

CREATE Streets

It isn't right to regenerate down. So what next for the Sutton Estate?

Flora Sutton revisits the Sutton Estate in the wake of the council's decision to reject Affinity Sutton's proposals to reduce the amount of housing and affordable housing on the site.

In 2015, Affinity Sutton, a housing association, proposed to demolish twelve of fifteen blocks of red brick, five-storey social housing in Chelsea. The other three were listed

The buildings are worn and torn but structurally sound. In its heyday, the Sutton Estate was exemplary; well-maintained and integrated into the surrounding streetscape. Today the brickwork is still perfectly intact and the terracotta detail worth thousands of pounds. The buildings are well spaced allowing for natural light to flood through. Architecturally, the estate is top of the class. It is home to the locals that form part of the permanent fabric of this Royal Borough.

Affinity Sutton's plans proposed to knock down the buildings and knock up in its place a soulless replica made up of 106 luxury apartments for private sale and 318 homes for social housing. These plans reduced the number of social housing by 30 percent and the overall density of the estate by 8 percent, from 462 to 424. The target market would have been the super-rich snapping up valuable land while the residents are decanted off around the country.

Thankfully, officials of the RBKC council have advised the plans should be rejected on three grounds:

1. The plans failed to show that the maximum amount of affordable housing would be provided. There would have been a net loss of social rented space. When I was investigating back in 2015, there was a complete vacuum in provision for the 73 flats used for sheltered housing. These were lived in by elderly residents with a warden to keep them safe, a garden and a communal living area.
2. The quality of design of the new estate was 'insufficient'. A less tactful evaluation by a resident was that they were 'mediocre plans by a third-rate architect.' The new building design was nothing on the old; a soulless replication of a set of buildings with life and atmosphere.
3. No agreed S106 obligations to secure affordable housing and appropriate infrastructure required to make the development acceptable. (S106 relates to the provision of affordable housing among other conditions.)

Another Save our Sutton campaigner commented on the local media that the plans were, 'a bit like using Chippendale for firewood and replacing it with something from Ikea, then expecting everyone to congratulate them on a bold new design.' There was certainly more than a hint of flat pack about the new buildings, and to those who know the beauty of the existing estate, flat pack wouldn't quite cut it.

Nevertheless, this has been a hard-won battle, and the future is not inevitably secure. The local campaigners Save our Sutton have fought hard, racking up nearly 11,000 signatures to

date to protect their homes and the working-class enclave. On 15th November, at the town hall, the decision on the officials' recommendations to reject the plans was ratified. This kind of victory is far from the norm, in a London where land is eye-wateringly valuable. Just around the corner, cranes feast on the ruins of Marlborough School; an equally attractive and community-centric primary school. It has been obliterated to make way for John Lewis part two, backed by Sports Direct's Mike Ashley. The fact that Sutton still and will stand is testament to the perseverance and strength of a group of committed campaigners and to local democracy getting it right. Save our Sutton has been a community effort that shows that despite appearances, Chelsea retains some sense of the village life it has been so celebrated for.

The residents hope that there will be improvements made to the buildings. Where Affinity Sutton *are* correct in their analysis is when they point out that the buildings are not currently in peak state. Specifically, the association decreed that the apartments were unfit for modern living. The campaigners have accused the association of wilful neglect so that they could use this argument in the logic for their plans. But with the plans now rejected, there is much that can be done to bring these wonderful Sutton buildings back to the former glory. But will Affinity Sutton want to do it?

Andrew Barshall, who spearheaded the campaign, said that they are 'looking at the feasibility of double mansard roofs for several of the buildings, outside lift blocks, and joining blocks at the back giving a courtyard effect in the centre of them.' Another superficial amendment which would improve the overall patina would be wooden window frames to replace the modern plastic ones that stick out in their incongruity.

Three cheers! One for grassroots activism, another for the continuation of a streets friendly estate, and a third for a wonderful work of architecture being given the attention it deserves. 'But, this is only a battle we have won,' says Barshall, 'and we now need to get someone to step in and do what's best for Chelsea and the residents.' As Rocky once said, 'it ain't over till it's over.'

Flora Sutton is a journalist and a member of Create Streets.