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## **Poor quality in Scottish housing?**

An Edinburgh building industry conference on 7<sup>th</sup> June raised accusations of poor quality and profiteering in the Scottish housing business. My own comparisons with other European experience, reported in the Scotsman the following day, drew strong reactions from both Homes for Scotland and Miller Homes. This is an important debate for all home buyers, as well as for authorities and the industry itself.

So what is happening in other countries, and how does Scotland compare?

There are very exciting things to see in housing in some European countries. Not least, some builders are getting proactively involved in innovation – not just following what government tells them to do, as Homes for Scotland executive Bruce Black puts it. Many companies really appreciate that energy saving is important, that toxic building materials are a serious health concern, and that environmentally sensitive site planning is a blessing both for residents and for nature – so they are making real efforts.

For sure, there is not as yet much “green” market demand. But isn’t there something called being market leaders? Even some conservative house building companies are now trying out new, low energy homes. As well as halving building waste, using better materials, and adopting environmental services technology.

To be fair to the industry, there is a need for more government incentives. But there is no doubt that profit margins are high at present. If the housing industry is not showing innovation now, heaven help us when times are hard.

No demand for green homes? This is a myth which in my view is an excuse to avoid thinking creatively. The experience of many of us is that a market segment of at least a few percent of home buyers does already exist, and that is enough to get going. These cutting edge companies may still be small but they are growing fast. Germany, Austria and Holland are leading countries, and Scandinavia has a lot to show too. I have arranged about 20 study tours around Europe for ministries, housing officials and companies to see this innovation. I’ve also taken Scottish officials on tour of ecological schools in Norway. There are now hundreds of excellent, “passive” homes which have virtually zero heating bills. Hundreds using healthy materials. Many using a large proportion of renewable energy. Even houses which produce more energy than they consume!

And no - they do NOT cost a fortune. Thanks to dedicated innovation over the last 10-15 years, the figures are on the table: these buildings cost just 2 to 5% more than normal. That small extra cost is rapidly paid back through very low energy bills (as well as better health, fewer allergies etc – hard to quantify but just as important).



*Plus-energy housing in Freiburg, Germany. Architect Rolf Disch. Homeowners get a reverse energy bill – a net income from sale of surplus energy from the solar roof! (see [www.rolfdisch.de](http://www.rolfdisch.de))*

It's important to add that this includes both detached houses, cluster housing and apartment blocks. In addition, they do not look "weird", nor require users to push control buttons all day, but are attractive and easy to live in.

As leader of an organisation in Norway promoting sustainable architecture and construction, my work has taken me all over Europe giving quite a broad overview of developments, and contacts with government, industries and designers as well as housing associations and consumers. Far from being on "a day visit to Scotland", Mr. Black's rather lame counterattack, I have been coming here for 25 years, have arranged conferences here, shown an international exhibition on housing which I prepared for the International Union of Architects (at The Lighthouse in Glasgow), and been involved in several projects. I've also been to see housing on site - such as an expensive top-end estate in Forfar where we went round with thermocameras for a BBC program a few months ago. The results were awful: heat leaks everywhere, missing insulation, and so on. If this is what Miller Homes means when they say they are fulfilling standards, then some home builders need to be policed more carefully. On the surface, things may look fine – but how can a poor home buyer know what is under the floor or inside the walls?

My colleagues in GAIA Architects in Edinburgh are at present designing Scotland's first school to passive low energy standard, with healthy materials, and with natural ventilation. I am sure there are some companies, designers and housing professionals, here as in other countries, who are well up to date on the latest developments and doing their level best to introduce them in Scotland. Home buyers should seek them out!

On the other hand, I recognise that the housing industry has difficulties too. We all need to be self critical. I have seen the same problems in many countries, and I am certainly not suggesting that "we in Norway are the best" – far from it. The public does need more information. Many of my fellow architects still don't know how to design environmentally friendly homes. Local authorities are bureaucratic, and do not take the lead in requiring high environmental standards. But we could be going a lot faster, instead of building these "little boxes" which in environmental and energy terms are, quite frankly, obsolete products – when one has up to date knowhow about what others are achieving. I think the housing industry should acknowledge its weaknesses, think of more than just profits, and put more serious effort into innovation and market leadership.

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