

London needs growth, not just a theory about it

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An unexpectedly swift resolution to Heritage England's attempt to force a reconsideration of the City Corporation's 'jelly mould' governing the height of new developments overlooking the Tower of London, was quite a result for the Square Mile's built environment community, gamekeepers and poachers alike. The City's immediate robust defence was highly effective.

The two planning inspectors involved were able to convince housing minister Matthew Pennycook and his minions that all this was soundly tested in the Examination in Public earlier in the year and concluded there was no need to reopen the box. Or perhaps there was sudden realisation at MCHLG that the 'theory of growth' expounded by the newly unelected Prime Minister requires a City that must evolve in the way its occupants need. Just as every town and city in the UK should. Perhaps not to the extent or in the fashion the Tower of London's client, William the Bastard, went about adjusting the Saxon built environment after 1066.

The UK cannot really afford to retard one of the main engines of its economic growth. The City being a main conduit for fresh capital that might help with the 'reindustrialising' of the north. And while the UK Stock Exchange continues to wither, with the takeover of quoted UK built environment companies (such as Segro falling to Prologis, and Harworth being taken private by Peel Holdings, while illustrious names such as Derwent, LandSec and British Land may also be takeover targets), the market for prime office space in the Square Mile is going gangbusters.

Record numbers of planning applications. Pre-lets. A looming shortage, with available space falling to a mere 2 per cent, and probably to zero by 2028, means London is also now running short of the office space companies want, in addition to failing to provide housing we need.

London needs to wake up. It is becoming a victim of its success, while its inequalities increase. It continues to attract businesses, especially in the City where the polyvalent benefits of its 'Destination City' policies are making themselves felt. Go there on a Thursday evening and feel the vibe. Its traditional attractions, rule of law, the English language, and its markets opening when the East's are going to bed and the West's are waking up, have become more valued as global instability has increased. You'll hear a lot of American accents around London today, and Russian over on the west side of town. And some of the City's largest occupiers are now tech companies. In fact all companies in the City are effectively tech companies now. But serious problems have put cracks in the capital's façade. Shortage of the right sort of offices in both the City and the West End is just one of many problems.

Any Government, any Mayor, needs to put the issues of housing and business space shortages front and centre, equal with education, training, transport, crime and health. But voters need to be persuaded of the benefits of growth that requires new buildings. They represent life changing opportunity, homes, jobs, improved incomes. But people often do not want new homes and new workspace near them. The built environment lobby that New London Architecture is building is an example of a new voice that could be developed to get these arguments across. But only if it has something powerful to say in addition to expounding the merits of member organisations and the undoubted economic contribution they make. ■

On your bikes!

Unintended consequences producing outcomes the opposite of policy intentions is one of the key risks in making any policy. The Mayor of London's Draft London Plan has finally realised that its 2021 policy on cycle parking requirements was just such a measure.

'Vastly underused,' says research from the London Property Alliance. 'Well they would say that, wouldn't they?' you might think. But the LPA's study of more than 1m sqm in 21 mod- >>>

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On what erroneous evidence was the misjudged 2021 cycle parking policy based?

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>>> ern office buildings with 9,000 spaces in central London show 76% were vacant at peak summer time periods. 76 per cent!

The statistic missing from LPA's report however, is how much all that carbon-intensive and expensive basement concrete and steel involved in creating those white elephant spaces, may have 'offset' a large chunk of the carbon savings made by planet-conscious cyclists who did ride to work. That's a calculation we'd like to see.

Also, on what erroneous evidence was the misjudged 2021 policy based in the first place? And who thought it up? What is all that hugely expensive space going to be used for now? And will planners have the temerity to insist on applications for new uses, having been so wildly out of touch with reality in the first place? ■

Housing? What housing?

The recent refusal of a housing development providing more than 1,000 homes on the Old Kent Road in Southwark, by Berkeley Homes, was based on the low percentage of 'affordable' units. The project was, therefore, not responding to local demands.

At about the same time, Taylor Wimpey, one of the country's biggest house builders, announced that it was abandoning London as a place to build, citing the increase in costs and potential clawbacks on profits through 'late-stage' reviews – which could increase the number of affordable units provided.

Given that the new housing pipeline in several London boroughs is now zero, you might think someone would have a broad-brush policy to encourage house builders and their activities. As ever, London mayor Sadiq Khan was quick to quote the impact he is having on the market through provision of finance. What he is not doing is directly procuring construction. The London County Council did; the Greater London Council did; why can't his Greater London authority revive the tradition?

That big idea informs Andy Burnham's thinking. The prime minister has remembered something called 'council housing'. We need more of it, he claims, and he is right. He has reached the same conclusion as Gordon Brown a lifetime ago. Unfortunately, Mr Brown provided miniscule funding to restart such development, so little was done before his own electoral demise.

What Mr Burnham appears not to have thought about is the process by which public housing will be initiated, designed, delivered and financed. Nor has Angela Rayner. Her recent statement about how great it is to be a home-owner (in her case a double owner) sits oddly with her party's stated dislike of right-to-buy (from which she benefited). Then we have the woeful example of how housing development, which some people seem to think is easy, helped to bankrupt Croydon Council and put it in special measures.

Moreover, there has been no real thinking about the nature of the 21st century 'council estate', a phrase which the prime minister is not embarrassed to use – even if he has yet to outline a convincing implementation policy.

What he might consider is the proportion of homes which should be sold on completion of a contemporary estate – to avoid the sort of social ghettos and no-go areas which gave these estates the reputation that resulted in little appetite to build any more.

Much more thinking required. In the meantime, instead of taxing house builders and making life increasingly difficult, government should think about what brakes they could remove from planning and tax policies which are causing London's house builders to vote with their feet. ■