

Free Trade

A property developer who takes no salary and gives all the profits to charity: no we haven't entered the Twilight Zone – just Putney. **Graham Norwood** reports on Give It Away, the company that's a breath of fresh air for the housebuilding industry.

AS property developers go, **Charlotte Grobier** is a breed apart.

For a start – she's a woman. This is rare enough in the industry, but more startling still is that, although she is as preoccupied with bottom lines, margins and quick sales as the next housebuilder, she has a very different objective in mind.

That is, she intends to give every penny of her profit to charity.

"In 2001 we had work done on our family home in Putney. It took from summer until December and was fantastically disruptive but the end result was great. Everyone worked well as a team so that gave me the idea to raise money through similar projects," says Grobier, who describes her skills as being in sales, management and good ideas rather than property development.

She originally wanted to refurbish an existing house, Sarah Beeny-style, for a quick profit of £50,000, but the lack of a suitable home on sale meant her company, Give It Away, had to tackle two new-build schemes. The upside is that profit expectations have rocketed to £500,000.

"She was probably at the end of her tether by the time we met," says Alex Howard Baker of Savills in Putney. "She'd clearly been talking about her project to other estate agents and got pretty short shrift, but I thought it was worth helping."

He directed her to a scruffy property in Alhurst Street, Putney, which she purchased and is now getting demolished to make space for two four-bedroom, three-bathroom homes. And like

this year work will start on turning an empty plot in nearby Dryburgh Road into a three-bedroom, two-bathroom coach house, scheduled to be finished in the spring.

Grobier borrowed the purchase costs and will deduct this loan and interest from the profits. She is taking no salary, and most of the demolition and building work is being done for free or for

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discounted rates by professionals including Savills, building contractors S R Newman, timber-frame company JTD, Aardark remediation experts, Paege & Benson conveyancing solicitors, and a string of specialist craft and building firms. Her accounts are being independently audited to ensure financial transparency.

"She's completely serious – just like any conventional developer. But because of her

negotiating skills and the causes involved, she'll probably get better deals than most other developers. It's a virtuous circle and everyone should benefit," says Baker.

Geoff Durham of JTD Timber Frame, whose wooden frames will be at the heart of the new homes, says he has never come across a scheme like this. "It was difficult to believe at first, but it's true. If Charlotte keeps the same team on her sites, it'll build up trust and create quite a different way of working for all us contractors too."

With the sites, builders and agents already organised, Grobier is now seeking suppliers – and you get the impression it may be hard for a firm receiving her call to say no.

"The less we spend, the more we have to give away. We currently need two complete kitchens to be donated or at least heavily discounted," she says. She has already successfully managed to get free or cheap materials and fittings, ranging from roof tiles and underfloor heating to living-room carpets and trellis fencing.

Her shopping list of wants – ideally for free – includes fittings for six bathrooms, sound systems and security alarms, as well as patio stones and garden sheds. "I've written to celebrity gardeners asking them to get involved. It'd be ideal publicity for them and free for us," she says. ▶

Charlotte Grobier is **Charlotte Grobier**, the woman behind Give It Away, the first project in Putney before demolition starts work



the projects

1. Demolition has started in Alhurst Street, Putney, where a down-at-head house has been demolished to make way for two four-bedrooms, three-bathroom houses, each with a basement and decked garden.

2. At Dryburgh Road, Putney, Give It Away is building a three-bedroom, two-bathroom coach house with garden, off-street parking space, and open-plan downstairs living area. A basement will house a study, playroom and games area.

give it away needs:

The charity has received substantial professional help to reach this stage, but is now seeking suppliers who may give, for free or at discounted rates, the following:

- six bedrooms
- two cloakrooms
- two kitchens
- underfloor heating
- kitchen and bathroom tiles
- doors and windows
- sound systems
- flooring
- roofing tiles and coverings
- security systems
- cement, bricks, plaster
- carpets
- garden decking

