

# Housing: let's start with what we've got

Incentivise  
down-sizing by  
discounting  
stamp duty

The need for more homes is dominating the planning agenda and giving us new planning acts every year.

In this issue contributors discuss the human cost of the housing crisis (Helen Hayes MP p11), limitations of viability appraisals (Cllr Andrew Wood of LB Tower Hamlets and Julia Park of Levitt Bernstein p12), the problem with space standards (Martin Skinner of Inspired Homes p10 and Adam Challis of JLL p16) the benefits of off-site construction (Marc Vlessing p30), the capacity of London's rooftops (Riëtte Oosthuizen and Natalya Palit of HTA Design p39), price trends (Dan Lewis p52) and what the Mayor can do to increase delivery (Katie Scuoler and Stephen Ashworth of Dentons p50).

Figures just released by the British Property Federation show that in the past year the amount of build-to-rent units with planning permission, under construction or completed in the UK has surged by over 200 per cent to 67,000 units. They stress that although this is encouraging, this sector could be delivering far more homes.

But making better use of existing accommodation may yield quicker results than new development. Recent huge increases in stamp duty on sales of large London homes has inhibited moves and reduced the ease of 'down-sizing' (and driven the urge to dig basements!).

Ironically the tax régime offers an opportunity to introduce incentives to encourage down-sizing by discounting the tax on such moves. Worth considering along with all the rest as a less confrontational way of meeting the need for housing more people, especially in London..

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## PiL 100!

Our next issue is our one hundredth – that covers 25 years of change for London.

Readers and contributors are invited to contribute to the special feature we plan to publish on how London and its development and planning has evolved over 25 years.

An anecdote, a sketch, a joke or an (interesting) diatribe; or a photograph even.

Email what you like [to be used subject to the editor's discretion of course] to: [editor@planninginlondon.com](mailto:editor@planninginlondon.com) by 5th December please.

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# Ditch the 'master' and just plan

Anything that needs 'master' in front of it is profoundly dodgy. It's just planning

A debate organised by the venerable Architecture Club at the even more venerable Atheneum posed the question 'Do masterplans make better places?'. It was organised by the almost venerable neo-classical architect Robert Adam.

Bob Allies of the UK's undoubted market leaders in masterplanning, Allies and Morrison, and Marcus Adams of John Thompson and Partners spoke in favour, writer Owen Hatherley and *Planning in London's* Lee Mallett spoke against. We draw a veil over who said what. And there was no suggestion that masterplans should be abandoned – but that's the problem, they often are. It is also, as Jane Austen might have said, 'a truth universally acknowledged' that masterplans have become the dominant orthodoxy in pre-planning major regeneration schemes. "And where there is an orthodoxy, it needs challenging," said Robert Adam.

We need to be more specific about what a masterplan is for a start. It can be anything from a simple site layout to a fully researched spatial, economic, sociological proposition. One term doesn't suffice. We need to be clearer. They are predictions of the future based on recent history. We assume our assumptions will be valid for decades – unlikely. We are driving using the rear view mirror of capitalism in order to contain risk. That sounds very risky. The reality is 'radical uncertainty', as Mervyn King once said. Outcomes and delivery may be decades hence, so why plan detail now? Wouldn't we be better spending a lot more money on imagining the future rather than recycling old trends?

On the other hand, some will argue that 'visioning' the future caused all the problems last time round in the Utopian era of Modernism, when we still believed in planning, and the Tories had not gutted it with cuts and deregulation. And where is the real hard evidence that masterplanning works? We prefer organic places to synthetic ones. We do not flock to Milton Keynes to admire its town planning, nor to Abercrombie's Plymouth.

Plans can be skin deep and don't get to grips with the reality of place. Like Domestos, as Hugh Pearman once remarked, urban regeneration masterplans kill all known germs and we end up with a kind of cultural Year Zero. Neither do masterplans really do anything. It is people that make things happen, and many don't hang about to actually implement what they've commissioned or designed. Yet we're in an age of ubiquitous site-based masterplanning, in a vacuum of wider place-based planning. Yes the GLA has set out a helicopter vision for the City in the East, but on the ground vast starship schemes are landing among two storey houses and single storey industrial sheds, waiting to dock in a landscape to which they are entirely alien. No problem with growth – but it is risky without more context.

It is the domination of the masterplanning process by the market in the absence of more detailed communal consideration that is encouraging a dangerous tick-box, client-driven, design uniformity about current masterplans. The missing link is the lack of public sector resources to shape the wider area and its lack of skill and confidence in doing this. We need a better understanding of what masterplanning should be because the absence of planning at the right levels locally is failing to produce masterplans that will make better, longer lasting places. So for the time being, readers, we suggest you vote against the motion and seek better masterplans.

Also anything that needs 'master' in front of it is profoundly dodgy. It's just planning. ■