

# Housing Design Handbook

The new edition of the Housing Design Handbook is intended to demonstrate that sacrificing design quality in favour of basic numbers would be both dangerous and counterproductive. The authors David Levitt and Jo McCafferty set the context

From £33 paperback, Routledge



Jo McCafferty is a director and David Levitt a founding partner of architectural practice, Levitt Bernstein

The new edition of the Housing Design Handbook was written not only as a campaigning document to promote quality in all forms of housing, but also as a primer to provide a firm foundation of practical knowledge, an aid not only to architects but to everyone involved in commissioning housing.

The book is intended to demonstrate that sacrificing design quality in favour of basic numbers would be both dangerous and counterproductive. We know that homes must be built to last and that replacing them after just a couple of generations is not merely wasteful but can be deeply disturbing for the people affected. It would be a tragedy if a significant proportion of homes built today simply replace those that have failed to last.

Writing more than 2,000 years ago, Vitruvius identified 'Firmness, Commodity and Delight' as essential components of a well-designed building. However, it appears that firmness and delight are often forgotten in new housing, despite it being the most significant built form in the urban landscape, while its ability to achieve a 'sense of place' provides an essential basis for social continuity. And in addition to housing quality, there is pressure on space itself: research published by LABC shows that space standards have been in continuous decline since a peak in the 1980s.

Since the onset of the 2008 recession, a succession of government ministers enacting a programme of austerity has presided over the removal of direct subsidies for construction, particularly in the provision of affordable housing. This has had the inevitable consequence of increasing densities in a scramble for more private sales to cross-subsidise the affordable homes that developers are obliged to provide. In London in recent years, local authorities have started to build their own housing again; some boroughs have even established their own development companies to circumvent lengthy procurement processes and increase borrowing capacity, while local communities are instigating co-housing projects. But, regrettably, these small-scale initiatives alone are not going to solve the housing crisis. Many have called for renewed state funding and a reskilling of borough departments or even a centrally funded national housebuilding agency. Without a radical rethinking of procurement and funding for truly affordable dwellings, homelessness will continue to soar, and with it a rising burden on all the major services: health, education and policing. Meanwhile, accessible central locations will be solely for the wealthy.

This is the context in which David and I invited some 26 of the country's most esteemed designers and clients to discuss the challenges and principles in the design of good homes, drawing from exemplary projects in the UK and beyond. Much can be forgotten in the drive for numbers, but this manual aims to refocus attention on the importance of quality in the creation of the fundamental right for all: good housing that lasts. Beginning with Claire Bennie's discussion of the factors influ-



encing housing that gets better over time, the rest of the book explores a series of issues that designers need to consider – a base of useful experience from which their own creative contributions can spring.

As this book shows, there are many good examples of housing of all generations; they have stood the test of time and are supporting happy, healthy and mixed neighbourhoods. Evaluation of these and other built projects, through discussions with their designers, contractors, residents and housing managers is crucial in defining what works and what doesn't, in order to influence what we design and build tomorrow, particularly with the current focus on offsite construction methods, new technologies, speed and efficiency. Meaningful analysis of long-term cost-in-use for all scales and types of development also needs to inform our thinking. New forms of tenure that offer the hope of affordability, with a broadening of rental and ownership options in both the public and private sectors, are emerging and should continue to evolve. But at the heart of all this, there has to be a genuine commitment from all those involved in the funding, design, delivery and management of housing to the social purpose of creating good homes – not social or private, just 'good housing' in the words of Neave Brown – a message he delivered with such passion and poignancy on being awarded the RIBA Gold Medal in October 2017.

Just as almost all books on housing published since 1968 had to mention the collapse of Ronan Point, so Grenfell Tower, >>>

>>> which burned in June 2017, now represents a watershed in the study of regulation and procurement. Unless some way is found to avoid the disconnect between the component parts of the entire design and construction team and those in control of managing and maintaining the housing itself, similar issues are likely to reappear. New forms of contract are essential to bind these relationships together formally through the design and construction process, and to ensure that the team working together at the beginning of a project is still there at the end.

Architectural education also has its role to play in engaging young designers in housing – and it's only of late that schools of architecture in the UK have begun to run programmes focussing on this most fundamental building typology.

From the late 1970s until recently, the design of housing did not find its way into a student's portfolio and has been actively discouraged as an area of study by some tutors in schools of architecture across the UK. To many studying architecture in central and northern European countries outside the UK and in the US, this seems incomprehensible – outrageous even. For students to have no understanding of the history, joys and complexities of designing homes that they themselves might live in, a built typology which forms 90% of the fabric of all our cities and is the very foundation of every aspect of our lives and wider society, is utterly perverse.

And so now, given the dearth of resource within Local Authorities due to the rapid austerity-driven decline in central government funding, we should be encouraging aspiring architects to study housing, enabling more skilled designers to enter Local Authorities when they graduate. A state funded, national house building programme, which is what we need to ease the availability and affordability of housing in the UK, requires a complete re-skilling of the industry – design skills, construction skills, management skills – and this needs to start in academic institutions.

The picture is beginning to change for the good. Housing projects and studios are now appearing in several different schools across the UK, some led by leading practitioners, such as Alex Ely at The CASS and Peter Barber at the University of Westminster. Housing projects are evident at Sheffield, Newcastle, Oxford Brookes, Nottingham Trent and Liverpool schools, to name a few, in undergraduate and postgraduate courses. In addition, a specialist housing masters is due to appear in the London based studio of Liverpool University in the next couple of years, and the Housing and Urbanism Masters Unit goes from strength to strength at the AA. A Senior Lecturer in Housing Design, Policy & Development is also being advertised by the University of Westminster this year.

Following the publication of the Housing Design Handbook last year, David Levitt and I embarked on a national tour of architectural schools to prompt a wider conversation about the



BELOW:  
Jo and David have visited several architectural schools to emphasise the importance of housing design



importance of good design in housing within academia. Already we have encountered 11 schools in the last eight months and there are more visits to come. Our intention has been to empower students with the knowledge and confidence to design good housing, and always advocate for quality in their working lives – whether within a Local Authority or private practice. It has been heartening to see a renewed passion for housing across the country from both students and academics – due no doubt also to the ever-increasing crisis faced by so many of us and the stark, visible increase of homelessness on our city streets. Many of the lectures have involved hundreds of engaged, informed students, and most events have been initiated by the student body themselves, including MASS' highly successful Megacrit in April this year.

So, please join the campaign to raise housing quality across the UK and ensure our academic institutions and all those involved in the commissioning of new homes prioritise high quality design. We need to speak of 'homes' not 'units', and 'people' rather than 'occupants'; this shift from merely considering the number of homes to their quality and longevity is fundamental to the evolution and successful growth of sustainable neighbourhoods across the country. ■

# Climax City and the planning of London

**We need to reform our planning system to rediscover the subtle art of regulating and shaping the natural process of urban growth say David Rudlin and Shruti Hemani in their new book**

*Climax City: Masterplanning and the complexity of urban growth*, David Rudlin and Shruti Hemani £36 RIBA Publications



David Rudlin is a director of URBED and Shruti Hemani a professor of urban design at Aayojan school of architecture, Jaipur

The planners throughout history have been a frustrated bunch – forever striving to create a better world only to see their plans end in failure. It is a failure that takes one of two forms, the most common is to see their plans ignored or superseded by events, the most depressing is to see their plans built and to fall short of their aspirations.

This frustration is a particularly British concern, dating back to the failure to rebuild London after the Great Fire of 1666. As the renowned planner Thomas Sharp wrote in his plan for Exeter after it was destroyed by wartime bombing: 'To rebuild the city on the old lines... would be a dreadful mistake. It would be an exact repetition of what happened in the rebuilding of London after the Fire and the results in regret and and lost opportunity will be the same.' Whether the unreconstructed London or the comprehensively redeveloped post war cities got the better deal is a moot point.

Our book *Climax City: Masterplanning and the complexity of urban growth*, written with my co-author Shruti Hemani explores this frustration. It is an exploration undertaken through large hand drawn maps at five scales through which we seek to understand the interaction between planning and the natural growth of cities. We draw on examples from across the world, particular Shruti's native India, but inevitably we keep returning to London.

John Evelyn who drew up one of the masterplans for the City after the fire (the other being by Wren) wrote of a London where 'the buildings are as deformed as the minds and confusions of the

people... [a] large very ugly town, pestered with hackney coaches and insolent carmen, shops and taverns, noyse and such a cloud of sea coal as if there be a resemblance to hell on earth.' He compares this unfavourably to Paris that was 'so incomparably fair and uniform that you would imagine yourself rather in some Italian Opera.' As Michael Hebbert points out in his history of London, many of the portraits of city merchants at the time included ideal cityscapes as backgrounds. Yet the same merchants had little time for fancy plans which came a poor second to the business of business and the city was rebuilt on its old plan.

However what did change things was the 1667 Rebuilding of the City of London Act intended to prevent the spread of future fires. This established five types of street and four classes of house, with the widths of the former and the heights and materials of the latter precisely fixed. This was to be the design code that would regulate the rebuilding of the city. The urban form that it created is what we now know as the London vernacular. It is a good example of the core idea of the book which is that a particular set of social and market conditions combined with a regulatory framework creates a 'climax' urban state, just as climatic conditions create climax vegetation. For the latter half of the 20th century this climax state was the suburban cul-de-sac in many parts of Britain, but in London the terrace and the square are an enduring climax form that can be dated to the Great Fire.

This of course is not to say that London is an unplanned city. Indeed by the 1830s the boot was on the other foot as Napoleon III was exiled in London and was able to admire the results of Nash's great remodelling of the axis from Regent's Park via Portland Street and Regent Street to Piccadilly Circus and Clarence House. We tell the story of this very British masterplan which kinks and turns through the gap between Soho and Mayfair. When Napoleon III was elected as president in 1948 he returned to Paris determined to complete the Rue de Rivoli that had been started by his uncle Bonaparte 50 years earlier.

So frustrated was he by the lack of progress in his four year term that he declared himself emperor with absolute powers, appointed Haussmann as his prefect and spent the next 18 years remodelling Paris. Indeed one of the unsettling conclusions of the book is that large scale masterplanning in existing cities tends to be only possible in a dictatorship. >>>

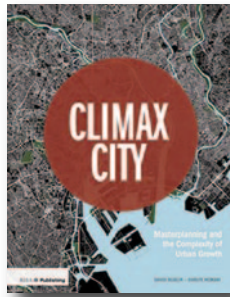


LEFT:

The rebuilding of London after 1666: The city prior to the fire in the 1660s (top) with the area in red showing the extent of the fire.

The two masterplans drawn up after the fire by Christopher Wren (middle right) and John Evelyn (middle left)

London in 1806 showing the persistence of the Medieval plan but with the planned estates of Bloomsbury (1) appearing in the north west of the plan



>>> London by contrast, outside the City, is an informal patchwork of masterplans promoted by land owners and coded through a process of plot based urbanism based largely on leasehold powers. Together with building codes these plans have created a frame for the city to grow into shaping its climax state.

This of course is not unique to London a large part of our book is devoted to this type of masterplan-led development as the way that cities have been built, across the world and throughout history.

This is true until we get to the birth of modern planning systems after the war. These were based on the idea that cities could be planned on paper in an orderly efficient way. Planners, as we said at the start of this article, have been frustrated either by the failure of these plans to be implemented or disappointed by the results when they have been built.

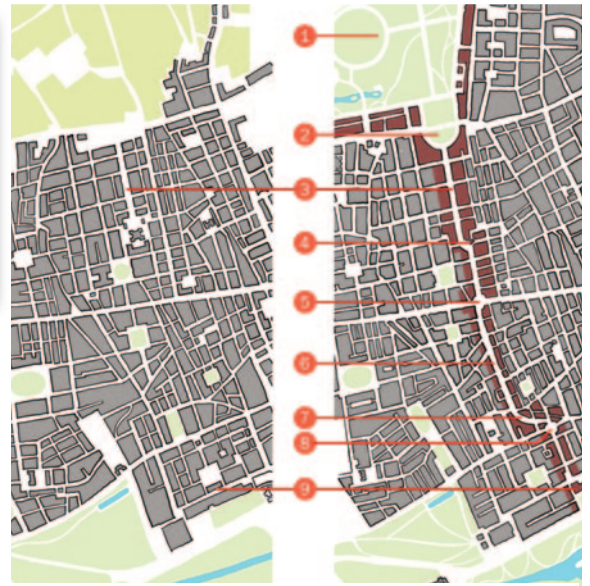
The core message of Climax City is that we need to reform our planning system to rediscover the subtle art of regulating and shaping the natural process of urban growth. ■

RIGHT BOTTOM:  
10km radius Trellis plan of London centres on Trafalgar Square

BELOW;  
2km radius Figure Ground plan of London centred on Trafalgar Square



RIGHT:  
80m Radius Tissue plan of Doughty Street as an example of typical London urban fabric



ABOVE:  
London Regent Street: Before and after plans of the remodelling showing how the street was threaded between the squares occupied by the rich and powerful.

1. Regents Park
2. Park Crescent
3. Portland Place
4. All Souls
5. Oxford Circus
6. Regent Street
7. The Great Quadrant
8. Piccadilly Circus
9. Carlton House

