

# Create Streets

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## **Create Streets lite**

### **Should we be doing more to infill streets ?**

**Gluckman Smith Architects and Nicholas Boys Smith**

#### ***Not just a large scale opportunity***

Most of the work and the analysis Create Streets has done to date has focused on bigger sites. This is quite deliberate. Put simply, we believe the best, most popular, highest-value, most socially just way to 'solve' London's housing crisis is to regenerate at scale; to replace some of the post-war housing estates with networks of higher density conventional streets of flats and terraced houses round a network of squares, crescents and well-overlooked open spaces. Doing so could, we and others estimate, provide between ten and twenty years of London's housing supply.<sup>1</sup> In the long term it would also make great economic sense as the value of conventional streets, squares and circuses only builds with time. Nor do the maintenance costs escalate in the way that they typically do for large multi-storey blocks.

Pragmatically and philosophically, such large scale regeneration would have to be done with local consent – as we have always made clear. Although nearly all developers and many councils and RSLs are very sceptical of community engagement, we remain very firmly of the view that early (and genuine) engagement and a willingness to consider forms, typologies and features that most developments eschew can not just win public consent but unlock public enthusiasm. We believe that the public response to our proposals at Mount Pleasant, where we achieved 99 per cent local support, demonstrates this.<sup>2</sup>

That said, many of our supporters and some of the members of Create Streets have also suggested a range of more modest sites where a few houses of medium rise flats could replace under-used space and start to 'put back together' streets degraded by wasted space or foolish post-war development. Here is one.

For the avoidance of doubt, this is a purely illustrative scheme to demonstrate the potential. We have not spoken to the landowner, to the local authority or to the local community. There are almost certainly local issues of which we are unaware. We are not seeking to develop this land. Nor do we pretend that this

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<sup>1</sup> Our initial analysis suggested about eight years. Boys Smith, N., Morton, A., (2013), *Create Streets*, p.63. More recent analysis (not yet published) has revised this figure very sharply upwards.

<sup>2</sup> Boys Smith, N., Murrain, P., Taylor D, Terry, D (2014), *Mount Pleasant Circus and Fleet Valley Gardens*, pp. 29-32.

is a 'perfect' proposal. For one thing, there is not enough space to make a proper block and so the row of new houses and flats may well be insufficiently secure at the back.

Nevertheless, such sites would be highly commercially viable, even without the massing of high rise flats upon them particularly if the landowner was able to take some partial exposure to their value in the long term.

And there are many such sites. Many (though not all) are consistent with the Mayor of London's draft policy on 'small infill developments' that those of 'degraded environments' such as 'neglected mews and back garages' can be developed to make a 'positive contribution' to a neighbourhood.<sup>3</sup> Above all, we believe these types of developments respect the look and feel of London and the evidence about what types of housing and streets works for real people.<sup>4</sup> This does not mean we believe that infill alone is able to meet London's needs. But where we do infill, this should be along the lines Create Streets suggests, rather than simply *ad hoc* cramming of high density flats onto existing sites.

### ***Portland Street, west of the Aylesbury Estate***

Immediately to the west of the Aylesbury Estate in South London fewer than a dozen streets survive the post war re-building. Initially developed as a series of modest two storey terraces immediately after the Napoleonic wars (with names such as Trafalgar Road and Cadiz Street), the area was largely redeveloped at the behest of the landowner, the Church Commissioners, in the first decade of the twentieth century.



*Portland Street: successful high density living in South East London . . . and the obverse (the Aylesbury Estate) behind it*

Octavia Hill was closely involved and a series of Arts and Crafts affordable cottages and modest three storey flats are now the main building type, with a scattering of older buildings from the mid or early nineteenth century. Almost all, Regency or Edwardian, are built from London stock bricks. To the west is one of John Soane's surviving churches, St Peter's, where 65 residents were

<sup>3</sup> Mayor of London, (2011), *Housing Draft Supplementary Planning Guidance*, p.23.

<sup>4</sup> Homes and Communities Agency (2009), *Previously-developed land that may be suitable for housing*, p. 3.

killed in 1940 when two German bombs penetrated to the crypt in which they were sheltering. To the north the high tower blocks of the Portland Estate cast long shadows. To the east and the south the huge grey slabs of the, soon to be toppled, Aylesbury Estate glower over the streets like misshapen ocean liners.

Although the area was designated as the Liverpool Grove conservation area in 1982, it is neither a fashionable enclave of middle class residents nor a well-studied example of how to deal with the challenges which still face many nearby estates. And yet it has all the answers in its safe streets and complex mix of occupation types. According to the police crime website, two crimes were committed in April 2012 on Portland Street. On nearby Beaconsfield Road, in the heart of the Aylesbury Estate, there were ten.<sup>5</sup> Residents include owner-occupiers, private tenants and social tenants. A slow but steady stream of houses and flats appear on the private market at reasonable, but not cheap, prices. Only a few hundred yards from tower-blocks to the north and slab-blocks to the east and south it would not be exaggerating to call the area an enclave of peace and normality in a troubled urban landscape.



*Surprisingly similar densities – Woodsford Tower surrounded by public space and the terraced housing of Portland Street with small private gardens*

### ***What you could do (if there was local support)***

Surely the rational thing to do would be to extend these streets into the troubled zone around them - mimicking their scale and texture to the north, the south and east ? One opportunity exists to do so even without the Portland Estate being demolished. In the early 1980s a section of Octavia Hill's development was swept away to extend Faraday Gardens. Thirty years on however this newly created space has been entirely wasted. It is used merely as tarmac footpath surrounding a sports ground. Nor can passersby see the back of the elegant St Peter's Church. This is hidden by trees and a local primary school. By moving the sports ground through ninety degrees and

<sup>5</sup> [www.police.uk/crime](http://www.police.uk/crime) accessed on 4 June 2012.



by narrowing one of the tarmac paths surrounding it, as shown below, a terrace of nine generous four storey houses could be created exactly where there used to be homes before. The three trees on the pavement could even be maintained *in situ*. We estimate that if half of these buildings were sold privately and half maintained the development would not just self-fund but leave a comfortable landowner's profit to reinvest into other schemes or into supporting social tenancies. From the south the only lost vista is of the questionable charms of Woodsford Tower.



*Portland Street and Faraday Gardens, SE17 showing site of former buildings now wasted*



*Portland Street and Faraday Gardens, SE17 with street reinstated and no loss of local amenity – though back of gardens is not ideal*

The images below show a development of nine four storey houses. They are clearly contemporary. However, they are built of the locally dominant London stock bricks, reference the simple and elegant bay windows in the nearby Edwardian buildings and pay clear homage to some of the earliest surviving early nineteenth century terraced houses south of the church and on Cadiz Street. They have balconies on the first floor and third floors and could function either as single and spacious self-contained house or as two reasonably generous two storey maisonettes. Every building has a garden. All address the street with balconies and large windows. The street after they were built would feel even safer and more 'observed' than it does at present. It would also feel more complete with the presence of the tower blocks of the Portland Estate more thoroughly obscured than at present.

That said, it should also be recognised that there are limits to the site and to what can be done. Most critically, the backs of the gardens would face into a public space. This is not ideal and is not correlated with the lowest levels of crime. A more wholesale development of the blocks to the north could avoid this limitation but, then again, would bring with it many other difficulties and challenges.

The proposed development is four storeys not two or three. Nor is it exact simulacrum of the predominant Edwardian development type. Building slightly higher improves the economics by increasing the amount of floor space without subverting the local scale or undermining the functioning of the buildings and the street. However, if local residents or Southwark Council preferred, three storey buildings which matched more exactly Octavia Hill's developments would also be viable.

If this modest development 'worked' and was popular it could then be extended north on both sides of Portland Street when the Portland estate needs to be removed. For a limited loss of little used communal green space (although much of Faraday Gardens could be preserved) a whole community could move from tower block to street. More families could be appropriately housed with private gardens and there would be infinitely more chance of a flourishing mixed community of social tenants, private tenants and owner-occupiers. There is no reason, one day, why the Liverpool Grove conservation area could not be extended to the north reflecting a third generation of early twenty first century much loved terraced houses and low-rise flats.



*Portland Street and Faraday Gardens, SE17 at present with clear view from the South of the towers of the Portland Estate*



*Portland Street and Faraday Gardens, SE17 with nine terraced houses replacing a tarmac path and the original street reinstated*

### ***About the authors***

**Gluckman Smith Architects** was founded in 2010 by principals Robert Gluckman and Thomas Smith. The practice has established an expertise in working with residential projects in central London often in a historic context. Gluckman Smith aims to achieve a 'mindful' approach to their work, producing imaginative and intelligent designs and architecture. Sustainability is an integral part of their design approach.

**Nicholas Boys Smith** is the director of Create Streets. He has written, lectured and spoken widely on issues to do with the built environment.