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THB QUESTIONS INNOVATION FOR INNVOATION'S SAKE

The announcement by Cabe of the shortlist for the Prime Minister's Better Public Building Award once again features a large number of prefabricated, modular buildings no doubt making it on the list for their supposed innovative solutions these offer the beleaguered building industry.

One of the nominated projects - The Peabody Trust's Raines Court - is yet another example of the great white elephant that is modular construction. Far from fulfilling the immediate demand for more homes this project has resulted in a substantial overspend and ran many months behind schedule, demonstrating once again the Urban Myth of off site construction and the inherent dangers of over investing in what is termed "innovative" which as this particular development demonstrates does not necessarily make for an efficient use of resource – whether publicly funded or otherwise.

Of course any development can over run in terms of cost and time but as modular construction has been so much heralded as the saviour of our nation's housing issues it is somewhat ironic to see this particular scheme so heralded for its innovative construction techniques. The selection of this particular project is even more spurious when you consider that a key driver in the force to develop better buildings is sustainability, yet such off site processes stretch to a maximum 60 year lifespan.

Innovation is not a bad thing but we should be wary of innovation for innovation's sake, particularly when it proves so costly.

The Housing Corporation, which part funded this scheme, has been recently criticised by a Commons Committee Inquiry over its use of prefabricated techniques fearing that quality may suffer as a result of untried and untested methods of construction.

The THB has long been campaigning for a holistically sustainable housing policy that offers a practical, realistic and forward thinking approach to building methods. The majority of homes will be expected to last for at least 100-150 years and of the 170,000 home shtta are being built each year approximately 85% are still built using brick and block construction methods, because it is a proven method that stands the test of time in terms of durability and performance.

The ODPM has consistently championed lightweight prefabricated building techniques, setting up various sub groups to put pressure on to the building industry to invest in new methods of construction. This has consistently ignored the substantial resources we already have in terms of manufacturing capabilities, supply chain and trained workforce that already exists for modern concrete masonry construction and ignored the innovation the sector has undergone in terms of proving its efficiency in terms of thermal efficiency, acoustics, build times and long term sustainability.

The Rained Court scheme does have some laudable intentions – to provide first time and low income buyers with the opportunity to get on the housing ladder through shared ownership. However, the Peabody Trust's intention to use the project as a test site to demonstrate that High Street mortgage finance can be secured on modular buildings flies in the face of concerns already raised by the Association of British Insurers (ABI), which has expressed extreme concern at the ODPM's predilection for untried and untested building methods questioning their safety and long term cost efficiency.

"The adoption of modular building techniques, currently being promoted by ODPM in England for low cost housing projects, are of particular concern to insurers. The construction methods have variable fire resistant qualities and rely on good finishes, which must remain in tact and undamaged during occupation. The cost of repairing such constructions after a fire can be significant, particularly where the structure has to be disassembled in order to "slot in" a new replacement module […] The social and economic costs of major fires in such constructions will be enormous."
Response to the legislative proposals for the Scottish Fire and Rescue Services.

It seems particularly ironic that the very sector of society of that has been highlighted as most in need of new housing – single parent families, low income families and key workers – should be offered housing that only has to guarantee a 60 year lifespan and which so much concern for it's long term durability, efficiency and safety. Hardly a long term investment in a family's future security or the fabric of a nation's society.

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