



We Hab a dream



It's almost 18 months since residents moved into Haboakus' first development, The Triangle. Now, with more schemes in the pipeline, ROGER HUNT catches up with the founders of Hab to find out what the future holds



Hab, or to define the acronym, happiness, architecture, beauty, seems a strange name for a housebuilder, but then Hab is, as the company's website makes clear, "a housebuilder that believes in doing things differently". This is no understatement, and with more to prove than most, Hab has had to work in the full glare of the media spotlight, including Channel 4 filming the building of its first development, warts and all.

The fact that Hab had such a high profile from the start is no surprise given the involvement of Kevin McCloud, the Grand Designs

presenter who founded the company along with Isabel Allen, then editor of Architects Journal.

So what on earth was it that, back in 2006, inspired McCloud to contemplate such a venture? "It was a kind of anti-inspiration really," he explains. "A lot of anger. A general disillusionment and anger with the mediocrity and uniformity of a lot of the housing that, at the time, was being built at a phenomenal rate up and down the country."

Allen adds that Hab was a challenge to the housebuilders of the time. "The big thing was to demonstrate that you could build for

the lower end of the market at the same cost as volume housebuilders; but that you could do it with a degree of care that would make the houses appropriate to their context with a decent environmental performance and good quality architecture."

With these goals in mind, coupled with the collapse of the housing market as the recession took hold, it was natural for Hab to look to the social housing sector where funding was more readily available and aspirations were shared in terms of the placemaking, environmental and social agenda.

The result was Haboakus, a joint venture between Hab and the south-west-based housing group GreenSquare. From this collaboration emerged The Triangle, an award-winning, 42-home development in Swindon into which residents began moving at the end of June 2011.

Designed by Glenn Howells Architects, with landscape architects Studio Engleback, the scheme is based on Haboakus's fundamental principles: a strong sense of community, a belief in the importance of public space, respect for cyclists and pedestrians, and a commitment to sustainable lifestyles. ►





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McCloud put his reputation and his savings on the line for the project, at the time describing building The Triangle as a long, difficult and sometimes brutal process. He concedes that he would probably not have achieved what he has with Hab without his media profile. "But equally, I would never have been able to achieve what we've achieved without the help and support of an awful lot of people who don't have any sort of media profile at all. There's no doubt that, right at the start, the media profile gave Hab a platform and opened doors, but it only gets you so far."

Hab is no one-hit wonder and other schemes are in the pipeline. Like most of the self-builders featured on Grand Designs, McCloud has a determination to carry on even though he admits to often being close to giving up when faced with the difficulties associated with housebuilding.

"There are much much easier ways to earn a living and pass the time than trying to establish a development company during the depths of recession," he confesses. "And nobody much likes development of any sort, let alone low-cost housing, in their back yard. Ideally, you need nerves of steel, bottomless pockets and the thickest skin in the world. Sadly, I don't have



any of the above. Hab is far and away the most difficult thing I've ever done but, on a good day, it is also the most rewarding."

In person, McCloud is just as passionate about buildings and design as he is on screen. What's more, he is hugely knowledgeable and caring about the environment, architecture and the use of materials, and genuinely wants to create better places for people to live.

Despite the years of being involved in other people's buildings he admits that "sadly" he is now more aware of the commercial imperatives, planning issues and regulatory burdens placed on housebuilders. "You have to be. We have had to become very bureaucracy-literate. But I wouldn't say we find it a whole lot of fun.

"There is an insane amount of red tape. Public sector competition is great in theory, but we generally find

that we have to pretty much design the whole project in order to win it. Then we go out to the stakeholders and the community, and then we design the whole thing over again. It's a hugely wasteful process. We've actually found the planning process – and planners themselves – to be very constructive. Our experience has been that they're as keen to deliver a really good scheme as we are."

The next developments are in Oxford and Stroud and are again





Kevin McCloud at Applewood, the former Cashes Green Hospital site in Stroud, Gloucestershire, that Haboakus is developing as its next scheme



The Triangle under construction



Kevin McCloud at the launch of The Triangle in May 2010



with GreenSquare under the Haboakus banner. Isabel Allen, now Hab's design director, hints that the company also has other schemes in the pipeline. "We've proved that we can do the gritty end. We're also interested in doing some projects which are not social housing and are slightly higher end, maybe building more on the classic Grand Designs kind of constituency," says Allen.

This of course prompts the question: would McCloud now call himself a housebuilder? "It's a rather trite thing to say, but I think

we're placemakers rather than housebuilders," he explains. "If you want sustainable communities you have to make sure that people can do stuff without getting in their cars. Hence, we're increasingly involved with designing all sorts of things – public spaces, allotments and so on, but also community centres, sports centres, cafes, shops."

The reference to sustainability is interesting. Given McCloud's belief in things green, it seems strange that the company did not embrace the word sustainability in its name. Shab – sustainability, happiness, architecture, beauty – would, of course, have sounded naff, but I am assured this was not the reason. Instead it was a more considered decision.

"We decide to put sustainability lower down," says Allen. "We absolutely felt that there have been pioneers – Bill Dunster is the obvious one – who have pushed sustainable housing and they have got us to where we are today. We saw ourselves as maybe the second generation. We didn't want it to be the manifesto; we weren't aiming at a particular eco constituency."

Instead, Hab wants people to fall in love with their houses because they are beautiful and the sense of place and community feels right, explains Allen: "The absolute ideal is that then, after a year or two, people realise the bills are low. We're ▶

The Triangle under construction



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not dismissing environmental performance; we build houses out of hemp, use passive ventilation and go for Code Level 4 as an absolute minimum, but I would say it's much more the One Planet Living perspective, it's the wider, cultural, social understanding of that."

This leads on to McCloud's unexpected yet sage advice that housebuilders should find a really good landscape architect. "There's still a tendency for people to hire architects first and then, maybe, if there's any money left in the pot, to hire somebody to add a bit of detail to the green bits. We're more and more convinced that the way to get really good projects is to look at the landscape issues first."

Allen puts this into context: "The sustainable drainage, the proper green infrastructure is what saves us money. If we can get rid of the big civil engineering, and do it in what we consider to be the right way, often that can justify the landscape architect's fee and some savings on the project."

At the Triangle, all the houses sit around a central green, and the landscaping offers a collection of spaces, including kitchen gardens for residents to grow their own vegetables.



In terms of housebuilding, McCloud is detecting a subtle shift in the industry. "I'm not sure that there is a mainstream housebuilding industry any more. The interesting thing about the recession is that everybody has to think a whole lot harder about what they're doing and why they're doing it. There have always been a lot of talented people in the industry trying to do difficult

and important things, but the great thing now is that, where many of the more ambitious individuals and companies were once very much on the sidelines, there's an increasingly willingness to listen to new ideas."

McCloud also believes that the volume housebuilders are able to match Hab's goals, in terms of community and sustainability, while still making profits for their

shareholders. "I think that the secret lies in upping the ante. Once the market starts to demand – and hence to value and pay for – homes that are respectful to the environment and strongly rooted on their place, it will be commercial suicide not to listen."

Read Roger Hunt's blog:
www.huntwriter.com and follow him: [www.twitter.com/huntwriter](https://twitter.com/huntwriter)



ABOVE: Aerial view of The Triangle
THIS PIC: Kevin McCloud at Applewood, the former Cashes Green Hospital site in Stroud, Gloucestershire, that Haboakus is developing as its next scheme.