

The Mayor's new housing design guide

'Design for London' commissioned architects mæ to work with them to develop the London Housing Design Guide to address the lamentable standard of much of London's housing provision. Its author Michael Howe explains.

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Few of us will need reminding that these are straightened economic times, especially for the construction industry. In a bid to mitigate this situation the government announced a programme in the last budget aimed at revivifying £400 million worth of stalled housing construction projects. The programme, Kickstart, received additional resources of £660 million on 29th June. All in all this is a lot of money for the Homes and Communities Agency to distribute to developers and house builders. The hope being that by making up the

short fall in their projected profits or ability to organize project finance, (caused by the credit crunch), they will be persuaded to restart projects they pulled last year.

In the spring the programme must have seemed like a great deal for the government, they would be seen to be doing something decisive to protect jobs and the economy. Added to this the record of RSL failure to get anywhere near the Government's housing targets would be improved. By paying for the completion of projects which

have already received Planning Permission a large number of valuable housing units would be delivered quickly, and because the banks still find themselves unable to provide mortgages to many first time buyers, these units could then be bought at a song by the RSLs, bish bash bosh, job done.

However there is a fly in the ointment. One that was evident to those who cared to see it back in 2008 when the housing market first stalled. Anyone remotely connected to the world of housing provision at

No more hobbit homes

The draft Housing Design Guide is long overdue and most welcome and Boris Johnson's commitment to 'no more hobbit homes' takes up an important issue which his predecessor failed to pursue says Duncan Bowie.

This is not the first attempt in recent years to introduce a minimum standard. The original 2004 London Plan did in fact have an objective of maximising internal and external space standards within its broader urban design policy.

"para 4.42 New building projects should ensure the highest possible space standards for users, in both public and private spaces inside and outside the building, creating spacious and usable private as well as public spaces. In particular, buildings should provide good storage and secondary space and maximise floor-ceiling heights where this is compatible with other urban design objectives."

This statement remained in the 2008 revised plan at para 4.102. Neither plan however prescribed a minimum space standard nor did the Mayor in practice seek to use his planning powers to ensure that these objectives were achieved – apart from occasional discussion on floor to ceiling heights or the limitations of single aspect.

In the preparation of the 2008 revisions, the

option of a space standard was actively considered. In fact in Ken Livingstone's December 2005 Statement of Intent, he explicitly stated that he would 'consider the possibility of introducing internal and external space standards' as well as 'ensuring that larger households, including families, have access to appropriate housing'. However while the density matrix was revised to remove the inherent bias in favour of smaller units and a 10sq m per child/ youth playspace requirement was introduced, the proposal for internal space standards was abandoned. This was despite the evidence of falling standards and specific proposals for the operation of a new standard set out in a report commissioned from Andrew Drury of HATC and Oldfield King – Housing Space Standards, which was published by the GLA in August 2006. The main reason why the issue was not pursued was that housebuilders objected to further specification of their product by local planning authorities – or as one housebuilder put it – the nationalization of their industry. The argument for standards was however

not abandoned by other interests, with the campaign being pursued first by Building for Life and then more broadly within the RIBA, culminating in the Space at Home seminar in July 2008. Meanwhile at a national level, English Partnerships introduced their own standard for sites they owned – a standard which in fact was more generous than the one Ken Livingstone had turned down. Ken has been reported as saying that he now regretted the missed opportunity. Meanwhile the Homes and Communities Agency is wrestling with the dilemma of how to combine the EP standard which applied to all tenures with the Housing Quality Index standard applied by the Housing Corporation to grant funded schemes. The HCA states that it aims to have a harmonious set of core standards in place by April 2011, which will evolve through consultation and collaboration with partners and key stakeholders.

Well so much for the history. What is helpful about the new guide drafted for the Mayor by Mae architects, in conjunction with Urban Initiatives, is that it seeks to be comprehensive in that the contentious issue of internal standards is only one part of a package which includes density, residential mix, mix of uses, car parking, cycle storage, refuse disposal, circulation space, privacy, daylight and sunlight, floor to ceiling heights, environmental performance, energy and carbon emissions, water use and flood risk, ecology and the use of materials, with

this time would have been aware of rumors of knock down offers being made to RSL's by various volume house builders. The RSL's didn't buy their products then, and unless the house builders have improved their methods in the interim, they probably will not buy them now. House builders can't shift surplus, (unsellable), stock onto Housing Associations because their design and build quality isn't good enough to meet government funding requirements.

CABE recently reported that less than 20 per cent of recent developments in London were rated good or very good. New homes in London have some of the smallest rooms in Europe with an average size of a newly built home of only 76sq.m,

compared with 109sq.m in Germany and 88sq.m in Ireland. This situation is not one that can be shrugged off as the inevitable effect of market choice, as there has been little real choice in the market for most people living in London. The effects of overcrowding impacts directly on long term public health, (as supported by the 2004 Shelters study "Crowded House". Rather like our banking industry the business model and products of house builders needs to change.

It is against this potentially contentious background that the Mayor of London's Housing Design Guide, (draft for consultation), was released on Wednesday 8th July. It is intended that the requirements set out will be mandatory for all publicly



funded housing developments in Greater London, with the further intention that they become a S.P.D. early 2012.

Some will argue that new legislation is the last thing we need when

the property market is stagnant, prices have fallen and we still have problems with affordability. However we would suggest that the present construction hiatus is the perfect time to develop >>>

a section on the design process – all within 87 pages. As a consolidation of existing guidance – both statutory requirements and best practice, the document is invaluable. The guide however does not treat density, amenity, sustainability and space standards as if they are separate issues, which has been a problem with past policy and regulation at all levels of our complex governance structure, of which the bizarre separation of development control and building regulations is only one symptom.

It is for others to comment on the details, and whether or not there are circumstances where waivers should be justified. Instead, I will focus on the key issue of whether space standards should be a matter for some form of regulation. What is curious about contemporary construction, architecture and design in England, in contrast with other countries, both developing and developed, is our failure to remember the extent to which planning and housing policy, and to a certain extent residential architecture, originated from the public health movement and a concern that public intervention, both through regulatory standards as well as from direct public sector development, were necessary if the combination of overcrowding and disease were to be overcome. This has been supplemented by a growing certainty in more recent years that the market knows best and that any regulation, which constrains the market, is inherently bad as it is anti-competitive.

What has clearly been proven by the experience of recent years of residential development in London is that the market did not know best – not just in terms of the longer term requirements of London's population, but actually in terms of what was actually marketable in the short and medium term. The analysis of London's housing output previously published in PIL has demonstrated the extent to which London's new housing output has shifted away from what was needed not just in terms of affordability and tenure mix, but also in terms of household size, and the deviation of the development programme from planning and housing policy targets which has effected though to a more limited extent, so called 'affordable' housing output as well as the pure (if that is an appropriate descriptor) market sector. The rather sad consequence has been, as referred to in Michael Howe's article, that many unsellable market homes cannot be used for social housing, either because they are predominantly bedsits and one bedroom homes – or because they do not meet the Housing Quality Indicator standards.

It is therefore not surprising that so little of the Homes and Communities Agency kickstart programme is being spent in London. This is in contrast with the last market crash in 1990-1991, when the Housing Corporation bought out some good quality market homes, many in Docklands, for use as social rented housing for families. We should

have learnt the lesson that if housing is to be built which can be moved between tenures as market circumstances change, or if the availability of public subsidy increases, we need housing outputs which are not just targeted at a single component of the market or type of occupant. This flexibility can be best achieved through standards which apply across tenures, a point no doubt recognized rather belatedly by some housebuilders who have got their fingers burnt by building homes for a market which does not currently exist – if only we had introduced a minimum standard in the boom time. Well, hopefully the lesson is now learnt – the best way to prepare for the recovery is to get our requirements and implementation tools and funding in place now. The Mayor has asked whether the guide should apply to all new development and be adopted as statutory planning policy. As the HCA already has its standards, there is not much point in having another standard, which applies just to 'social housing'. We all have an obligation to look beyond the short-term market, and to guarantee all households a decent quality of living environment. The answer must be a resounding and unconditional yes – and yes now!

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product improvements for the future. One assumes that the HCA is currently carrying out due diligence and design quality control checks on the schemes lining up for Kickstart handouts. It will be interesting to see what level of project design quality will trigger the release of funding. Too high and few projects will be delivered and the government will be seen as doing too little to help industry, too low and the government will rightly be accused of “buying a pup”, by subsidizing the construction of slums.

The London Development Agency’s design resource arm “Design for London” commissioned our office to work with them to develop the London Housing Design Guide in part to address the lamentable standard of much of London’s housing provision. The Guide covers areas such as appropriate housing density, street proportion, dwelling space standards, circulation design, etc. Its recommendations were arrived at as a result of a synthetic approach to the plethora of existing guidance. If adopted it will cut the documents governing London housing design to a fifth of their current number, making life easier for everyone involved with the procurement, design and construction of housing.

We believe that Mayor’s Guide is an effective way of assisting the industry to produce housing that people genuinely want to live in and RSL’s and individuals want to buy. London has a long history of enacting forward thinking housing guidance. The most successful, we would argue, were the Building Acts developed immediately after the Great Fire of London and continuing to the middle of the 19th century. The Acts were the first building control legislation to be adopted, with minor variation, throughout Britain. Perhaps ensuring that the introduction of this guidance is of more than passing interest for other

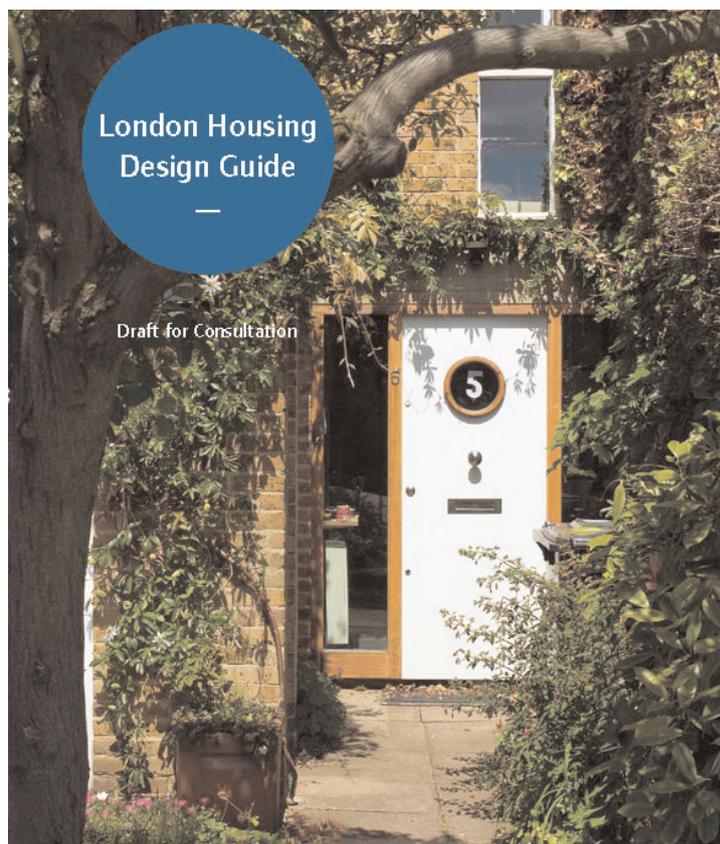
metropolitan authorities.

One of the strengths of the Acts resided in their ability to galvanize political will behind the revision of permissible building forms and techniques immediately after the fire. It should be remembered that this was in the face of strong resistance from large sections of the capital’s business community who saw the introduction of fireproof construction as a ruinous extravagance.

Boris Johnson says “ I am determined to deliver the highest quality homes for the long term, innovating in the best tradition of this unique city.” This being the case we would argue that this ambition is best served by the production of the minimum number of simple guidance documents possible. A good example of the benefits of simplicity and familiarity, (with regard to housing space standards), followed the publication of the Parker Morris standards (1961). The period of standards stability following their becoming mandatory, some six years later, allowing all sectors of the construction industry to become familiar with their requirements, fostering broad agreement on what an acceptable house might be, (at least in terms of size), and how to achieve it cheaply.

Descriptions of the of the Mayor’s Guidance in the media has tended to concentrate on space standards, this is hardly surprising given the squalid nature of much of this countries new build, however the document has something to say about other areas pertinent to the production of good housing and place making. The guide is based around six themes devised with DfL, these are:

- Shaping Good Places.
- Housing for a Diverse City: dealing with issues of appropriate density, residential mix and mix of use.
- From Street to Front Door: shared circulation, car and cycle ports, refuse



etc.

- Dwelling Space Standards.
- Home as a Place of Retreat: privacy, noise, internal room height, daylight.
- Climate Change Mitigation and Adaptation.

We have attempted to form each of these requirement simply so that they are immediately understandable by designers, commissioners and constructors, and on the principle that “If everyone has to conform to a standard no-one can claim that they are at a disadvantage”.

The Guide does not seek to reinvent the wheel or duplicate existing guides; if another document has described a situation well it is referred to in an introduction. An example of the intended brevity of Guide is exhibited in section 5.5 “Daylight and Sunlight” this has only two requirements following the introduction. Of course in order to arrive at this level of brevity a great

deal of testing work was undertaken with the production of diagrams as a key part of that process, such as the Space Standards Study and Furniture Schedule included in the appendix. Anecdotal evidence received by our office, (based on nothing more scientific then comment made by other designers), would lead us to believe that this sort of simple visual advice would perhaps be welcomed on the principle that a picture is worth a thousand words.

The timely nature of the Mayor’s Housing Guide consultation period is reiterated by current development HCA’s own national standards. As an individual citizen I am quite aware that getting two Government agencies to work together is a little like asking turkeys to vote for Christmas, however if they could pool their resources how useful that would be for all of us.