

Luddites 1, Technocrats 0



It comes to us all. That sudden realisation that you have missed a leap in technology: that awful moment where you suddenly feel out of touch. The moment when a young person rolls their eyes and says something along the lines of "what do you mean you've never heard of Snapchat?" It will come as no surprise to you to hear that I actually had my first moment like this when still

comparatively young. In the late 1990s, I went into HMV* to buy a video (I don't remember which one: probably one of the more cerebral arthouse classics like Die Hard 8 or Rocky 9).

The assistant apologised, saying they didn't have any video copies left of the film I wanted but they did have it on DVD. I had literally never heard of DVD! It was explained to me as being 'like a laser disc but much smaller'. I was quite shocked that a whole new wave of technological advancement had passed me by. I found myself slowly shaking my head in wide eyed amazement as the 13-year-old shop assistant explained how this new technology worked.

I was reminded of this recently when driving past a building site where some new student accommodation was being built using a modular construction system. I was on my way to one of our construction sites where we were building a new care home using traditional methods. As I pulled up, I noticed that the builders on our site were occupied with traffic management, sweeping up rubbish, talking to nosy neighbours, taking delivery of various pallets of materials, and it struck me that none of them was actually building anything. I had just driven past a site where modular sections were being craned and bolted into place, where kitchen and bathroom 'pods' had come to site already finished internally with wiring and plumbing all pre-fitted in a factory probably somewhere in Germany or Sweden. They wouldn't be recording days lost due to inclement weather or suffering the problems of competing finishing trades getting each other's way. Surely this is the way we should build all of our buildings in the 21st Century. Or is it?

As a nation we flirted with system building in the 1960s and it didn't go well. Well-documented problems of poor thermal

flexibility, attention to detail and a powerful sense of 'ownership' makes traditional building methods the preferred option in the care home sector, says NorthStar director **DANNY SHARPE.**

efficiency, noise transfer and condensation caused by badly made elements being badly bolted together resulted in a backlash against this type of building. However, surely by now in these days of computer aided design and laser technology these problems will all have been ironed out. There is huge business in off-site manufacture and modular system building which is fuelling the growth in student living and hotel chain development throughout the world. So why don't we in the care sector embrace this technology and make more use of modular systems? We could speed up construction and eradicate the problems inherent in trying to build in the driving wind and pouring rain.

It's this personal touch which will always differentiate most care home owners from owners of other asset classes.

Some say one of the reasons we are reluctant is that funding institutions want to invest in properties over a lengthy period and there may be some doubt over the longevity of the timber framed systems on offer. I am not so sure this is the reason. We do, after all, still have plenty of timber framed buildings from over 500 years ago still standing. No, I have another theory why the care home development industry remains reluctant and that is to do with adaptability. Without exception, every care home we have built has, at some, point, involved a client/end user walking around the part-completed building and asking if it's not too late to "(i) put another window in there? (ii) sub-divide this room into two (iii) move that door to there and create a new store cupboard?"

With traditional construction this means cutting away a few blocks and shoving a new lintel in. With modular construction it means telling your client that "yes . . . sorry, it is too late". The typical care home operator is always looking to tinker with a building.

I think this happens less in the more corporate hotel and student accommodation world because of the lack of personal ownership of those buildings. Whereas the corporate market dominates hotel ownership, a massive 70% of the care home market is composed of providers who each have no more than 0.4% of total beds**. These are the small operators who have one or two homes and look after them just as they would their own home.

It's this personal touch which will always differentiate most care home owners from owners of other asset classes. I like this. It chimes with the household model of care that all good operators aspire to. The emphasis on 'home' is every bit as important as the emphasis on 'care'.

Since my embarrassment with the whole DVD thing I have since resolved to stay on top of technology and to make sure I keep up with all the latest advances.

Staying in regular contact with the younger generation is a great way to do that. So, tonight I have my teenage nephew coming round to play computer games – the play station is on and FIFA '97 is loaded and waiting for him. ct

* For our younger readers HMV was a shop . . . no, not like Amazon, an actual shop where you could buy records and videos . . . oh just Google it!

**House of Commons Library Briefing Paper (The care home market (England) Feb 2017)