

Create Streets

The Mayor is dead. Long live the Mayor.

Why and how the new Mayor of London has the mandate and, potentially, the policy platform to change fundamentally the politics of London house-building

So that's it. The Mayoralty of Mayor Johnson is over. Boris the brand is no longer part of the London product suite. Boris the man, the blonde bombshell, Catullus-citing, Labour-baiting, verbally prolix phenomenon is still for this world. But his self-propelled peculiar (and powerful) verbal blunderbuss is now on manoeuvres elsewhere, lobbing grenades into the garden of Number Ten rather than ratting and riling his City Hall opponents with his confidence and (worst of all) his undeniable popularity. London's Labour politicians will be pleased to see the back of him. He was that most unwished of adversaries: a populist who read ancient Greek.

So what does the future hold for Mayor Khan and for London? What does it hold for the campaign (of which Create Streets is a part) to build more dramatically new homes in London by radically changing the level of popular consent for new homes and neighbourhoods.

Even his allies admitted that Mayor Johnson's Achilles heel was his record on housing. Sure, homebuilding grew on his watch (from 21,000 per year in 2008, to 31,900 in 2015) but that was partly growing out of recession (in 2005 27,000 new homes were built). Sure, Boris did some good things improving and systematising design. In particular, his work to promote and encourage the 'New London Vernacular' has been praised by many. Characterized by brick cladding, many front doors and Georgian-scaled (though not styled) windows, with recessed balconies one recent rave review in [CityLab](#), praised it for employing 'the key building block of traditional British architecture recognized around the world—the cornerstone of Georgian garden squares, Victorian terraces, dockside warehouses and mansion blocks.'

Others, however, are less convinced and fear that too cheaply and monotonously built it will not age well. Worse, many of Boris' regulations interact with the National Planning Policy Framework, housing and building regulations and borough plans in such a way as to make it hard to build 'finely-grained' high density normal streets. For example, guidance on light levels means that the historic built form of inner London would struggle to get permission to be built today. One comment from an experienced professional on our (highly popular and high density) scheme at Mount Pleasant was 'Very beautiful, it will never get planning permission.' This is ridiculous. The denizens of Earls Court or Islington are clearly not all suffering from rickets. In addition Boris performed a *volte face* on tall buildings - the number of towers higher than 20 storeys proposed for London is now more than 400. This is not necessary to achieve housing targets and just stokes up popular resistance to new developments for the price of a surprisingly small number of, largely luxury, homes.

On top of this there's been little clarity or consistency on affordable housing. Developers are allowed to include either the price paid for land, or an assessment of its value based on comparable evidence, which results in the total cost of development including land being higher. Planners then allow a reduction in the provision of affordable homes to increase the end value of the development, rather than insisting on policy compliant provision. This means that there is an incentive for developers to overpay for land in the hope of negotiating a reduced provision of affordable homes. This leads to land prices higher than a true 'residual' approach would produce. These are effectively being supported by an under-provision of affordable homes.

Mayor Khan has a clear mandate to stop this nonsense. How can he? How should he go about it? The good news is that we believe that implemented in the right way Mr Khan's manifesto pledges could not just deliver more affordable housing (his clear and powerfully-supported priority) but also help change fundamentally the political dynamics on the amount of land that can be developed. The GLA should not just be asking 'how do we build more homes?' It should also be asking 'how do we make new homes more popular?' This can help systematically build more homes and more affordable homes. If he wishes the mayor could rise to this challenge. We profoundly and passionately hope that he does. And we certainly pledge ourselves to help him and the GLA as best we can. Mayor Khan has the mandate. And he potentially has the policy platform. But, as always, the devil is in the detail and what some of his manifesto pledges actually mean really matters.

Here are some specific thoughts on his pledges and how he might implement them to maximum effect.

Homes for Londoners. The Mayor has pledged to create *'Homes for Londoners – a new and powerful team at the heart of City Hall – and building an alliance of all those with a stake in building new homes for Londoners.'* Quite right. This is good and some version of this was a common pledge to several candidates. We have also argued for this. And we are really pleased to see that 'residents' organisations' are included. It should also include developers or designers who properly understand how to work with and engage local residents to build popular housing with strong local support. Everyone says they know how to do this. Not everyone does. There was a good nuance in Sian Berry's Green manifesto to *'provide a Community Homes Unit of experts in planning and project development in City Hall to help communities and small builders develop their plans'* It might be worth stealing?

Developing public sector land. It is also right that Homes for Londoners is going to focus on assembling land and *'building on brownfield public land.'* As our manifesto, [A Direct Planning Revolution for London](#), has shown the public sector estate is huge. The GLAs role as a direct supplier of its own land is coming to an end. It now needs to transform its role into an enabler for the sensible development of the extensive wider public sector land bank. There is a huge and emerging risk that doing so will just replicate a previous generation's errors and build huge blocks that either work well for luxury housing (with high maintenance costs) and far less well for mixed communities when the rental income is insufficient. This is already happening. Some blocks less than ten years old are already having [major problems](#) and will need to be pulled down. And look at what has been built at half a dozen misconceived estate regenerations or the very alarming plans emerging at Old Oak Common. Homes for Londoners needs to end this madness and develop, with residents, the sort of mixed normal community that can work for everyone and for the long term.

Affordable homes. The Mayor's pledge on affordability is very significantly less precise than some of his earlier rhetoric. He promises to *'support councils to enforce clear, new rules to maximise the affordable housing in new developments, with greater transparency around viability assessments, and the option to set local affordable housing targets.'* Create Streets does not get involved in detailed debates on appropriate definitions of affordability as our focus is on urban form. However, two points are so important that they are worth making. One of the key problems with the British planning and development process is its lack of certainty and predictability. This means that the good news is that more clarity and certainty on affordable housing could be very helpful. The bad news however is that if developers have bought land on the expectation of lower affordable housing levels a new higher requirement will make development for them very unprofitable. There must therefore be a risk of many developments getting frozen as landowners hunker down. Careful footwork will be required.

Income not sales receipts. The new Mayor is spot on arguing for *'using public land creatively to generate future income'* and that we should *'use City Hall as a platform to attract institutional investors, pension and other investment funds to finance homes for long term, secure rent.'* Several councils such as Hackney are learning how to do this rather than just working with conventional house builders. The GLA needs to learn from them. So do other boroughs and Housing Associations who continue to say they are building for the long term while choosing a delivery and partner model which is anything but. We have seen some real horrors very recently. Our forthcoming report, *Creating Streets for London*, will also explore this theme and give practical examples in more detail.

Estate regeneration and working with communities. The mayor is very very right to *'require that estate regeneration only takes place where there is resident support, based on full and transparent consultation, and that demolition is only permitted where it does not result in a loss of social housing, or where all other options have been exhausted, with full rights to return for displaced tenants and a fair deal for leaseholders.'* However far more clarity is required on what this means in practice. As the GLA's own 2015 Housing Committee report found too often consultation is a faked exercise in *post hoc* rationalisation. There is good research showing that working collaboratively with communities not only improves the design. It improves public support as well. In this spirit, the Mayor has promised that *'as London's population grows it is vital that we look at developing new forms of housing to meet the future needs of the capital, such as community land trusts.'* This is right but again the new mayor should go further. Supporting other ways for communities to take the lead in development in conjunction with professionals will only increase support for new housing in practice above all outside traditional inner city Labour heartlands. How can co-design techniques such as charrettes and form-based design codes be used to bring greater public support and certainty to the delivery of new homes? Caroline Pidgeon argued for *'giving local community groups the right to bid for public sector land or buildings left unused or unoccupied for more than two years.'* This idea as well might be worth appropriating? On the same subject what will be the trade off between full regeneration and infill? Infill can be faster and less controversial. But is also typically generates far fewer new homes. Full regeneration takes longer but typically provides far more new homes. At the London-wide level, both are necessary. What will be decision-making matrix between them?

Homes and transport. The new Mayor is right to argue for *'long-term planning for new and affordable homes tied in with new transport infrastructure'* but wrong merely to think in terms of mega-projects such as the DLR or Bakerloo Line extensions. As our recent discussion paper, [Create Boulevards](#), has argued there is a huge amount that can and should be done to improve street-level transport as well. Express busses; new trams. This can support new homes and intensification of use.

Character and good design. The Mayor's manifesto wrote that *'it is important that we do more to protect the character of London's communities while delivering the new and affordable homes we need to cope with a rising population. I will put good design and sustainability at the heart of the London Plan.'* It is impossible to argue with these words but they could mean precisely anything. Maybe the mayor's policy team have not had to time to think about it. Maybe they have but they did not judge it worth putting in the manifesto. Given how much opinionated non-empirical rubbish is talked about 'good design' and 'sustainable design' it would be more reassuring to see the new Mayor talking about 'popular design' and a determination to see design linked to an empirical understanding of design's links with wellbeing, community cohesion, happiness and long term value and economic growth.

Popular design can reduce opposition to new housing by half. Surely the London Plan should be encouraging it?

Towers? Both London's previous mayors have succumbed to the guiles of the *grand project*. Will our third mayor do the same despite the evidence against towers as a good place to live for the majority of people? He has promised to *'include stronger policies to ensure tall buildings respect the character of existing neighbourhoods.'* Again this could mean anything or nothing. Sir Eddy Lister, Boris' deputy mayor and the apostle of high rise, would certainly argue that that is what London has been doing. Many would disagree. Towers have their place but they can also and do also encourage anti-development resistance while delivering remarkable few homes for their unpopularity. In policy terms, they are a very bad bang for your buck.

Towers are less energy efficient and best-suited to housing the rich whose rents and service charges can support their materially higher running costs. Our [Direct Planning Manifesto](#) made a series of specific recommendations on ways in which a mayor of London could use his powers of call in to ensure towers are popular and supported

Intensifying London. There are lots of places where London can be intensified and improved to provide more homes, more workplaces and more activity. We have argued for this ourselves and a forthcoming report will examine it in detail. So the new Mayor is very right to have argued for *'developing appropriate design principles to build up areas around town centres across the capital.'* We welcome this. But if we want intensifying the suburbs to work *en masse*, it will have to be locally supported. We would argue not just for vague 'principles' but for robust form-based design codes to establish a clear upper limit for intensifying development but also an urban form that is provably popular.

Access standards. The Mayor has pledged to *'retain in the London Plan targets for all new homes to meet Lifetime Homes standards and 10 per cent of new homes to be wheelchair accessible.'* Technically, this pledge is out of date. Lifetime Homes standards have now been superseded as a possible reference point and changes in national building regulations are obliging a series of detailed changes in the London Plan. These have attracted widespread [criticism](#) in the industry for the malign impact they are having on the economics of low and medium rise development. As these are implemented clearly the mayor cannot go back on the spirit of this pledge even if he cannot meet it in the actuality. That's a shame as it will make it harder to deliver high density and popular developments. It may also lead to less good health outcomes. As US evidence is beginning to show overly regulated access arrangements also lead to less good physical health outcomes for older residents. Nevertheless other detailed rules or guidance (for example on light) can and should still be revisited to make it easier to build the sort of low-rise, high density, street-based developments which most people prefer and which can be built more efficiently for better mixed use communities

Making London streets cleaner and better. Finally, it's not really homes but it's certainly places. Why not adopt some excellent ideas in defeated rivals' proposals to make London a better city to live in? For example Sian Berry argued for:

- Ensuring we have people-friendly street projects in every London borough to support better local town and village centres. These should be led by local communities who want to see the benefits of reduced traffic levels; and
- Bringing in 'Car-Free Sundays', starting with an expanding area of the West End, and encourage all London boroughs to follow suit in their town centres.

There are excellent examples of the brilliant impact that similar policies have had on foreign cities from Paris to Bogota. London is big enough and self-confident enough to follow their

lead. And Caroline Pidgeon, newly elected Chair of the GLA Transport Committee, could be a good ally in some of these actions to improve London for very modest (if any) cost.

So will it work? Mayor Khan certainly has the mandate. And he potentially has the policy platform. Let's hope that in the weeks and months to come he is well advised so that his detailed implementation supports his undoubtedly bold vision and his unerringly boundless energy.

Nicholas Boys Smith

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