



Housing and Urban Neighbourhoods

ACCOMMODATING GROWTH OR CONFLICT?

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High land values, continuous price hikes and the inability of supply to keep pace with rising demand have made housing one of the most difficult hurdles to London's continued growth. It is a key factor determining Londoners' well-being: renters are burdened by housing costs and prospective first time buyers face increasing difficulties in accessing home-ownership. Disadvantaged immigrant families suffer overcrowding in some parts of London and those living in temporary or transitory accommodation rank by the hundreds of thousands, while middle class families continue haemorrhaging to the outer edges of an ever more extended metropolitan region, all due to the lack of space and suitable units within London. Policy-makers and planners, for their part, are pressed to make room for new construction, devise mechanisms to provide affordable units and guide the growth process so that new developments can be integrated to the fabric of existing neighbourhoods to enhance, rather than detract, from the grain of the city's built environment. To add to the challenge, there is widespread concern – especially at the level of local councillors – that intensification of land should not compromise public amenities, such as open and green spaces or the river, and that intensification can lead to town-cramming and over-development.

A prevalent argument among those studying the social geography of the city has been that the concentration of social disadvantage in inner London results from the uneven distribution of affordable housing units. While certain inner districts are dominated by estates owned and managed by local councils, providing social units which are affordable yet many are problematic in terms of construction quality, maintenance and social conditions, the same quantum of housing is virtually non-existent in the outer boroughs. After decades of governmental neglect, the impact of renewed interest by volume house builders, coupled with public sector grants and the growing involvement of civil society have not solved this basic issue. While many core neighbourhoods have experienced a return of the middle classes, in parts of Hammersmith, Brixton and Clerkenwell, for example – the decaying and rapidly

shrinking stock of affordable housing in inner London continues to be, depending on the analyst's view, an entrapment or the last resort for the least fortunate in a largely unaffordable metropolitan housing market. Current policies in London aim to increase the supply of housing and develop dense and vibrant urban neighbourhoods with a social mix and a variety of housing sizes, building typologies and tenure types. The urgency of this agenda transcends the realm of housing and it has important implications for social integration and for London's ability to keep functioning; many of the city's key workers in the fields of health, transport, policing and education find it increasingly difficult to secure housing within the city. However, this goal is obstructed by ingrained preferences for low density neighbourhoods (with house and garden typologies) and against multi-family units. Despite high land values, there are often insufficient incentives for housebuilders to build more affordable units. Many new up-market developments in disadvantaged neighbourhoods are self-segregated from the local urban fabric, especially along the River Thames, and actively buffer their residents from the everyday life of their surrounding communities. Even subtle design differences and the distribution of units within a scheme can lead to the formation of micro-ghettos, such as those developments which clearly separate affordable units from those at a market rate, thus stigmatising their occupants; a phenomenon that is often unintentionally caused by the requirements of social housing providers for low maintenance costs in shared areas and the need for larger family units.

Good design can make higher densities compatible with urban attractiveness, reconciling the demand for personal space and privacy, with London's need to grow in a compact manner. A combination of units of varied sizes and costs, the integration of housing with other uses and open spaces, and an overall upgrading of the quality of new developments through clearer design and construction guidelines, constitute important steps towards more socially integrated communities. These principles have been embraced in the UK and wholeheartedly adopted by the Mayor of London since

the publication of the Urban Task Force Report. The redevelopment of large portions of East London in preparation for the 2012 Olympic Games is seen as an opportunity to demonstrate the reach of design in practice. How much will the Olympic Park, like other regeneration sites across the city, catalyse a regeneration of the derelict areas surrounding it? And what legacy will the Olympic Village create as a model of socially sustainable housing? Are questions worth asking. How to stimulate housing construction and secure affordability, the important roles for the private and social sectors to play, and the response of the general public to a denser model of city living remain important issues that must not be neglected. Financing and design strategies must be thought simultaneously from the formulation of citywide strategies to the implementation of individual projects. It is in the challenging realm of housing that the need for joined-up thinking makes itself the most evident at every stage of the development process, from the drafting of citywide housing strategies to the implementation of individual projects and the creation of sustainable and socially integrated urban communities from their very inception.

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