

Equality of beauty is a pernicious myth

Take the designations of the heritage sector and apply them to land

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The enforced departure of Sir Roger Scruton as chairman of the weirdly named '*Building Better Building Beautiful Commission*' is a reminder that words and opinions can be regarded as ugly. Sir Roger proved to have more intelligence than judgement in his unfortunate remarks about various groups which led to his dismissal. These days it is a mistake in public life to say anyone is better or worse than someone else. We are all equally beautiful.

Unfortunately, the idea that everything has the same quality is alive and well in the planning system, not least in relation to Green Belt and Metropolitan Open Land. The one is equally green, the other equally open. Thus prohibitions on building on their hallowed turfs are strict and, in some ways, getting stricter. For example, the draft London Plan makes it very clear that development on said sites will be resisted by the Mayor and indeed that he would use his powers to reverse any approval given by a local planning authority.

This is a mistake. The idea that all sites given GB or MOL designations have equal value can be rapidly disproved with reference to sites within London's boundaries that are now frozen from being used for housing development, for example. My favourite MOL was always the area next to Hungerford Bridge which, for decades, was used as a surface car park. There are countless examples of sites which could be GB but are in fact 'brownfield', and there is plenty of GB land that could be de-designated – and not given the sacred cow status specified in the London Plan.

There would be a simple way to address this issue, which would be to take the designations of the heritage sector and apply them to land: that is to say Grades I, II* and II. This would imply that it would be impossible to build on the highest graded sites but there would be a case in principle on lesser sites. One might add to this the possibility of improving an unlisted site in return for permission on something that is listed Grade II.

The payoff in London could be considerable, because there are housing schemes which could be contemplated on or next to sites which are currently incapable of development. It would be part of the drive to encourage London to house its future population within its own boundaries, rather than continuing with the dubious policy of boroughs buying up blocks in what they use as overspill towns such as Harlow or Crawley.

London can intensify, but it needs to rationalise the dormant assets at its disposal. ■

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Pyrrhic losses

The useless, time-wasting fighting over viability needs to stop

“We certainly wouldn’t be building this particular scheme now if we’d had to meet the Mayor’s new 50 per cent affordable housing guidelines,” said the developer.

An anecdote from a recent site visit where the developer concerned had been required to preserve and renew industrial/distribution uses on sites and had been given permission to convert the rest of the factory site into new private-for-sale and “affordable” housing.

“We would have included a lot less homes and gone for more distribution uses because they are now more profitable than the housing.”

Here is an indication of what happens to developers’ thinking when the tax on them, to provide housing at unprofitable rates, is increased. They produce less of the unprofitable element. It is a potent disincentive to build homes. The opposite of what’s needed.

It is a very basic factor of housing production, of any form of production, that the more you increase the tax on that activity, the less inclined capital becomes to engage in it.

Sadiq Khan’s new housing SPG introduced in November 2017 is now biting hard on many schemes across the capital that are struggling to find viability. Especially those that involve a public sector, borough partner, where the borough is obliged to deliver 50 per cent affordable homes wherever possible - but may be involved with a private developer for other elements of the scheme who is trying to deliver something that is viable overall. This means pumping up the density, and that means local opposition. It’s a rock and hard place to negotiate.

Yes, more grant money is available from the GLA and of course at last year’s Tory conference, even Brexit-befuddled Theresa May recognised housing need by removing the cap on council borrowing for housebuilding.

It had always seemed iniquitous that boroughs could not reinvest their council house sales receipts in new homes, of whatever tenure, but there was a bigger job to do at the time which was to control inflation. Also, the money was in fact ours as taxpayers. And now a majority of us probably do want it spent on creating more new homes.

Perhaps we are finally moving in the right direction. But nowhere near fast enough, or easy enough, to persuade private developers to build a whole lot more affordable homes. We are building only about one third of the Mayor’s target of 66,000 homes a year in London.

To change that, much much more public money is required. And, instead of simplifying the tax on development with the introduction of the Community Infrastructure Levy, boroughs are insisting on charging both CIL and S106 contributions. They are also continuing to require affordable housing elements in smaller schemes where it always has been a nonsense. Or in Westminster’s case, even requiring the introduction of housing elements in office schemes where there wasn’t any before. So smaller housebuilders continue to be stifled in their ability to contribute to the solution.

Affordable housing policies aren’t working. They have never worked. And the unintended consequences of seeking directly to control what housing developers do has been exactly the opposite of what those policies sought to achieve. Fewer homes than are required. London’s ideological and pyrrhic housing battlefield needs cleaning up – but first the useless, time-wasting fighting over viability needs to stop. ■