

Reappraising London's suburbs

We need to accept that the character of our neighbourhoods may need to change to accommodate new homes says Russell Curtis

It is becoming increasingly apparent that the coronavirus pandemic will have a profound effect on the way our cities function. Social media has been littered with photographs of deserted London streets while the government pleads with workers to return to their city centre offices after half a year of working from home.

Doubtless some of the changes lockdown has imposed over the last six months will become permanent. For many this transition has initiated a re-evaluation of whether proximity to the office (if we still have one) is necessary at all. The recent announcement of a Suburban Taskforce by the All Party Parliamentary Group (APPG) for London's Planning and Built Environment is one encouraging demonstration of a new interest in the periphery of our cities.

One consequence of this new paradigm has been a long-overdue reappraisal of suburban living. It's been apparent for some time that anachronistic perceptions of suburban life as a trade-off between weekdays in the city and weekends on the bucolic fringes of London is outdated and anachronistic, and now is surely the time for a more nuanced reassessment. Even before lockdown the suburbs were increasingly the destination of younger people forced out of inner London by the housing crisis, accepting that the marginally longer commute is preferable to relocating to satellite towns on the other side of the green belt.

It's widely known that London is not particularly dense. Kensington & Chelsea is the city's most tightly-packed borough, with around 80 dwellings per hectare—but this swiftly drops away to 30 dwellings per hectare in outer London, even with green belt and metropolitan open land removed from the equation. At the other extreme, Paris famously has a density in excess of 125 dwellings per hectare. If we are to have any hope of achieving the required growth London needs to achieve if it wants to retain its status as a global city, these figures need to change significantly; and, as the new London Plan suggests, the character of some neighbourhoods will inevitably have to evolve accordingly.

Yet the housing crisis will not be solved by any one silver bullet: tall buildings, in the right places, are one part of the puzzle. Selective release of some green belt land will also be required; likewise making the development of brownfield land more straightforward and enabling small site delivery less risky for specialist developers will help too. The fourteen London boroughs sharing a border with the home counties will together need to deliver 52,000 homes on small sites over the next decade: 10 per cent of the London's total housing target. But to date the delivery of homes on small sites in these areas has been notoriously difficult: habitable room distances, derived from prevailing patterns of suburban development and encoded within planning policy, often preventing development coming

forward on the pockets of disused land found scattered around outer London—and complaints of "garden grabbing" abound.

Barnet is London's most populous borough, and despite its location on the northern edge of the city, it has the largest area of land that falls within the emerging London Plan small sites policy H2 zone; that is either 800m from a station or town centre boundary, or with a public transport accessibility level (PTAL) of 3 or more. It is an obvious first choice to explore ideas around how a creative approach might deliver more homes on small suburban sites.

According to planning consultancy Lichfields, which has analysed the government's proposed 2020 Standard Method of calculating housing delivery, Barnet is placed third in London in the league table of new homes to be delivered, behind Tower Hamlets and Westminster. Although this calculation is likely to change prior to adoption, even current targets are significant with the new London Plan requiring the delivery of over 23,500 homes over the next decade - the fourth highest target in London - and the highest of the suburban boroughs. Of these, 18 per cent are to come from small sites; although this is a dramatic reduction compared to the version of the plan presented at the 2018 examination in public, where nearly 40 per cent of new homes were expected to be delivered on sites of a quarter of a hectare or less.

With this in mind, RCKa has recently submitted a planning application for a gentle intensification of the Broadfields Estate in Barnet, which we believe provides a potential model for how an increase in density might be achieved in outer London that does not irrevocably change local character. Delivering 47 new affordable homes, the scheme deploys RCKa's proprietary Common Home housing system which has been designed to address the specific site conditions of outer London. Comprising a suite of semi-detached, terraced houses and small apartment blocks, the dimensions of each have been tailored to slot neatly into the particular conditions of suburban housing estates.

Broadfields is typical of many edge-of-the-city housing estates: numerous open spaces of indistinct purpose and ownership which are often problematic for residents as a source of anti-social behaviour, and a maintenance headache for the local authority landowner. Residents are heavily dependent on their cars as the nearest station is over a mile away and access to the bus network is poor.

Common Home came about at the intersection of several of RCKa's interests: our ongoing interest in the potential of small sites; how to achieve sensitive intensification of the suburbs and how to use appropriate offsite construction techniques to achieve higher levels of quality and sustainability in affordable homes. It began life four years ago when RCKa partnered with fintech (financial technology) firm Native Finance, which provides an investment platform for property development. Our



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discussions galvanised around ideas for how we might make full home ownership accessible to those on lower incomes. With the knowledge that the price of land is the key barrier to affordability, and aware of the many publicly-owned sites around the capital which lay vacant or under-used, our proposition was that we partner with the public sector to provide a full design, delivery and management service, taking on full responsibility for the provision of new homes on land which is provided on a long lease, for free. In return we would provide affordable homes for key workers from the local area. Any savings we could achieve within the design and delivery process would be passed on to the purchaser. In this way we believe we can deliver one-bedroom homes for sale at £215,000, with two-bedroom properties at £240,000.

We are currently engaged in discussions with several London boroughs about deploying this system on land owned by them but in the case of Broadfields, which is managed by Barnet Homes - the council's arms length management organisation - only the architectural design element of the system will be deployed across the estate.

Disused garages, no longer large enough to accommodate

modern vehicles and rarely overlooked by adjacent homes, are a common sight across suburban housing estates and often a source of antisocial behaviour. The Common House replaces four garages with a neat three-bedroom dwelling, with garages either side removed to provide garden space. As garages often back on to the gardens of neighbouring homes, bedrooms are arranged so that window positions can be altered to avoid overlooking. Staggering these homes along a narrow garage site allows a development of around 50 dwellings per hectare—double the prevailing density—without exceeding two storeys.

Likewise, Common Terrace has been designed to match the dimensions of a suburban terraced house built between 1950 and 1980 which are typical of many suburban estates of this period. At the Broadfields Estate the Common Terrace has been used as a new bookend to rows of existing homes, with windows in the front and rear allowing two or more homes to be appended to an existing row of houses without compromising the character of the street.

Although the system comprises a range of homes for small sites, we are mindful of the combined impact of the overall proposal. One of the criticisms levelled at the London Plan small

ABOVE AND NEXT PAGE: RCKa and Barnet Homes have submitted plans for a new development project within the Broadfields Estate that will provide 100 per cent affordable housing on a low-density, suburban site in the north of the borough. Taking advantage of the Common Home model developed by RCKa, the 47 homes will be delivered across the estate using a modular construction system, with the potential for future expansion

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>>> sites targets is the net effect that many new homes will have on the wider area; not only the change in character than the plan states is, in some places, inevitable, but on social and physical infrastructure: parking demand, traffic congestion and local services. In some respects this is true—in isolated development of a handful of homes is unlikely to have much of an impact, but the existing community are right to expect some benefits if new homes are being built around them.

At the Broadfields Estate we are using these to improve legibility of the public realm, providing overlooking of previously unsurveyed space, and to enhance wayfinding through the estate. Investment in the remaining green spaces, including play areas for children and mini parks for residents, offer something

back to local people who will inevitably face some disruption while the construction works take place.

Living in London is a privilege, and those of us lucky enough to own our own homes have a duty to the rest of London to accommodate others who also want to enjoy the same benefits that we do. Part of this responsibility is the acceptance that the character of our neighbourhoods may need to change to accommodate new homes.

Rather than debating whether new homes should be built near us at all, we need to start engaging with the question of how they are built when they are. We hope that our proposals for Broadfields illustrated here start to give an indication of how this might happen. ■

