock that letting a two-bed independent living unit would create far more voids than a one-bed 2-person unit, which meant a wholesale review of the viability once the 4th floor was ruled out.

The result of the review was to change the mix, amending the two-bed units to one-beds and to locate them elsewhere in the scheme, replacing some of the communal space with resi-

dential accommodation. It was deemed that this was an acceptable compromise that still allowed the scheme to achieve its aim of delivering an aspirational environment, with few changes to most of the design, while gaining the support of the local authority.

Once this was gained the updated scheme went to committee where it was unanimously approved, with Cllr Elengorn summing up the remarks at the planning committee stating that "I think it's an excellent scheme; I think it is a fine piece of architecture if I may say so and I think we should wish them all the best and hope it goes well". ■

(See: Age-Friendly Housing reviewed in Books)

