

The pack ice may be shifting

Lots of European cities are much denser than London

There is one particular striking suggestion for increasing London's development potential in the Mayor's consultation document *Towards a new London Plan* – apart of course from changes to Green Belt policy.

To increase housing supply and encourage more types of housebuilders it suggests the next London Plan 'could take a different approach' and 'set out building heights that should be acceptable in principle in all locations across London that share certain characteristics'.

'The plan could also set a minimum height benchmark across London to support small site development,' it adds. And these heights would reflect transport links, PDR rights and 'opportunity for development already in the area'.

This of course wasn't really an issue in London's best-loved, most valuable neighbourhoods pre-1947. When the Victorians built Kensington and Chelsea they built what they thought they could rent, and eventually by the inter-war years, what they could sell.

It became an issue again for different reasons in the City of London which felt the need in the fierce rivalry with an emerging Canary Wharf in the early 90s. The City's solution was to broadcast it was open for business to developers by indicating precisely what increased plot ratios of 5:1 (if memory serves) could be achieved where. A very handy planning switch that only the City dared flick. London is in a similar existential competition now when it comes to lack of housing.

London has lots of low density, unsustainable, but desperately needed and valuable, low-rise suburban housing and neighbourhoods. Local people and politicians have resisted in recent years, however, any suggestion that 'zoning' measures around density and heights might affect them. But that is precisely how London grew when it needed to, by increasing in height. And avoided land take by doing so, concentrating homes where there was (eventually) public transport. Lots of European cities are much denser than London.

A mandate to increase the height of development in some areas could a) encourage developers to pursue denser housing schemes, possibly on a smaller scale, and b) encourage homeowners to sell in designated areas helping site assembly, for private or social development.

Such blanket policies are controversial. Architect HTA's 'Superbia' for example, met with little enthusiasm. But...it is an idea that could, more than any other perhaps, if liberated and accompanied by design guidance, help encourage development – with the possible exception of the scrapping of affordable housing policies which have excluded smaller builders and retarded supply of housing since their introduction in the early 00s.

The other big news in the document is the intention to revisit 10-unit thresholds for requiring inclusion of affordable housing, and the possibility of delaying payment for planning gain and CIL until later in the process when cash is flowing, improving viability and resources available for quality.

Hallelujah.

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Memorials are tricky



>>> Nightmare statuary in London is not unknown

It was predictable that Foster and Partners would win the competition for the late Queen's memorial – at least once they had committed to entering. The practice has managed to combine technical innovation with a grasp of what the public might like for many decades, and the gravitas attaching to Lord Foster himself, now 90. His memorable remark, 'I have everything left to achieve' will have no doubt been a comfort to the selection committee; in any event, nobody has ever been fired for hiring Foster ...

Memorials are one of those areas where the planning system generally feels uncomfortable, since it is not supposed to make aesthetic judgements, especially where (by definition) proposers are informed by a desire to express genuine gratitude/emotion in respect of the person or group being memorialised. You may or may not like the monument to Bomber Command on Piccadilly, but it would have been wrong to try to block it on planning grounds.

Nor is this an easy matter for architects. Adolf Loos declared that 'Only a very small part of architecture belongs to art: the tomb and the monument'. In the case of the Elizabeth II memorial, there is the awkward question of statuary, with the potential sculptor wisely omitted from the Foster competition entry. Nightmare statuary in London is not unknown – as the memorial to dead warfare animals on Park Lane shows only too clearly. We must cross our fingers.

It should be said that the design drawn up by the late Bryan Avery for a site in Green Park, published in this issue, was a match for anything submitted in the competition, not least because of its use of water as a reflector – a symbol of calm.

One fears that the new Foster bridge in St James's Park might simply become a maelstrom of selfie-obsessed tourists, rather than a focus for contemplation of a royal life well lived. ■

Focus on enhancements to existing housing stock

Incentivise better use of existing homes

The shortage of homes in England is more than a housing crisis. *The Economist* argues that it chokes economic growth and that more radical deregulation is needed.

The OBR predicts the fall of housing starts from 265,000 in 2024 to 192,000 in 2026. The GLA says just 1210 units started in Greater London in the first quarter of this year, the lowest since 2009, and that year-on-year starts have fallen by 31 per cent.

The government's new Affordable Homes Programme with its headline figure of £39 billion is not quite the increase claimed. Just the loss of Right to Buy income – £12.5 billion in the past 12 years – will diminish the impact of public funds available for social housing.

A greater and speedier impact might be achieved by focusing on enhancements to the existing housing stock in England: over 25 million dwellings.

Incentivising better use so as to encourage downsizing of under-occupied houses and the subdivision of homes to provide for young people as well as 'later living' households could go a long way to meeting the 1.5 million target for new homes.

Incentives should include discounts on stamp duty to reduce the cost of moving, and the enforcement of government policy to prevent local planning authorities imposing affordable homes taxation on smaller and medium size developments. ■