

Updating Richard Rogers' urban renaissance

It remains the job of good government to balance and guide the forces that might deliver Lord Roger's "strong urban renaissance"

Planning in London has been published and edited by Brian Waters, Lee Mallett and Paul Finch since 1992

Who will regenerate the large vacant site in British urbanism left by the departure of Richard Rogers? There are few contenders with the same passion, presence and voice.

Looking at his foreword to the 2005 update on the original 1999 document, *Towards an Urban Renaissance*, which captured so much useful thinking about regenerating British urban conditions, makes depressing reading. Not because his ideas were in any way depressing, but because key points he highlighted remain unaddressed.

"Massive inequalities persist in our cities. Competition for space pushes up prices for housing, making access for lower income households much harder."

Nil change there, apart from the severe and worsening epidemic of unaffordability, aggravated by a rash of higher rise, more expensive, private housing, providing handy piggy banks in which to plonk capital subtracted from unreliable and hostile regimes.

If there were a recipe for breeding inequality since the original 1999 report, that would be the main ingredient. "Social housing supply is too low..." as Richard observed, would be the other. Investment is not bad; it is the erosion of equality of opportunity in society which is pernicious. Something the planning system was established to ameliorate.

Action on this issue has been rarer than rocking horse dung and, in the Conservative Party's case, is ideological anathema. It is pointless to quote figures or budgets for what's needed. The issue remains absolutely as Richard stated 17 years ago. Particularly in London where the capital city becomes steadily more dysfunctional because of unaffordability.

The flight from Covid to the suburbs and beyond, remote working, the transformation of retailing, the impact of technology, means there are new opportunities to revisit Richard's ideas about urban forms and uses. We are moving, blindly it sometimes seems, towards a new urban "renaissance", but only if these forces are acknowledged, understood and sensitively taken advantage of. It is planning's job to make sense of these.

"Design advice to Ministers, Mayors, local authority leaders and cabinets is still too limited," he wrote. "Design quality is not a central objective for public bodies with responsibility for the built environment."

There are signs this debilitating condition has improved. Local authorities are moving towards being more propositional and making use of design advice. Conservative policy, however, seems Stuckist - resolutely populist, regressive, anti-intellectual and anti-planning. Put King Charles in charge of planning and let a thousand Poundburys flourish. The market is adept at taking such cues to minimise planning risk. It is an evolutionary cul-de-sac.

We must keep moving towards Lord Rogers' "strong urban renaissance". It remains the job of good government to balance and guide the forces that might deliver it. There are votes to be won in doing it well. An update of what that renaissance might look like now would be very welcome, and a fitting legacy for our greatest modern urbanist. ■

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We need housing commitment – to numbers and quality

There is no reason why we cannot improve on this sorry state of affairs – provided the political class decides that housing really matters.

Reviewing the ongoing failure to provide sufficient decent housing for Londoners, whose numbers have increased by two million over the past quarter-century, policy- and decision-makers in local government should ask themselves the following questions: (a) are we addressing current and future shortages in a constructive and engaged way and if not, why not?; and (b) if we believe in more housing construction, how many of the policies associated with development of any sort in our borough make delivery less likely in terms of numbers and timescale?

London is littered with example of cognitive dissonance where claims to be totally committed to an increase in housing supply are accompanied by multiple reasons why any particular development is unacceptable. This can involve too much or not enough height; too much or not enough density; not enough bike spaces; proximity to an area which, while not a conservation area, should be treated as though it is one; proximity to a conservation area; too much/not enough parking; too much/not enough mixed use; lack of education/health/transport provision (when the history of London suggests that these are just as likely to follow development rather than be triggered by it) and so on.

In short, rather like our attitude to cars, we know we like and need them, but we do everything we can to pretend otherwise. You could make a compelling argument to say that the political class in Britain, cross-party, has shown no interest in housing the population it supposedly serves. Where is the evidence that it has?

This is in marked contrast to the generations that permitted/encouraged/delivered vast quantities of housing, much of which is still occupied today, produced by private housebuilders, philanthropic institutions, and local government. And all without the benefit of the 1947 Town & Country Planning Act, local development plans, a London Plan, and a Department for 'housing and communities', the latter required because of a failure to provide housing and which, under various Whitehall names, has presided over an era in which communities have been torn to pieces because of political failure.

There is no reason why we cannot improve on this sorry state of affairs – provided the political class decides that housing really matters. If it does, it will act decisively to tip the balance far further in favour of development than is currently the case. The balancing factor will be the requirement, in return for easy permissions, for greater quality in terms of space, volume and construction standards.

The failure to deal with the latter, over decades, is a post-Grenfell story waiting to be fully told. The second official report on the fire and its causes, expected later this year, will be another grim story. ■

Reform the rules

There needs to be made a clear separation between the building regulations and planning

On page 16 Julia Park makes a strong case for the reform of planning control and building regulation.

In the wake of Grenfell she explains how the multiplicity of overlapping rules makes compliance near impossible – and even more difficult to verify even when someone is in charge (clearly not the case with Grenfell). While condemning the multiplicity of regulations she also criticises governments' aim to reduce regulation. As the Association of Consultant Architects argues in its planning manifesto, there needs to be made a clear separation between the measurable – building regulations – and planning, a matter for policies and judgements. Planning decisions need only be conditional on satisfying regulations by condition and, where unavoidable, it will be necessary to demonstrate that complex conditions can be satisfied before the submission of the planning application; this will help reinforce the distinction. It will also lift a near impossible and growing burden on local planning authorities. (SEE our book preview on The Environment Act 2021 on page 65). ■