LILAC, Leeds

Contributors: LILAC
White Design

Community-led Housing

Low Impact Living Affordable Community (LILAC) was founded in 2006 by a group of friends. Their ambitious idea – to design an eco-village and potentially create a new housing movement – became a citizen-led agenda.

Located in Bramley, West Leeds, LILAC is an award-winning co-housing project comprising 20 eco-homes designed around shared facilities such as a large common house to foster community interaction and wellbeing.

Architects White Design created a contemporary environment at LILAC that set a new future standard for environmental performance and design of homes and community living.

Creating a co-housing model for LILAC

"The design process at LILAC empowered residents to contribute to the design and customisation of their own homes and surrounding community."

Co-Founder, LILAC

The concept of 'co-housing' originated in Denmark in the 1970s and soon became established in Germany, Scandinavia and the USA. In recent years, a small handful of co-housing communities have emerged in the UK, with the model gradually gaining momentum.

LILAC established a shared approach to home ownership with the creation of a Mutual Home Ownership Society (MHOS). Under this model, the society obtains the mortgage rather than the individuals. Potential future residents are invited to become members of the scheme and pay an equity share to the cooperative in return for a lease. This gives them the right to contribute to the design and development of the community.

Design from the heart of the community

"Usually design is 'delivered to communities'. A lot of people at LILAC had clear views about design and tools and techniques were developed to help them express those views in a successful way."

Founder, White Design

By working closely with incoming residents and neighbouring communities, designers can make sure that plans are fully responsive to local needs, for example in terms of health, safety and wellbeing. At LILAC this involved a well-organised process of design-led community brainstorming using a formal 'community consensus' process.

"With 20 families feeding back ideas on the design it could have become too complicated, but LILAC set up a very structured workshop format and clearly translated those community design ideas back to us with decisions on how to proceed."

Founder, White Design

The designers created an interactive board game activity to explore the community's needs and preferences for landscaping and buildings. Game counters were used to represent key design features such as gardens and car parking, which were laid out in different configurations so that community members could comment on and prioritise what was most important to them. Aerial photos were brought in as a means of identifying potential design constraints and the community considered different scenarios for layout and configuration.

"A striking design outcome from the community is the common house, located at the physical and social heart of the community. It incorporates a shared kitchen and dining area, laundry, multi-purpose room, guest room and workshop."

Founder, White Design

LILAC also broke new ground in terms of challenging planning policy. Residents prioritised larger shared communal spaces over the need for car parking and a legally binding covenant was drawn up restricting the number of cars per household. temperature all year round.

Community-led housing for the future

"LILAC is as an exemplar of community-led design housing projects for the future."

Co-Founder, LILAC

Through its cooperative financing model, LILAC has stimulated active community involvement at the forefront of the design process. The outcome is a safe and healthy community connected through shared values including environmental sustainability, respect, inclusion and a sense of wellbeing.

LILAC has also set a benchmark for how the UK may seek to design and deliver community-led housing in the future. This is particularly timely given the passing of the Self-build and Custom Housebuilding Act 2015, which aims to encourage self-build projects in the future.