Answering the 21st century call to alms

Almshouses are springing up at the fastest rate for over a century and the charities behind them are on a very modern mission. By Laura Silverman

As the 21st century has dawned, the almshouse in all its ancient glory is being reborn. The traditional image of the almshouse as a secluded building accommodating the elderly is being replaced by an innovative approach that is more about communities and the future. 

The idea of the almshouse is as old as humanity itself, with the first known almshouse being built in 450 AD. In the UK, the tradition continued into the 20th century, with the last almshouse being built in the 1960s. However, due to a lack of awareness and funding, the almshouse was on the brink of disappearing as a building type.

The current renaissance of the almshouse is driven by a desire to provide affordable housing for all ages, not just the elderly. Charities like United Charities and Dartmouth Trust are now building almshouses for younger families, as well as the elderly. 

One site, run by Salisbury City Almshouses, comprises 19 flats, use handmade tiles and brickwork, and is built using locally sourced materials and energy-efficient practices. 

The new almshouses are not just about providing homes; they are about creating communities. They often have shared spaces where residents can meet and socialise, and they are often located in areas that are underutilised. 

The almshouses are not just for the elderly; they are for anyone who needs affordable housing. They are especially welcome for younger families who are finding it difficult to get on the housing ladder. 

The almshouses are designed to be sustainable, with many incorporating renewable energy sources. This not only reduces the cost of living for residents, but it also helps to reduce carbon emissions. 

The almshouses are also designed to be energy-efficient, with many incorporating solar panels and efficient insulation. This means that residents can save money on their energy bills and contribute to the fight against climate change.

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