

FINCH

# London – procrastination city

To pick up on two London stories covered in recent months: first, the courts decided in favour of Marks and Spencer in their action against the government's planning refusal of redevelopment in Oxford Street. The relevant minister, Michael Gove, now has to reconsider his decision, given that five of his six reasons for refusal have now been rejected by a High Court judge. He would have been forced to reconsider if only one of the six had been rejected, so five out of six is something of an embarrassment. We wait to see what happens next.

Predictable news on the South Bank, where the government upheld a planning inspector's decision that a major development by Mitsubishi, designed by Make Architects, should be approved. Now opponents are seeking funding support in order to launch a legal challenge against the decision. Watch this space – this was a very carefully written inspector's report which Mr Gove could not reject, even though he does not like the proposal.

Our mercurial mayor, Sadiq Khan, supported both of these developments so cannot be accused of being a stereotypical left-wing opponent of development. Moreover, recent nasty attacks accusing him of being controlled by Islamists, clearly not the case, have generated a certain amount of sympathy for him, even among political opponents.

The sympathy starts to run out in respect of things he himself should be instigating or generating but has failed to. This is most obvious in respect of the ongoing scandal of the closed Hammersmith Bridge (closed to ordinary motorists, that is), where there is no extant plan to do anything about it.

But it has also applied to housing, where every announcement he makes has to be read twice in order to understand the real implications, which are that he is doing very little to help. These often take the form of statistical wizardry where housing planning applications are elided with construction starts, then elided with completions and occupation. Another trick is to cite large numbers of new homes on projects where substantial demolition is involved: the 'net additional homes' statistic is rarely supplied.

You can understand why, since the mayor has

land, planning powers and funding from government to produce those net additional dwellings – but he doesn't do anything directly, instead making announcements about what he hopes other people will do.

On the day of writing this column, Mayor Khan announced he was going to 'build 40,000 council homes', part of his manifesto for re-election as mayor, which looks like a formality given a lacklustre Conservative candidate and the general state of that political party. Examine the 40,000 figure and it looks like peanuts. For one thing it will take until 2030 to deliver, so a pitiful 8,000 dwellings per year. By the way, these won't be Greater London Authority homes, but homes actually procured by local authorities, whose track record in these matters is, to put it mildly, patchy.

In May last year, City Hall said London was in the process of 'delivering the highest number of council homes since the 1970s', with 23,000 council units started since 2018 – again a confusing number which ignores the lack of completions earlier this century, and amounts to a start (not completion) rate of under 4,000 a year.

To understand how pitiful this is, you have to understand what is happening to London's population: it is rising at an extraordinary rate, with more than two million residents added in the past 30 years while housing completions have been at a historic low. With another million residents (net) by the end of this decade, triumphalism about the mayor's proposals, let alone his achievements, looks highly inappropriate.

A near-laughable set of recommendations from the Greater London Authority to the mayor, about his next spatial plan, rambles on about gender-diverse spaces, inclusive design, the architectural design of social housing and the importance of women. There is no mention of the chronic under-supply of housing or how a planning policy might address this. Pathetic. And check out the images of the committee and advisers 'at work'. About as unrepresentative a group of Londoners as you are every likely to see.

Meanwhile the lust for further regulation, gum-

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ming up an increasingly sclerotic planning process, is doing nothing to encourage the private housebuilding sector, including small and medium-size enterprises. We have had alarms, some exaggerated some not, about a shortage of qualified building control officers as a result of new registration requirements prompted by the Grenfell Tower fire disaster; and we now wait to see the effects of new biodiversity increase requirements (net) on production and timely planning.

Since there are not enough experienced ecologists to conduct the necessary analysis work on applications, expect a lot of cut-and-paste applications and reviews – a boon to the myriad people and groups who love nothing more than trying to block housing development anywhere near them, sometimes with the support of local authorities.

An example from a location an hour outside London: a very civilised proposal in a heritage setting of 117 net additional homes, included development on three small sites recommended by the local authority as suitable for development. The proposal was supported by the authority's own urban design official. Bizarrely, the authority then brought in an outside urban design consultant who gave a different opinion about the merits of the scheme (ie condemning it), and criticised use of one of the sites recommended for homes by the planning case officer. Result: a planning inquiry after the architect and good clients (46% affordable homes in the project) had worked on the proposal for four years.

This gives the planning system a bad name – and a housing delivery blockage replicated in many different guises, across the country.

No wonder the UK has a housing shortage. ■

MALLETT

# A more humane City

'The Invisible Hand' was the vivid metaphor 18th Century economist Adam Smith coined to describe the mechanism by which useful social and economic outcomes arise from the self-interested actions of individuals, or other entities, none of whom may directly intend to bring about such outcomes.

From this end of the neo-liberal era, which championed the notion things will be better left to the market, the concept is showing its limitations, not least at Thames Water. There are some things the market will not do, unless forced or effectively policed by the hand of socio-political leadership.

In London the lack of housing (and other problems) must be laid at politicians' door. If we wish to rely on the market to do stuff in the way we want, politicians and civil servants have to create the right conditions, not the wrong conditions. The mess we have made of planning for the market to provide affordable housing is something any future government must visibly grapple with and resolve. PDQ.

Prof. Greg Clarke writes about London's resilience, inventiveness, ability to scale-up, its outward looking internationalism, and the new post-pandemic cycle we are embarked on. His parting shots in his *Shaping a Better City* essay for NLA's New London Agenda, however, talks about the need for a new 'social contract' for the capital that addresses planetary, social and spatial justice' as a way of ameliorating and reversing the existential threat to London of a 'long cycle of uncertainty and perhaps unmanaged decline'.

There are a lot of those 'post' conditions the capital still struggles with. War (looming again), Empire, departure of industry and people until the 80s, 2008's Global Financial Crisis, Brexit, and our current political crisis which led to Brexit and the post-Truss bombing of the economy last September by a party that invented the era now departing.

It's not a pretty picture in the run up to the Mayoral or national elections. And yet, London is rammed with visitors and new migrants, despite the indigenous population's falling birth rate, and the departure of couples seeking a viable place to raise a family.

London was all too familiar with unmanaged decline prior to the 1980s. Its effects are still around

us, despite the dramatic market driven 'unmanaged' growth we've been living through, which is failing to meet the capital's broader range of needs.

The City of London has been central to that growth. It was one of the chief beneficiaries of the Thatcher era, even though the stock market had to be dragged kicking and screaming to Big Bang. The City 'fathers' had to be shocked into approving new office development by the threat of upstart Yanks creating an alternative venue down in darkest Docklands. Competition, eh?

Now the City has finally got round to completing its new plan, *City Plan 2040*, and is shortly due its final round of public consultation. Meanwhile though, the UK stock market, perhaps the chief barometer of the City's status, is floundering with companies jumping ship to New York and uncaring UK investing institutions looking on. Not something planning can meaningfully address perhaps.

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But the arrival of a new local plan in a place that contributes more than £90bn annually to the UK economy and provides jobs for 615,000 people is also a snapshot of a 'visible hand' of local government and offers directions for planning everywhere.

Its policies encourage a new urbanism that should help establish the renewed 'social contract' Greg Clark seeks. The City's chief politician, Chris Hayward Policy Chairman of the City Corporation, writes about it in *CityAM* this month: 'improving our environment and open spaces strengthens our communities, public services and competitiveness, which will provide better economic growth...our corporate plan and people strategy are opportunities to provide a world-class experience for all those who live



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work learn and explore in the Square Mile...' It's about people and place.

There are policies which require developers and designers, for example, to include more mixed uses, including cultural activities, to demonstrate biodiversity net gain, to consider retro-fit first and demonstrate scientifically why redevelopment might be better. The City's transport strategy, which we wrote about in our last issue, *PiL 128*, and which supports this plan, also pursues vigorously the enhancement of the City's public places and discourages private vehicles while encouraging healthier options.

The policy thrust is all about making a more humane place with more diversity of uses, including no less than 2m sq ft of additional retail space – pretty much the equivalent of at least one Westfield. Major developments must also make cultural plans for arts, culture and leisure uses, which can be pooled with those from other schemes. Provision for visitor facilities must be made.

The UK operates on a social contract that balances opportunity with needs and some semblance of fairness. The *City Plan 2040* demonstrates the need for that contract to be tangible to shape a better City. It is not an insensitive piling of market forces. And even the City, in all its affluence, continues to need dynamic and creative planning, in its seven Key Areas of Change - Smithfield, the core City Cluster, Fleet Street and Ludgate, Blackfriars, the Pool of London riverside, Liverpool Street station and Aldgate-Tower of London.

Economic, climactic and technological change are driving transformation such that even in a continuously evolving confined area like the City, the need for an intelligent, visionary, visible hand is a necessity to invent the future and generate opportunity for the market. ■