

Portmadoc harbour scheme

By Judi Goodwin

A new development at Portmadoc, Gwynedd, North Wales, could bring hope to anyone with high aspirations for getaway weekends but without an income to match. With demand for country cottages sending their prices beyond reach, it was only a matter of time before a developer worked out a modern, made-to-measure alternative. The joy of the Portmadoc harbour scheme is not simply that the houses fill a gap in the market, but their design breaks new ground in modern housing.

Portmadoc is an old world town of Welsh stone on the fringe of Snowdonia; it is the terminus of the narrow gauge railway bringing slate from the quarries at Blaenau Ffestiniog. When the unorthodox plans were first proposed for building weekend sailors' houses on the man-made peninsula sheltering the harbour there was resistance from the authorities and local residents. But in this case the results have proved successful with owners and townspeople. Anyone strolling around the harbour development would surely recognise that it was something new and exciting: a good living environment. The little houses are in total contrast to the rest of the town; viewed against the hills beyond, it seems almost as if they had just put out to sea. Architects Phillips, Cutler, Phillips and Troy approached the project with no preconceived ideas, save to design low cost housing for yacht-owning families who

want a handy base on shore. John Holmes, one of the design team, explained: "We did assume a certain way of life before we began and anticipated that people would not be eating main meals at home. There are lots of good restaurants locally and boat owners are used to cramped galley kitchens.

"So we opted for a compact mini-kitchen as part of the living/dining area. Three types of houses, of two or three storeys, would offer a choice of one, two or three bedrooms but all provide a minimum of sleeping space; and the main emphasis is on large, open living space." But the outside appearance of the houses is remarkable and refreshing. Although the population density is four times higher than on a conventional housing estate, there is no feeling of overcrowding.

Instead there is a sense of shipboard friendliness. Obviously the surrounding sea contributes to this but more important is the inbuilt feeling that people matter. The visual effect is uncompromisingly modern, but the designers made a careful study of local building in an attempt to incorporate some traditional elements of Welsh architecture. Alan Holmes said: "Small, pitched roofs are typical of old Welsh houses and so are the small, deep set windows which we have copied. We have kept the colours similar to those used locally, mainly the slate tones like green, beige and grey/white."

There is no private space around the houses, which means no gardening work. But to maintain privacy within, living accommodation is on the first floor and clever

Left: a new development of cottage style homes at Portmadoc is a combination of modern design and traditional Welsh architecture.



Opposite, top: houses around the perimeter of the site enjoy very good sea-scape views.

Opposite, far left: nautical style steps and balconies give a seafaring flavour to the new holiday houses.

Opposite, centre right: view from the central road looking across to the existing houses built round the harbour.

Opposite, below right: close-up of one house showing first-floor sun deck and vertical access ladder.

Top, left: a sloping ceiling and timbered rafters have given this room a definite shape and atmosphere which gets by with the minimum amount of furniture. Glass doors opening on to the first floor balcony contribute an extra feeling of spaciousness.

Below, left: boat owners are accustomed to cramped galley kitchens, the designers say, so they opted for a compact mini-kitchen as part of the actual living/dining area.



landscaping has placed loose granite rubble areas close to the houses, which can be planted or left alone.

Though the scheme has been criticised for its absence of trees and lawns, Welsh villages tend to have a less green tradition than their English counterparts. Simple stone containers with shrubs provide the only green relief. At the front of the houses, the absence of trees goes unnoticed for the sea steals the scene. And because the development is an important part of the local landscape, the long distance views from the other side of the estuary were of vital consideration. John Holmes said: "The idea was to have an intricate collection of small units which are not identical. This way we avoid monotony but because we have a unifying theme, the effect is not chaotic. We deliberately created a number of design combinations to give the impression that the site was developed over a period of time."

Very simple architectural lines and white rendered walls lend the place a Mediterranean

air. Given the same factors of sea plus space and cost restrictions, architects of different nations come up with similar answers.

To find out how well the designers' theories work in practice, we visited a Liverpool family who own one of the three-bedroom units. David Brock is himself an architect with experience of housing developments. And the fact that he and his wife Geraldine bought the place on impulse, says much for the immediate charm of the place.

Because the building details of their unit were not complete, they were able to make slight alterations to the basic design—simple, low cost amendments that could easily have been incorporated into the other houses, and to great advantage.

Being an end house meant they could install extra side windows for more light. But the major change was to move back the kitchen wall, to take in cupboards, work surface and a sink.

This opened up the culinary possibilities enormously and they considered the sacrifice of about two feet taken from the adjoining bedroom was well worth while.

But on other counts, the house fulfils all expectations. Glass doors opening on to a first floor balcony facing the harbour provide a perpetual link with the sea and the sun. There is ample space to store the boat and all its equipment and the Brocks also remarked on the instant friendliness the place seems to create.

Even as a stranger you find yourself bidding a cheery "good morning" to all, because reserve seems to be broken down by the setting. John Holmes summed up: "People do tend to be conservative in the choice of their first home, but more adventurous with their second. A weekend home is for fun but we think the success here is an indication of the way people will want to live in the future."

"People must inevitably realise a monotonous estate does not give an interesting way of life. It is our ambition to do this type of development in an urban area — and there is no reason why not."

