



JAPAN TO EXPORT CHEAP HOMES TO UK

A British company has voiced fears that UK housebuilding could soon be swamped by imported Japanese system-built houses, manufactured and built at a fraction of the cost of British homes. Alastair Stewart reports.

John Prewer, director of Domain International, a company which has developed similar system-built housing, warns that factory-built modular housing is booming in Japan. He said top companies were planning to do to UK housebuilding what Japan did to the car industry in the 1970.

One of the largest of such companies in Japan, Sekisui, has cut down manufacturing time for a typical semi to 10 man-hours and sitework to 40. This compares with over 1800 for a traditionally built house in the United Kingdom.

British housebuilders operating in California report that the Japanese are already exporting house kits to the US West Coast.

Japanese companies are active in the UK. Two large-scale developments are being built in London – a department store in Oxford Street and the GPO headquarters near St Paul's.

The Japanese can tailor-make homes by offering options on a CAD system. The computer can be linked to the manufacturer and an instant report of cost and completion date can be prepared; the design data can link to the production machines without any drawings being

passed between departments.

Plans for importing these homes are being co-ordinated by the country's Ministry of International Trade and Industry, Prewer said.

"Unlike Britain, the Japanese make planned co-ordinated attacks on certain market areas, be it motor cycles, videos or whatever. Plans are made out up to 10 years in advance and then they can go ahead smoothly," Prewer said.

Shinichiro Ota, a MITI representative in London, denied there were any present plans to import: "A very few are being exported to China and Korea and I don't think any will be exported to Great Britain. In the near future – maybe because of over-capacity – some companies could export to countries other than China or Korea."

Shipping of components to the UK on the back of supertankers was a possibility being looked into, said Prewer. Empty tankers returning to the Middle East from Japan have to be filled with seawater as ballast. Instead, they could be filled with flat-packed components.

On arrival in the Gulf the units would be transferred to ships or barges for the remainder of the journey to Britain. Here they would be assembled into box-like units ready for transport to site. Alternatively, the components could be manufactured entirely in this country, either by Japanese companies or under licence by British manufacturers, he said.

TRAINING SCHEME FOR CRAFT ELITE

A new training scheme designed to create an elite core of young craftsmen to manage historic building repairs will be launched in London next Monday.

This follows growing concern that without a massive increase of specialist craftsmen and managers in the industry, much of the country's crumbling heritage will soon be beyond repair.

The William Morris Craft Fellowship – which has the backing of all of Britain's conservation bodies – is an intensive six-month course aimed at demonstrating the intricacies of repairing historic buildings.

It will be open to qualified or suitably experienced tradesmen who are likely to find themselves in supervisory positions on conservation projects.

Bertie Field, senior architect with English Heritage, warned that many of the country's historic buildings and monuments were in dire need of repair.

"The demolition and rebuild attitude of the 1960s combined with changes that took place in technology, meant that the building industry has failed to sustain an adequate training programme for specialist craftsmen," said Field.

"Although the situation is slowly improving there are still insufficient trainees coming into the craft industry to maintain the necessary status quo."

WEST CANARY WHARF PLANS SENT TO DOE

The London Docklands Development Corporation has sent the planning application for the western section of the £2bn Canary Wharf scheme to environment secretary Nicholas Ridley. But, in an apparently contradictory move, it is requesting that the corporation be allowed to determine the application itself.

West Ferry Circus, comprising 172 000 m² of offices, hotel and commercial space plus a double-level road interchange, is the only part of the one million m² Canary Wharf scheme to lie outside the London Enterprise Zone, thus making it liable to normal planning procedures.

The LDDC has offered the planning decision to the DOE because the West Ferry Circus application marks a number of departures from the statutory

borough plan. The borough plan precludes office development if it involves the loss of existing industry.

The West Ferry Circus site at present contains 3740m² industrial floor space, accounting for 64 jobs. However both Tarmac Roadstone, which stores concrete aggregate on the site, and Pioneer Concrete plan to move out of the area.

The local neighbourhood committee of Tower Hamlets Borough Council is keen to ensure that industrial jobs are maintained for local residents. Nevertheless, the borough council as a whole has decided not to oppose the planning application. It says that the best community benefits can be obtained through negotiations.

FEARS PERSIST ON NEW-BUILD VAT

The construction industry has dismissed attempts by the president of the European Commission to quell fears over the prospect of VAT on new house building.

The European Court will decide in March next year if housebuilders are to be stripped of zero rating. The House Builders Federation fears this would bring land shortages and bankruptcy for firms on tight margins.

Speaking at the Confederation of British Industry conference in Bournemouth on Monday, Commission president Jacques Delors said the EEC was not seeking to impose a harmonised rate of VAT. "We will probably propose more than one target rate of VAT and will certainly allow a margin of fluctuation around those target rates.

House Builders Federation director Roger Humber immediately dismissed the reassurance as "Euroflannel". He said: "The question of variable rates is academic. We are looking for a favourable decision against VAT imposition from the European Court."

Delors also said that a single European market demanded the sweeping away of contract impediments arising from disparate standards, different technical rules and divergent national specifications.

A new approach was needed, even though the number of tenders published in the official journal had grown each year. He suggested that new sectors to be covered by directives governing building contracts would include transport, energy, water and telecommunications.