

If I was designing London, I would concentrate my efforts in the east where the city has yet to fully develop. Why can't living in east London be as nice as living in west London? At the moment it doesn't look as if it is going to be. Design for London concentrates its effort on infrastructure and public space, because that is where they have some influence. But ultimately the character of the city is made up of more than its infrastructure, and London's problem of quality exists at a general level. Specifically, London has lost the ability it once had to make the city with its housing.

Take the Docklands Light Railway eastwards from Tower Hill, and see how in this part of London the urban diversity for which the city is acclaimed has so quickly descended into a fascinating miniature of the formless and arbitrary globalised model of Pudong, Dubai, and Mumbai. The glitzy and the tall overlook the tired and grey. Private oases block connections between neighbourhoods. Small flats with cheap facades of veneer-thin seaside timber, with uninhabitable balconies and with no thought to their orientation or aspect, masquerade as luxury development. Private roads and public streets of tortuous shapes lead to fields of concrete paviers, where to walk on the pavement is to be embarrassingly exposed. Every form and height of building is possible, the more different the better, in a disorientating and alienating environment of brash mediocrity. There has been no resistance to this developer-led short term view of regeneration in the Docklands. The danger for London now is that the policy of the London Plan, to encourage dramatically higher densities in a diverse range of neighbourhoods with good transport links, will result in much more of the same. Planning control is so weak and expectations are so low, why should we expect any better?

Of course you will be told that London has always developed in this fashion. In the history of the city, neither crown nor state has ever held too strong a sway, so there has never been much foresight or control. Most of the city has been built by developers and builders, the argument goes, without the involvement of planners and architects. Georgian squares, Victorian bay fronted terraces, Edwardian mansion blocks, post-war semis; all are private development, and each has generated a successful metropolitan ambience. The high densities of the grand stucco terraces of Queensway and Notting Hill, all built in the two decades after the Great Exhibition of 1851, were an expansion of unprecedented scale for London at the time. Builders used a variety of standard details and plan typologies to generate palace-like structures, with animated elevations that made extraordinary streets. By the end of this period, the boom was over and houses of that scale, built for large families with their servants, could not be sold. But the generosity of their spaces and simplicity of their arrangement meant that they could easily be converted to flats, bed sits, offices and hotels.

By comparison with any of these examples, the standard of developer-led housing in London today is terrible. In terms of lasting quality of construction, typological clarity to adapt flexibly to future changes of occupation, and in making neighbourhoods of character and distinctiveness, it's worse. There are good examples of new urban housing in Holland, Germany and Switzerland. Why are we in the UK not more demanding?

What everyone appreciates about London, its organic relaxed structure, its seamlessly joined and distinctive neighbourhoods, should be the model of east London's development. For the next thirty years, it could be like central London in the 18th century, when there were still fields within the city and open streams. Archipelagos of density, growing out from scattered centres, could form an extraordinarily varied and distinctive urbanism. But allowing metropolitan density at these centres will not be enough to bring about this open, organic city. As with other wealthy European cities responding to the demand for city housing (eg Rotterdam, Amsterdam, Hamburg, Zürich) there should be more planning, control of quality and management of change.

Firstly, I would invest heavily in an empowered planning team for east London with authority across the London Boroughs. It is too weak and slow now. Piecemeal opportunistic influence is not enough. Planning shouldn't be a constraint. In Zurich and the Netherlands, the planning process gives a structure and stability to the development process, so developers cooperate. Secondly, I would restart an element of Council Housing construction, where the motive for building is not just profit. Councils should be given extra powers to take control of land, and funds made available to allow them to build affordable homes. Thirdly, I would introduce continental housing developers to key development sites in the Thames corridor. UK housing developers and the architects they use are generally bad. Before they eventually improve, great damage will have been done. Fourthly, I would demand bolder, more intelligent designs for contemporary housing, with more concern for quality, typological clarity, collective urban identity, and less fear of uniformity and repetition. CABE's Building for Life checklist for good housing is a recipe for complacent mediocrity.

It is time we took these matters more seriously if we want to build a city that we would all want to live in.

