

Create Streets

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Create Boulevards for London

The beautification and intensification of London's arterial roads

London's arterial roads are some of the most important in the city in. But too many are under-developed, polluted, ugly and unpleasant. None strategically make any or sufficient use of express busses or light rail to improve transport into the city centre. But it doesn't have to be this way. Intensely used avenues or boulevards can be beautiful *and* busy. It's time to be more ambitious. It's time for a change.

In this discussion paper, we are proposing a partially community-led programme for the populist beautification and intensification of London's arterial roads with a range of beautiful, popular medium-rise developments with pre-set designs agreed by local communities to permit faster higher development of more homes. We are proposing more trees (where there is space) and an enhanced system of express busses and (whisper it) trams to cut journey times, reduce pollution and return London's historic arterial roads to their true breadth of purpose and potential for beauty. If we want them to be, many of London's arterial roads could be just as beautiful and busy as those of Paris though (probably) in a more cluttered and idiosyncratic London way!

This is a discussion paper. Our ideas are not fully worked up. And we don't pretend that they are. We want to crowd-source **your** expertise and ideas to turn Create Boulevards into a fully worked up manifesto for action which we'll send to the new mayor of London later in the year. Please e-mail us at kieran@createstreets.com with ideas, concerns, relevant information. We would be very grateful.¹

Fig i – Avenue Montaigne in Paris

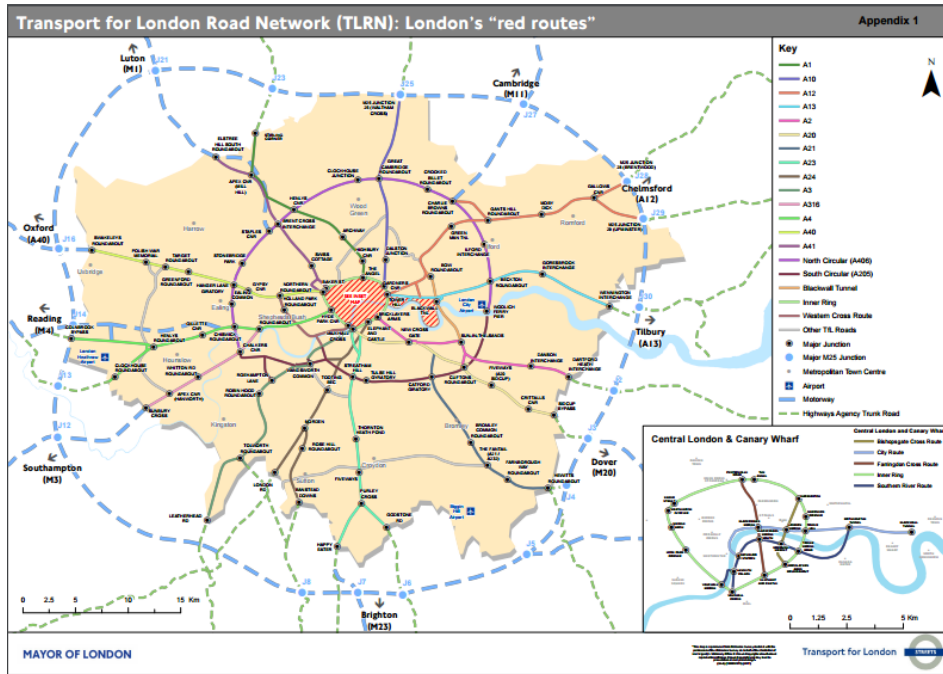


¹ Some of the ideas in this paper derive from our work with and for the Redington Frognal Neighbourhood Forum and from discussions with Nicholas Falk of Urbed, Barbara Weiss of the Skyline Campaign, David Taylor and Ben Rogers of the Centre for London. We thank them all.

What is a boulevard? What could be a boulevard?

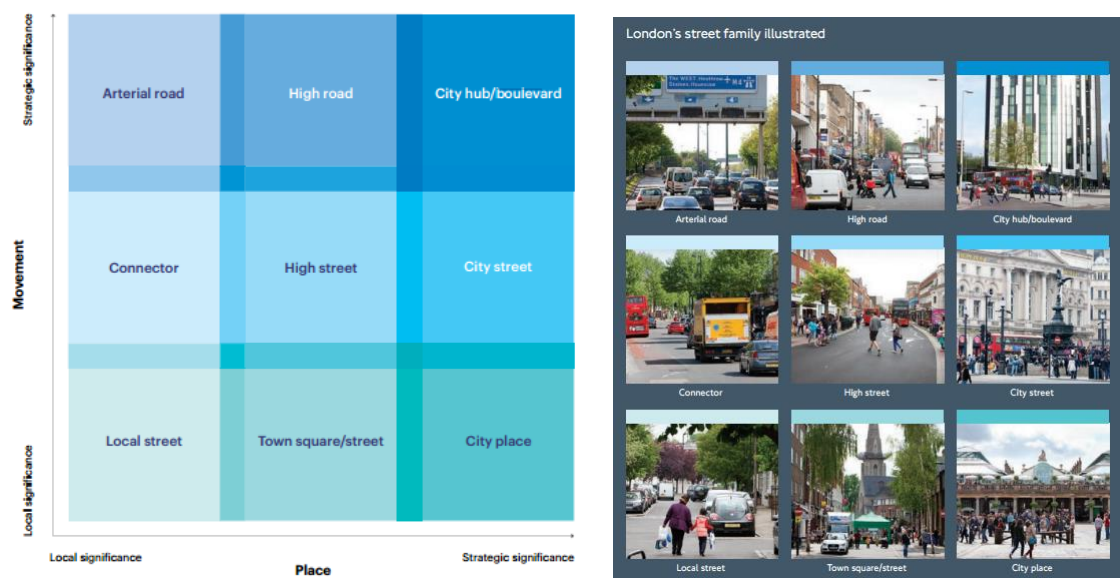
As is well known London has a network of 'red routes' – primary arterial roads leading into the city or making important linear connections.

Figure ii – London's red routes



Within TfL's snappily titled 'RTF street types matrix', below, we see how an arterial road, when it is a better place, is deemed to become first a high road and then (best of all) a 'boulevard' or 'City Hub'

Figure iii – TfL's street type matrix



The boulevard has both a high place function and a high movement function. What this means is that it has a lot of people moving through it but also a lot of people coming to visit it. It is important for getting from A to B. It is also a nice place to be in itself. TfL say that *“Successful city hubs/boulevards should provide vibrant focal points for business and culture. They should*

reduce the impact of high traffic volumes while accommodating high pedestrian flows, bus access and essential traffic”

Boulevards *can* provide beautiful and much-loved places, without sacrificing the connectivity that a city needs to thrive. There is a really good exploration of this in the excellent book *Street Design* by Victor Dover and John Massengale. Paris is famous for its boulevards, which also feature midrise housing that gives central Paris a very high density. However, the boulevard as defined by TfL doesn't always quite measure up. Some of the examples of boulevards in London they give are Euston Road, Kingston Town Centre and Elephant and Castle. These are very important for transport, but potentially also destinations, and places to live, love and admire in themselves. Are they serving that role at present? And why not 'upgrade' miles of arterial road into boulevards? It may not be possible everywhere but, we believe, it will be possible quite a lot.

It isn't just about quality. It's about intensity of use as well. Arterial roads are (or should be) well connected with public transport. Perhaps their biggest potential therefore lies in their potential to be centres for increased densities of housing. Boulevards should be desirable, and should therefore be places that people want to live. But how can we unlock the housing potential of our arterial roads? How can we upgrade them from arterial roads to boulevards?

The opportunity: housing

Riding into or out of London on the top of a bus or that other well-known form of transport, Google Street-view, reveals a startling number of service stations, car parks and low and unloved, under-invested buildings.

We don't pretend to have calculated it specifically for arterial roads (does anyone know of any?) but the potential for more homes, more height, for more flats above shops, more sense of place is clearly non trivial. As figure iv shows, however, the potential for a series of ugly, blocky, unloved, locally-resisted, polluted developments is just as great.

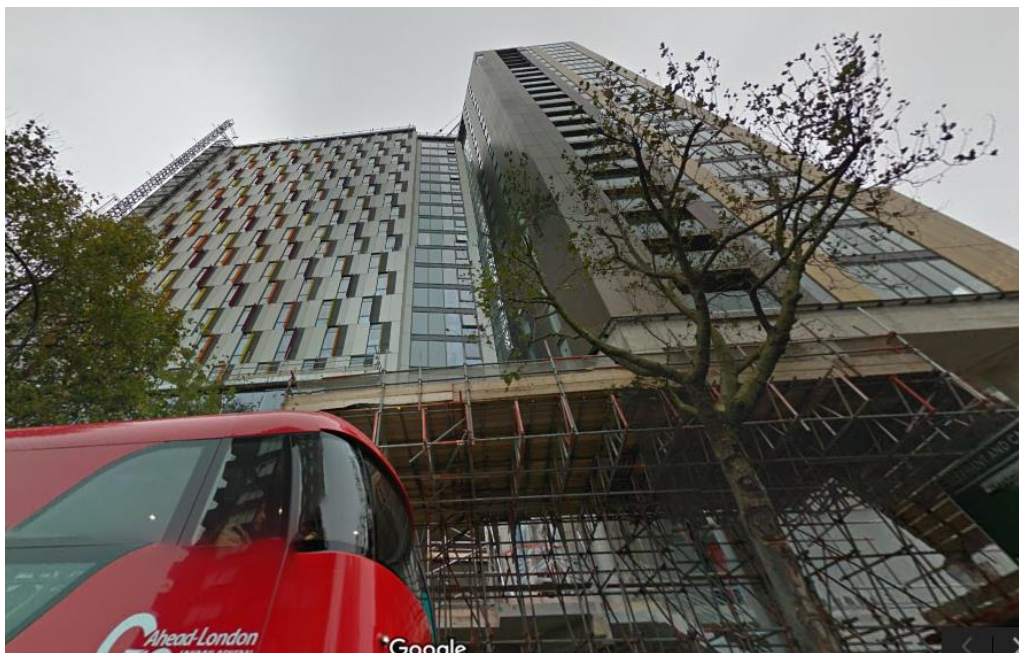
This matters because Create Streets' research has shown that people tend to support new housing far more if they like the look of it. We know from our polling with MORI (as well as from our work with community groups across London) that one of the most remarkably easy ways to win popular local support for a development is *to propose something that people like*.² Funny that. For example, at the Mount Pleasant site in central London our proposed urban form is actually denser than the consented proposal but gets between 95 and 99% local support because it 'fits in' with narrow urban streets and a small central circus. Tellingly one developer said of our initial plans, "Very beautiful, you'll never get planning permission."

If boulevards are to be places to go to as well as places of movement they need to be worth looking at. They need to be popular rather than necessarily victims of officially-decreed good design. (We'll come to traffic). If the local population are not just to support systemic intensification of use but to actively campaign for it then they will need to have confidence that what they want to get, what they've been told they will get is what they are actually going to get. For a strategic and dramatically sped up programme of intensification some level of populist pre-approval will therefore be necessary. This will need popular consent and confidence. We believe that the evidence shows that co-design, direct planning and form-based codes with clear images not just planning or developers' mouthwash about 'good design' or 'appropriate place-making' would be the most effective way to achieve this.³

² See Boys Smith, N (2016), *A Direct Planning Revolution for London*, p. 6.

³ See Boys Smith N, (2015), *Briefing on the Direct Planning (Pilot) Bill* and Boys Smith N, (2016), *A Direct Planning Revolution for London?*

Figure iv – The Old Kent Road: full of potential for beautiful intensification and for ugly blocks



The opportunity: traffic

But of course it is not just about buildings. It's about use and it's about traffic as well. Many years ago before the car became predominant in western societies, the street was an attractive setting for the richness of urban life. Over time the street became the road, and the purpose of so much of this urban space was reduced merely to answering the question of how the maximum possible amount of cars could be moved through it. The result is that many roads that once could have been described as boulevards are now very different. Finchley Road in north London is one. As these photos of the road in the mid-1960s and in 2016 show, it used to have a very different feel even 50 years ago.

Now, instead of the large, wide, attractive pavements of the past, the carriageway has been widened and more and more traffic lanes have been put in. The constant and dominating roar of traffic overshadows any other interesting aspect of the street. As multiple research demonstrates overly heavy traffic can have a major impact on community cohesion.⁴

⁴ See *The Wellbeing of Place*, forthcoming from Create Streets.

Figure v – Finchley Road



We can see that even roads that *might* qualify as London boulevards tend to lack any real place-making infrastructure or characteristics. 2016's Finchley Road, despite the retention of the architecturally striking facades, is not a particularly desirable place to live. However, the housing pressure in London means that a place like Finchley Road could still be vulnerable to a new development that could drastically alter the existing qualities of the street (the red-brick upper storeys) without tackling the actual problem of the street, namely the erosion of the attraction of Finchley road as a place to be on the ground level and in the road.

The opportunity: trams and express busses

Of course people need to move along these arterial roads. Traffic can't just magically disappear – particularly in expanding modern London. Despite dramatic, and welcome, extension of bus and cycle lanes over the last decade travelling by bus remains too frequently too slow and unpredictable. Might it be time for London to take its bus revolution to the next stage by introducing a network of express buses, electric busses, trams or other innovative light rail along these core arterial roads? How can we lift our ambition and really super-charge their capacity to transport people quickly into London?

Surely London has the scale and need to make this profoundly viable? And are there ways that this could be made cheaper and more deliverable? Here's one idea. At present those building new trams are required to dig up and divert all underground utilities. That adds about 10% to the cost.⁵ But is this actually necessary everywhere? A Government report from 2011 noted that; 'light rail promoters argue that the current legislation may not facilitate the most cost effective decisions on whether to divert apparatus or deal with these through other solutions.' And (with thanks to the Finnish member of the Create Streets network, Timo Hämäläinen), the example of Helsinki's planned Raide-Jokeri light rail service implies they might be right. From a quick outside-in analysis, less than 4% of the full budget will be spent on rearranging utilities and pipes. A full technical appraisal of the feasibility of lower-cost tramways in the UK through a change in approach to underground utilities is obviously far beyond the scope of this paper. But we strongly suspect there would be ways to drive down cost – certainly if building at scale.

Another relatively cheap way to improve public service provisions, which goes hand in hand with a rethink of how we allocate space on our arterial roads, can be seen in Bogota's Transmilenio bus system. This is a rapid-transit bus system that moves more people per hour than many urban public train and subway systems. You buy a ticket, and then enter a dedicated elevated station building, which makes boarding speedy. By taking dedicated lanes

⁵ Department of Transport, (2011), *Green light for light rail*, Section 5.31.

on some of the most important roads in the city it has transformed the city's public system at a fraction of the cost of building a new underground train line.⁶ There is no reason why a more extensive network of express buses, a sort of 'street level tube' could not be introduced in London. One that filled up in Peckham, or further out, and then rode non-stop along the Old Kent Road, directly into the heart of London, for example.

The opportunity: street trees

As Boris Johnson rightly recognised, street trees are a wellbeing and city micro-climate 'no brainer'. Evidence links their presence to safer-driving, fewer accidents and better air quality. They moderate heating and cooling energy use. And people aesthetically prefer streets with trees in them. Above all, and perhaps astonishingly in the complexity of human life, street trees have a measurable effect on human health even taking into account income, age and education. Our forthcoming report, *The Wellbeing of Place*, will provide an up to date summary of the evidence. Recently London has been planting far more trees – the GLA alone has supported the planting of 20,000 over the last eight years, possibly one of Mayor Johnson's greatest and least appreciated achievements. But there is far more that could and should be done. Traffic engineers often dislike trees along busy roads. Sometimes with good reason; often without. Based on a quick scan London's arterial roads will need and could take many thousands more if they are to be places to be and to live as well as places to travel through.

The opportunity: pollution

Trees won't be plantable *en masse* everywhere. And they will clearly be insufficient to overcome current levels of pollution. Nor, we assume, will massively improved light rail be sufficient? What other ideas could improve air quality over the next 5 to 15 years? Banning diesel? Banning lorries other than at certain times? Car free days? We'd welcome ideas – specifically focused on arterial roads which are evolving into London boulevards along which more people live and more people walk.

Our draft proposals for you to consider and respond to...

To get the discussion going, we are proposing a partially community-led programme for the populist beautification and intensification of London's arterial roads with a range of beautiful, popular medium-rise developments with pre-set designs agreed by local communities to permit faster higher development of more homes. We are proposing more trees and an enhanced system of express busses and light rail to cut journey times, reduce pollution and return London's historic arterial roads to their true breadth of purpose and potential for beauty.

We want to turn arterial roads along which you move (probably) in a car to places where more people live, with cleaner air, more trees and with a strategically upgraded surface transport.

These are early-stage ideas. We may have details wrong. Please tell us what you think....

We are proposing;

1. The creation of local, **community-led 'beautification and intensification' companies** (let's call them BICs for now) along some of London's arterial roads. These might be similar in some ways to a Neighbourhood Forum, only more specifically designed with arterial roads in mind. They might have the right to grant:
 - Areas of enhanced permitted development rights
 - Sites for higher density development (especially on empty plots, non-listed buildings etc.)

⁶ Montgomery, C. (2015) Happy City: Transforming our Lives Through Urban Design p.234

- Set design codes for development alongside the government's new Permission in Principle legislation
- Request (or mandate?) TFL to prioritise support for some of these actions.

Where such BICs exist, their policies would form part of local planning policy. This would give them sway on planning issues and give them real weight in interactions with developers / investors / RSLs. Crucially however it would encourage more development. Anyone wanting to build here would know what the community were looking for, and would be able to bring forward plans that adhered to these wishes. At the moment permitted development is unattractive to local communities as they fear being blighted by ugly unsympathetic new buildings that fail to take into account local context, and also exist as individual buildings, rather than fitting into a more holistic, joined-up approach to the character and nature of the streets on which they are built. Providing design codes and pattern books for new buildings on these boulevards will shift the balance of power into the hands of local communities, residents and businesses who will be able to engage proactively rather than merely reactively with the planning system, and thus the quality of their built environment.

2. To support the network of beautification companies, the GLA working with boroughs, TfL and (this bit is utterly crucial) measurable data on what people like should create a **base line pattern and form book for the boulevardisation (sic) of streets** (where wide enough) with central trees, central footpaths and light rail / express bus-ways or electric busses.
 - This could be thought of as a London-wide template. Crucially local BICs would have the ability, through design codes, to tighten up these forms, add detail, and make them particularly sympathetic and appropriate to local contexts. But having this London-wide blueprint would make the process simpler to follow and implement.
 - Narrower roads should have their own pattern and form book that allow some of the characteristics of a boulevard to be implemented
3. **Central government should allow councils to grant the formation of BICs, in a manner similar to Neighbourhood Forums.** However, the current process of becoming a Neighbourhood Forum can be very slow, in part due to the fact that defining a Neighbourhood Area can be time consuming and often contentious between competing Neighbourhood Forums. The formation of BICs can and should be more streamlined, not least because the roads that can become boulevards are much more specifically and clearly defined.
4. **TfL should be instructed by the next mayor to work up a strategy for light rail and express busses along London's arterial roads.** Long term funding mechanisms will need to be worked up. Clearly the provision of enhanced transport will not be a matter for decision at the BIC level – though they could and should call for it.
5. **TfL, working with central government and the GLA, should investigate what opportunities there are to reduce costs for light rail** along the lines of the point we started exploring on under-road utilities.
6. **The GLA should commit to a programme of planting (?) 10,000 trees along London's arterial roads.**

Ultimately a debate would need to be had about the future of our streets: what are they for? Although boulevards have an important movement function, in the 21st century we could be changing the way we think about movement. Boulevards will not be able to prioritise the car above everything else. Where possible (it won't be everywhere of course) trams, cycle lanes

and express buses should dominate the movement function of these boulevards, along with ample pedestrian space, both for purposeful journeys and more leisurely meandering in a pleasant urban environment for the people who will live there.

To do this we would need to think more strategically about what goes on under our roads. Urban Design Group Director Robert Huxford, speaking at a recent Energy Utilities Industry Conference, has called for a better design and management of the space underneath our streets. Huxford pointed out the wastefulness of the current practice: at the moment the approach is “taking a sophisticated and complex array of high pressure gas pipes, high tension cables, coaxial cables, copper wire; optical fibre, water mains and distribution pipes, and numerous connections to properties; burying them in soil, then sealing them in with a surface that is supposed to bear the weight of a 40 tonne heavy goods vehicle, and then when something goes wrong just digging everything up again.”

This means that streets are being permanently dug up, which impacts on our ability to make high quality street surfaces – for one thing the financial cost grows. Huxford believes that we could look to the Georgian era as a model. Back then, town-houses and streets were designed as one, with utilities designed-in. Some of the biggest costs of implementing Trams, for example, come from moving utilities around. But we can also look elsewhere not only in time but in space: in Barcelona they have a series of underground waste disposal systems, in Copenhagen integrated drainage. A more strategic longer term approach to this important but often overlooked element of our streets could bring multiple benefits.

NPPF says that developments should “establish a strong sense of place, using streetscapes and buildings to create attractive and comfortable places to live, work and visit...” “respond to local character and history, and reflect the identity of local surroundings and materials, while not preventing or discouraging appropriate innovation;” and should be “visually attractive as a result of good architecture and appropriate landscaping.” (58)

Design codes for boulevards will help ensure that the positive elements of these words are upheld, and that new developments really are visually attractive, reflect local history and character and establish a strong sense of place.

A call for action, a call for ideas...

Thank you! If you have read this far you are at least slightly interested in what we're starting to say. Now we'd like to ask you for your help with some questions;

- Do you know of any data on housing opportunities on arterial roads?
- What data is there on the width of arterial roads?
- Any thoughts on segmenting roads by nature and level of opportunity?
- What do you think would be the key pitfalls? How might we get round these?
- What else should we be thinking of?
- Do you have any practical suggestions for our proposed BICs, particularly on the interaction with TfL and local boroughs? Or the wider Neighbourhood Planning framework?
- Any (dare we say it...) quick wins?
- Any specific roads would most suit a 'Create Boulevards' approach?
- Finally if you are a community group, local civic society or neighbourhood forum and you are interested in any of these ideas with specific reference to your area please do get in touch..... (excitingly we already know of one)

Please do send through any ideas, suggestions or concerns to kieran@createstreets.com.
Thank you.

Kieran Toms & Nicholas Boys Smith
Create Streets