

Can London meet its housing target by building small?

The mayor needs to do more to support community builders says Hank Dittmar

One of the singular aspects of the post-recession housing crisis in Britain has been the absolute dominance of the large PLC housebuilders, and the resistance of their business model to government efforts to increase supply. Even government has begun to admit that increasing diversity of suppliers is necessary. Councils are beginning to get back into the provision of housing and there are signs that the build-to-rent sector is finally becoming a real thing.

Much less attention has been paid until lately to the collapse of small builders after the recession, with the number of small firms declining by more than 80 per cent over the past 25 years, with one-third failing between 2007 and 2009, according to the Home Builders Federation. The Institute for Public Policy Research found that this industry collapse was due to a “toxic triangle” of factors: ability to access land, denial of credit and finance, and the complexity of the planning process imposing excessive costs on smaller firms.

Local plans can tend to overlook small sites as it seems to be easier to convince an inspector that a plan is deliverable if one can show a larger urban extension site on the edge of town with one willing landowner. The slant in planning has been increasingly towards urban extensions to small cities and market towns and “opportunity sites” in London, where large numbers of houses can be built with one or a few volume builders.

Analysts are now focusing on the potential for smaller projects to contribute to housing numbers, while reinforcing the viability of neighbourhoods. Former Conservative planning minister Nick Boles has called for policies to encourage small builders, community builders and self-builders, as has progressive think tank IPPR. The Supurbia project in London, sponsored by HTA and its chairman, RIBA president Ben Derbyshire, has looked at invisible suburban intensification through permitting homeowners to add accessory units.

The draft London Plan, which is out for comment until March 2, makes a significant commitment to small sites, projecting that 38 per cent of

the 65,000 homes to be built in the plan period will be on sites of 25 homes or less. The bulk of these – more than two-thirds – are expected to be in London’s suburbs.

In order to meet this very ambitious target, the draft plan proposes that boroughs should identify and allocate sites, develop area-wide design codes for small projects, provide permission in principle or adopt local development orders for specific sites, and adopt a presumption in favour of infill development and intensification near public transport or in high PTAL zones. The plan sets out small site targets for each borough. These changes in planning policy would, if adopted by boroughs, begin to address the fact that it is often as complex, expensive and time consuming to get planning permission for a dozen houses as it is for a few hundred. This is an unfair burden for small and first-time builders.

To support the effort, the mayor has launched a small site register, which will make small, publicly owned sites available to small developers and self-builders. The pilot website currently only lists 10 properties, of which three are directly on the North Circular, but it is expected that more sites will be added. It remains to be seen if the boroughs contribute in the manner envisaged by the London Plan.

The 38 per cent target is a huge challenge, and I doubt it can be achieved without going beyond the policies already proposed. What’s needed is a concerted effort to stimulate an SME and self-building sector in the country. This will require programmes to recruit, train and provide accessible credit to small and first-time builders, whether they are white van traders looking to become



Hank Dittmar was the longest serving Chief Executive for the Prince’s Foundation for Building Community

developers, homeowners or architects and planners who want to make a difference.

Some friends of mine in the States formed the Incremental Development Alliance (IDA) to address just this gap. A part of a loose movement for Lean Urbanism, seeking to make small possible again, the non-profit IDA aims to cultivate 1,000 small developers with cities that support them. The group does one-day incremental development workshops to introduce the basics about development, as well as more intensive “boot camps” which allow prospective developers to present their projects to seasoned developers.

Architect and developer Roger Zogolovitch, whose eight-unit Weston Street project with AHMM has just launched, has argued that we should all be developers, in a 2015 monograph. He proposes what he calls the “oil can” approach, rather than another reinvention of the planning system. Three such tools can be taught to neophyte builders and local authorities: appropriate thresholds which recognise the lower potential harm from small projects; work-arounds and patches which meet requirements in a less burdensome way; and hacks, the tactics experienced developers and planning consultants know about, but start-ups don’t.

Along with the positive changes in the draft London Plan, the mayor should promote an effort to recruit, train and provide technical support to small builders and self-builders, as a way to level the playing field. As the potential for small development grows, architects and town planners should become developers themselves. ■

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We publish this article in tribute to important urbanist Hank Dittmar who died at 61 last week