

# WHY COLLABORATION IS THE SECRET TO SUCCESS FOR CUSTOM BUILD DEVELOPERS



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*Michael Kohn, Digitising Custom Build project lead and chief executive of [Stickyworld](#), looks at how collaboration has underpinned the progress of the project, and why it should also underpin progress of the UK custom build sector to solve the process puzzle and unlock its value...*

In a [previous post](#), I explained the reasons of why we started this research and development project, how we formed the project team, and how an open approach to collaboration is helping us develop test use cases and define new partnerships for the future.

In this blog, I'll now share our learning from the custom build sector as we start to work with companies of different scales and with different development models and processes. I will also suggest why an open collaborative approach is key to the custom developers' shared success however counter-intuitive this may seem to traditionally guarded property developers.

## AN OPEN APPROACH TO COLLABORATION

The Digitising Custom Build project has developed in a number of ways, but collaboration underpins the approach. [Slider Studio](#) and [HTA Design LLP](#) have collaborated to progress the [housing configurators](#), primarily focusing on HTA's design for Potton Homes at [Heartlands in Cornwall](#). They've also been testing CAD tools with scripts that plug into both Sketchup and Web based configurators.

[Axis Design Architects](#) and [Commusoft](#) have been working together to better understand the potential for a home user guide, published via [Stickyworld's](#) platform and referencing data from Commusoft's IoT platform to communicate the energy used in the home.

[Facit Homes](#) have been working to refine their existing digital manufacturing processes, data management and site inspection processes, and giving me and my team some insight of how a specialist custom builder works.

Meanwhile at Stickyworld we have been working with all partners to develop a suite of supporting features to allow appropriate communication at different stages of custom build. To do this we have been developing different configurations of our cloud communications platform to publish micro-websites we call 'rooms'. These are effectively multi-media online chat rooms where organisers can present all kinds of media and host the different kinds of conversations between different groups of people, and change the settings of the rules of engagement to suit the process. I'll explain more on this and show some detail in the next blog.



What has interested me so far however is how it is still a little hard to see a clear pattern emerging across the industry, and this suggests to me that custom build developers may also need to collaborate more with each other in order to evolve and grow their industry. Here's why:

## WHAT WE ARE LEARNING FROM OUR ENGAGEMENT WITH INDUSTRY?

Over the last 18 months I have learned a few things about the custom build model, but the consistent observation is that every custom builder I meet – almost without exception – is different.

Custom by name and nature, every early stage custom builder is offering a different flavour, a slightly different process and a different result product. And maybe this is normal as, for one, the objective is to offer something a bit different from the normal housing product, and also, in terms of the process, no one yet knows the optimum way to introduce choice to the market.

In a very segmented market, there maybe a number of viable models, operating in different parts of the market, from social housing up to luxury homes, where the custom build approach finds an optimum configuration. But the difference and diversity – whilst exciting – is also a real challenge to digital innovators and in particular software developers like Stickyworld. We always try to cut through the noise to identify clear patterns and processes around which we can model our technology so that it can scale. When everyone is doing it differently, it's a real challenge to make a tool that can serve all cases in a meaningful way.

But the more fundamental challenge is also about making this all make sense to the customer. Customers need to understand what choice is on offer, what is the process, what is the time frame, and what are the benefits of this approach, as oppose to the competition. If it's too confusing, there is greater risk that they will find a more familiar way to buy a new home.

## ANY INNOVATIVE PRODUCT OR PROCESS NEEDS COLLABORATION TO HELP REFINE IT

Collaboration has enabled each company the Digitising Custom Build Project – all very different – to progress their independent commercial interests, technologies and business models, yet each is still able to come together as a project consortium to show how they can couple and interact, each benefitting from one another's work.

Open knowledge sharing along the way is par for the course in these kinds of research and development projects – in fact it is essential. It is the same reason why at Stickyworld we have opened our project development to interested beta testers to help us refine the tools in live contexts.



The instinct for collaboration is also why we are connecting with other technologists working in this space to further extend our reach and invite them into the conversation about the future of custom build technology.

## TIME TO TEAM UP ON THE PROBLEM SOLVING?

But just as technology innovation requires a foundation of collaboration to make progress, maybe so too should operators in the custom build sector consider their own opportunities to collaborate?

In one sense, each development is a collaboration with your customer, but are there opportunities to deploy collaborative business models on specific developments with other custom build developers? For instance there are many opportunities for small scale developments on infill sites, but if these are not repeatable at scale with a common process, it is difficult for larger landowners to focus on these and open them up. The idea of tying up resources in individual silos, with many small players may not be desirable.

Wouldn't it be better if small custom build developers could club together to form larger teams and share some common processes and resources, reduce their overheads in figuring out new ideas and processes and increase the collective capacity to deliver new homes? Maybe over time we will see projects like this, and if they emerge I am sure there are many savings, not just in resources and buying power, but in the inevitable overhead that exists when everyone is trying to solve a new puzzle by themselves.