

Streets for people to fall in love with

We should Create Streets for people to fall in love with not stockpile a second generation of public resentment says Nicholas Boys Smith

There has not been such political focus on building new homes since the 1960s when Supermac promised to out-build Labour and Harold Wilson to keep building in the 'white heat' of his technological revolution. This is good. London needs more homes. London house prices rose by over 20 per cent in the last 12 months. But it is also risky. Last time, we got into a government-dominated, political arms race on house-building the quality of our built environment was massacred. The 1956 Housing Subsidy Act biased the system in favour of elephantine multi-storey housing. Flats at fifteen storeys received a government subsidy nearly three and a half times the subsidy for a normal house.

The same thing is happening again and it is profoundly important. Never before have we built at such scale, height and density. 236 towers of at least 20 storeys are being built or have planning permission in London. And Create Street's analysis of nineteen regeneration and redevelopment sites shows that the typical increase in height is 230 per cent and the typical increase in density 170 per cent. We have caught architectural elephantiasis.

Supporters of this second generation of large multi-storey buildings argue 'we have no choice, we need to build more homes.' They are right about the housing crisis. They are very wrong about the lack of choice.

We have lots of choices and we are making the wrong ones. A generation ago, so great was the public backlash against the destruction of traditional street-based communities and their decanting into off-street multi-storey horrors that much research was commissioned into what forms of housing were popular and correlated with good social outcomes. So clear was the evidence, so great the public distaste that the previous revolution of multi-storey housing was stopped in its tracks. These studies have been largely forgotten. More recent ones, which support their findings, are little read. However, the conclusions are clear. And if we ignore them we are in danger not just of repeating the mistakes of the past but of inflicting misery on future generations.

For the good news is that there is an answer: terraced urban

streets with normal houses and low or medium rise flats. In every single piece of evidence, they are infinitely more popular. In the latest national poll, only 3 per cent of us want to live in flats with over 10 units in the buildings. And people are being deeply rational in expressing this view. Controlled studies show that living in large big tall buildings is not good for you. The vast majority of studies show that the residents of large multi-storey blocks suffer from more stress, mental health difficulties and crime, that children do less well and that communities are less strong. And this is taking account of socio-economic status.

Streets are also practical. Terraced streets can be very high density. They are higher density than most post-war estates. Southwark saw its density fall by two thirds when streets were turned into post-war estates. If we built enough and regenerated sufficient land (with local support), streets could solve London's housing crisis – potentially providing nearly two decades' supply. The opportunity is so great that the Government has commissioned Savills to investigate it. By making redevelopment more popular, by giving local people more control over what happens, we believe that redevelopment of more land would be popular – to say nothing of a better investment. Conventionally designed streets of houses and flats have gone up in value nearly twice as fast over the last 30 years and tend to be cheaper to maintain.

So we have choices. And we should be backing streets not large multi-storey buildings. If not, as the fate of Vauxhall and Blackfriars demonstrates, where one huge building is permitted, other will inevitably follow.

To do this well some key changes are required in City Hall, in most borough housing and planning teams and in the culture of the industry. All would better align what we build with what people actually want in the built environment. Properly measured and understood they would also align what is built better with the long term economics of place.

Firstly, all major regeneration schemes should be undertaken hand in hand by long term investors and landowners – almost never by pure developers looking at short term returns.

Secondly, we should stop permitting density maximisation on any given site. It is unpopular, sociologically unwise and poor long term economics. 200-225 units per hectare should normally be the limit.

Thirdly, we need better to understand what type of green space people actually want and ensure that top down targets are not mitigating against traditional London streets (they can and do).

Fourth, we need to take further steps to prevent some highway engineers making it hard to build traditional streets (some boroughs are getting much better at this. Others very much are not).

Fifth, we need to fundamentally change our largely broken 'consultation' techniques. As often as not these are a PR fig leaf that masks the defeat of a weary community. It is striking how many 'consultation' firms also do PR. By actually bothering to ask real and important questions up front and by listening to the answers you can get actually very profitable long term schemes supported and launched.

Finally, we need to make sure that access and other rules are not mitigating against the design of traditional spatially efficient (and thus economically attractive) houses and vertically-accessed flats. (Again, though well-intentioned the gold-plating of national standards in London has perverse effects on what we build).

Underpinning all of these changes is a crucial, almost existential, strategic shift. We should cease ramming through the construction of new blocks in the teeth of public opposition (at worst) or weary forbearance (at best). We should instead ask: how do we make new homes so popular that communities actively campaign for them.

One senior industry insider who has steered though many large multi-storey developments in London but whose family lives in a Georgian terraced house put it to me starkly when he



warned of a 'ticking time bomb' of high future management and maintenance costs and conceded that, 'I worry that we are creating ghettos of tall buildings.' Will this be our generation's gift to London? ■

1 Developments like those on the left have gone up in value over twice as fast as developments like this over the last 30 years
 2 We're repeating the game of verbal legerdemain we played 50 years ago. Calling blocks 'estates' did not make them stately homes
 3-4 No more is this a garden... this is a garden
 5 Calling it a square does not make it a square
 6 This is not a village... This is a village
 7 LEFT: Supported by 1 per cent of local community
 RIGHT: Supported by 99%



Nicholas Boys Smith is the Director of Create Streets, a social enterprise encouraging urban homes in terraced streets not multi-storey-buildings. Follow Create Streets on twitter.

