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How to build better places

James Wildblood

Urban places are popular. Think of where the world likes to go on holiday, and it is the great cities that attract millions of visitors. It isn't only the larger international ones people want to spend time in either. Small, densely packed urbanism seems just as popular – found in towns like Rye on the south coast of England or Bruges just across the North Sea. There's also no denying that Britain, and southeast England in particular, is in need of a lot more urbanism for its rapidly growing population. Well that's OK then, all we need to do is create the types of places that we pay good money to spend time in, and we can provide enough new homes to alleviate the shortage. It is a central conundrum that if urbanity is popular, then why can't new urban places be popular?

But everyone knows it doesn't work like that, or at least it doesn't seem to have worked like that for the last seventy years. Milton Keynes supposed rehabilitation aside, none of the centrally-planned post-war New Towns has become a byword for aspirational living. A RIBA report found two thirds of people would not even consider buying a new home, despite their obvious advantages of improved energy efficiency and maintenance costs. This is pretty staggering - imagine another industry where the majority of consumers shunned the latest product for the older version.

Why are people so turned off by developers' products? Well, they score very low on the features that people rate highest. Research from Savills shows that a property's 'external appearance' is surpassed only by 'neighbourhood' in a potential home buyer's considerations. Modern homes tend to be 'featureless boxes' located in dormitory neighbourhoods that lack the facilities and feel of established areas. Interiors rarely compensate for this – the UK has officially the meanest floor-space for new homes in Western Europe, 21% smaller than the average and half the size of a new build in Denmark. Look outside again and there's little cheer either. The spacious front and back gardens of the typical 60s Bellway suburb have given way to shared car parks, metre-deep front gardens and back yards designed to be just about big enough for a child's trampoline.

What people want, and what developers and local authorities want, has never been more divergent. Most people would prefer to live in a house rather than a flat (in a recent poll only 3% expressed a desire to live in a block with more than 10 units), but the percentage of new houses being built has fallen from 81% to 57% of total new builds after 2002, representing a massive increase in flat building. Tall buildings are also unpopular. 56% of Londoners would not be happy to live in a tall building, versus 27% who would (Ipsos-Mori, 2014), yet the number of buildings of 20 or more storeys planned for the capital is in the high 200s, which is an increase of over 1000% on what was built in the past five years. The vast majority of these are residential. Of course there's demand out there for such high rise towers, but no-one pretends that these are anything other than investment products.

Why is this stuff being built?

The odd thing is, disagreement about what types of urban environments work best has diminished rapidly since the work of 70s urbanists like Jane Jacobs. Given that we all know what types of places are most valuable, it seems strange that they aren't making them anymore. Looking at where values are highest supports the case for dense, low- to mid-rise street-based urbanism. In London, Kensington and Chelsea is the exemplar, with the 2nd highest population density in the country. Yet the myth still propagates that tall buildings are a prerequisite for achieving high densities. Of course tall buildings can achieve very high densities, but then only the wealthy are willing and able to afford to pay for the true costs of maintaining them.

The problem is also that in the very short term investment horizons of most developers, street-based schemes are less valuable than hyper-dense monolithic blocks, and chronic under-supply only adds to the short-term illusion of value for big ugly buildings.

Outside London – which has additional layers of dysfunction – the planning system provides very little concrete protection against unsuitable development. That is not to say that ensuring local appropriateness and good design hasn't functioned reasonably well when left to local planners in the past. However this well-exercised discretion has run up against the urgency of the housing crisis, and abetted by liberalising tweaks to the planning system, it has become one of the first things to be sacrificed in the quest for volume.

Visit a handful of local newspaper websites covering most regions of England and you'll soon find stories of villages feeling under siege from aggressive developers. In this pressurised environment it is almost impossible to stop a development because of its ugliness or destructiveness to local character. Why not instigate a rule that any development should not increase the housing stock in a parish by more than a certain percentage over a given time period? Such a simple measure would make people feel more certain about how their neighbourhoods will grow in the future and it would alleviate concerns about local services and road congestion. Sadly the discretionary planning process pushes against the notion of having clear and unambiguous rules.

London

In London in addition, extremely strong demand and the shortage of supply has exaggerated the worst aspects of the system. The relationship between planning authorities and developers has become extremely unhealthy and lopsided; councils rely on developers for delivering the affordable homes they need, so agree to more and more inappropriate schemes to deliver the numbers. Developers in turn see this weakness and land prices get bid up in the expectation that ever higher-density proposals will be allowed. But this is where the snake begins to eat its own tail, for the colossal land prices are factored in to developers' viability assessments for the appropriate density and affordable provision of a site. Developers use the inflated price they paid for land to justify both ever denser/taller schemes and ever less affordable housing provision. Clever!

If it couldn't get any worse, consider also the huge disparity in resources between a developer and a local authority and the (usually one-way) revolving door between the human resources departments of the planning department and the large development companies. No wonder the whole ridiculously expensive bureaucracy is referred to as 'the planning game'.

As a starting point viability tests could be restructured so as to discount land prices or take into account long-term value. Developers could also be made to fund better expert advice for

planning departments. But this wouldn't help where the system has become the facilitator for, rather than the mediator of, developer ambition. In a particularly egregious recent example this has gone as far as using legal loopholes to push through a 75 storey tower block in East London. The proposed development severely interferes with its neighbours' rights to light and the developer would be forced to provide compensation under a statute dating from 1832. To get round this inconvenience the local authority has offered to buy the site in order to use another unrelated statute to abrogate these rights, before transferring ownership back to the developer. A £5 million payment towards affordable housing is due under the conditions of the planning permission.

In London's four corners, a ground war is being fought by local residents against mega schemes that pay no respect to an area's individual character: Earl's Court, Bishopsgate goods yards, Mount Pleasant sorting office, the Aylesbury and Heygate estates – all have their individual complexities but are united by the lack of meaningful consultation and accountability to local opinion.

What type of regeneration?

Regeneration of low-density but high-rise council estates could be a huge opportunity to provide additional housing supply whilst re-creating popular and beautiful street-based neighbourhoods without the need permanently to move out sitting social tenants. An estimated 2 million households across the country live on sites like these, which could be redeveloped to the same densities as the surviving surrounding streets. A study Create Streets conducted on a possible infill site in South London shows just how wasteful public bodies have been with land, and what great potential even small sites offer.

There is evidence of good practice in some areas particularly outside London, but planning rules often make it hard to build normal houses in streets and in effect encourage multi-storey blocks (see our October 2013 report). For instance planners' reluctance to accept a reduction in the provision of open space means a development that aims to replace the typical point block tower set in masses of unloved grassland has very few options. An analysis of a row of new terraced homes in London shows how the numerous regulations of the London Housing Design Guide have a cumulative effect of reducing space efficiency by up to 30% compared to equivalent Georgian terraced houses. So 21 highly sought-after Georgian properties occupy the same street frontage as 16 of the new builds.

Create Streets looked at 18 of the largest and best known estate regeneration projects currently underway or recently completed in London, and found that far from seeking to reinstate the densities of surrounding streets, at 171% these sites had an average density increase that far surpassed them. The increase in maximum building height came in at 237%. It was only in the one project that didn't rely on developer finance where this increase was a more reasonable 33%, from six storeys to eight. (See our report from March 2014).

As more councils wake up to the untapped potential of their ageing estates, the danger grows that quick-fix solutions could, through a series of benign compromises and expediencies, come to resemble the systems-building disasters of the 1960s and 1970s. In the absence of a set of clear rules for the regeneration process, there is evidence of extremely flimsy resident consultation and the deliberate running-down of building stock to justify demolition and rebuild.

A final note of pessimism: expert design guidance can often be at great variance to popular taste. This was well captured in work by the director of the Behavioural Insights Team, David Halpern, where two groups of students were tested on their aesthetic preferences by presenting them with images of different dwellings. The first group – architecture students –

shared very similar preferences, but as a group they were strongly inversely correlated to those of non-architecture students. A test on professional architects and other professionals yielded similar results. Halpern concludes: 'the normal training of architects fosters the development of divergent aesthetic preferences.'

Conclusion

The housing crisis is a many-headed hydra and can be tackled in a great many ways. Thinking about the whole planning system itself, a radical change would be to reconsider the principle that development is not allowed unless specific permission is granted. For landowners to have absolutely no right to develop unless it is allowed by the planning authority has come under great strain and vulnerable to centralised political interference.

Protection of neighbours and the environment could be achieved by laying down a set of parameters to which landowners can refer in advance, confident that they can build unchallenged. This is normal in many parts of the world. To be able to develop so long as plans comply with a local plan would liberate thousands of small builders and provide better peace-of-mind to communities. Statutory rights to light and other amenity could be more vigorously defended, this would establish a direct relationship between neighbours to enable negotiated development.

Blandly calling for 'high quality design' in a document like the London Plan clearly has no impact in the current circumstances. Other countries have more innovative ways of ensuring good design. In Norway for example, a percentage of the build cost of certain public buildings must be spent on art, loosely defined. It would be similarly possible to stipulate that a certain percentage of build cost be spent on a building's façade – a much easier and more certain way of ensuring quality design than vague appeals buried in the volumes of planning bureaucracy.

Buildings whose scale, massing and height are far above the average of a particular neighbourhood could easily come under much more assured and objective evaluation. After all, they are concrete measurables which could be subjected to threshold tests for local referenda, specific regulation, or compensation for affected neighbours. Instead of being items to horse-trade over between developers and planners whilst everyone else sits on the side lines, a resident-led local plan could decide how they are treated so landowners know in advance what would be acceptable. Good design could be encouraged through the tax system, with reliefs for buildings that are popular in a community, or premiums for those that cause detriment.

As Alain de Botton has pointed out, we know what makes for good urbanism. But by the confluence of many complex factors – which are by no means all covered in this article – what we get can often be its opposite. The result can sometimes be as disastrous as the Woolwich Central development, recent winner of the architecture's ugly prize the Carbuncle Cup. To behold Woolwich Central is to disbelieve that the UK actually has a planning system at all. Short-term need for volume and the short-term investment horizons of big developers has become a toxic mix and is putting the fabric of communities at risk.

James Wildblood runs a business consultancy having previously run a retail business. He has recently finished a Masters at UCL specialising in urbanism and architectural history.

Creates Streets is a social enterprise encouraging the creation of more urban homes in conventional, terraced streets rather than complex multi-storey buildings. We do this via research, arguing for policy change and consulting to developers and landowners. We are members of the Government's Design Panel. Find out more about our work here.