

Building Greater London

Ben Derbyshire looks towards an end to the Capital's crisis of affordability

The averagely priced London home is now beyond the reach of 80 per cent of Londoners. 'London, the Equitable City' is the theme of the second Journal to be published by the London Society's newly installed committee and under the editorship of David Michon. Alongside the Journal, this second occasional paper of the revitalised London Society refers to the most acute symptom presently being experienced by Londoners as a consequence of the City's inability to plan for and build sufficiently to house its burgeoning population.

The Mayor of London has set out what he intends to do about this issue in The London Plan. This document is remarkably frank about the nature of the problem and the consequences of our failure to deal with it before now. It sets out the statistics in detail and there is no need to reiterate them here - they are all too familiar. And The London Plan is quite candid that with the resources and powers available to it, the GLA cannot meet its statutory obligation to satisfy its own assessment of housing demand.

Boris Johnson has responded to this paradoxical situation by calling for more powers to be devolved from central Government to London and other City Regions. Devolution is a hot topic following the Scottish Referendum, and now seems like a good time to paint a picture of what a devolved London Economic Region might be like and what the consequences might be for its ability to meet the diverse housing needs of its population.

The London Society has done this before, proposing a Development Plan for Greater London as far back as 1919. It is relevant to do so again now because of the political constraints upon the city's leadership. None of the parties represented in the Greater London Authority seem to be in a position to postulate what this future might look like for fear of alienating middle ground voters especially in the outer Boroughs and Home Counties where, in an era of tight poll margins and coalition Government, support is desperately hard fought.

It's ironic indeed that planning and house building have become so contentious with voters that discussion of them is virtually taboo for politicians - even though an effective plan for the delivery of more homes is precisely where the solution to our citizen's most pressing difficulty lies.

London, a crucible of invention

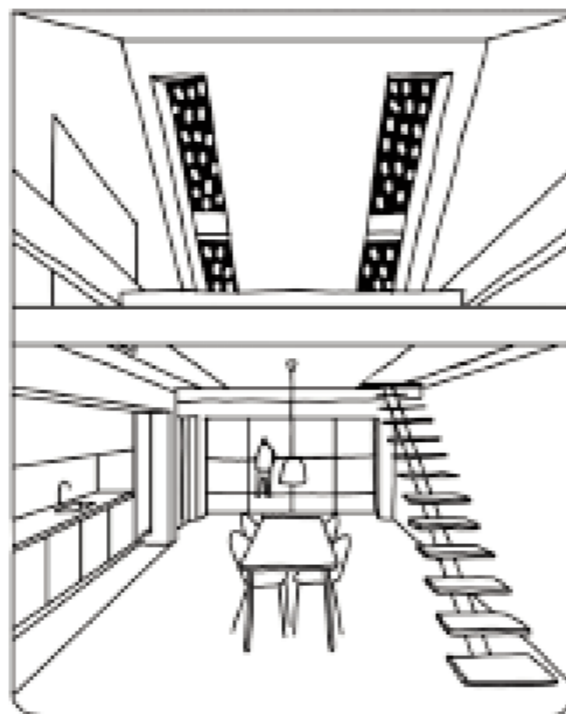
London is a world city. The global nature of its commercial transactions over centuries has resulted in a diversity amongst its population and a plurality in its economic and social life. It is a vigorous and inventive place. Enterprise, cultural and artistic innovation and entrepreneurialism in the city are not new. Records show streets teeming with diverse mixed uses over centuries. Today, whilst we preserve our heritage and conserve cherished neighbourhoods, we also enjoy pop-ups, meanwhile



uses, immersive experiences and constant change in the appearance and use of building space and the environment.

It's not a romantic notion to celebrate London as a seedbed of invention. The reason for pointing out this characteristic of our city in a paper on planning its future is to suggest that the ready availability of a diverse and affordable housing stock is not only necessary for reasons of equity and fairness. If we are to retain our position as a world city we must sustain the opportunity for those we have attracted over the years to coexist, interact, exchange ideas and contribute to the constant renewal of our economy and culture.

This is true, for example, in the case of relatively low paid actors and ushers we need for our theatres. It is also just as pertinent to the director of the soon to open Crick Institute who complains that his young research scientists cannot find an affordable place to live in the capital. So London is haemor-



rhaging its poor, its low paid, its young and its inventive, creative talent.

Rafts of initiatives have been postulated to counteract this trend. The Housing Forum report, 'Making a Place for Low Cost Homes' by Mike De'Ath suggests 15 remedies for 2015. The Elphicke House review for the Coalition and the Lyons review for the Labour Party pick up many of these ideas. The Mayor's own Housing Plan does so too, but still falls short by its own admission. Indeed it is often remarked that strings of such initiatives will never solve the problem and that many conflict with each other in the effect they have on housing outcomes.

So, if not more policy initiatives on housing, what will address the cost of living in London? This paper suggests two new levels of vision; a strategic revamp of the structure of governance and planning for the economic region of Greater London (Housing Greater London), and a tour d'horizon of the kinds of innovative housing solution that the leadership of such an entity could pursue with greater powers and longer reach than is available for the present Mayorality.

This second paper of the revitalised London Society picks up on themes raised in the first, "Green Sprawl, Our current affection for a presentation myth?", calling for a Royal Commission into planning the future of the Capital city.

We need new structures for the governance and planning of London

Brandon Lewis, the Minister of State for Housing and Planning, wrote to Boris Johnson, the Mayor of London, on 27 January 2015, responding to the London Plan. The minister acknowledges the mayor's commitment to address the increase in

London's population. But, noting the GLA's obligation to work closely with local authorities outside London, he warns against the expectation that they may help to satisfy London's unmet housing need. Stressing that the government has no intention of "raising the South East Plan from the dead," he goes further, to suggest that protection afforded to the green belt may impact on authorities' ability to meet their own housing need, never mind London's.

Meanwhile in a January 2015 survey of MPs commissioned by Homes for Britain, Ipsos Mori found that two thirds agree that there is a housing crisis and 86 per cent disagree that there is nothing more that the government could do to solve it. So what should Government do to assist London to meet its acknowledged challenges? Surely the answer has to be to put in place the structures that would enable a world city of London's status and size to organise and meet its own needs. The starting point would be the recognition that the footprint of the capital extends far beyond its presently defined boundaries.

Lewis's letter notes that past efforts to plan at this scale "built up nothing but resentment." Yet planning is meaningless if it is not a democratic means of legitimising (and compensating for) the disadvantage suffered by the few in the interests of the many. And, as has been revealed in recent debates at The London Society on this topic, allowing the widely acknowledged success of the green belt to become an excuse for inaction is not helpful. By way of an illustration of this conflict, Surrey's Campaign to Protect Rural England's 10-point manifesto for the next election has as its top two priorities:

"1) Protect the green belt and other countryside and green >>>

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spaces in Surrey from inappropriate development.
 2) Oppose excessive and unsustainable house building – especially where demand arises from outside the county.”
 Is it reasonable to exclude the demand for housing from outsiders when unquestionably the 56,000 residents of Surrey rely heavily on London for other aspects of their lives, and not least for employment? We fail to challenge the conflation of policies to protect the natural environment with nimbyism at our peril. The confusion creates a taboo which makes it so much harder to develop an inspiring vision for how Londoners and their neighbours can share the natural and economic wealth that surrounds them. Such a vision was hinted at by Professor Peter



Figure 1. Hanham Hall by HTA Design LLP

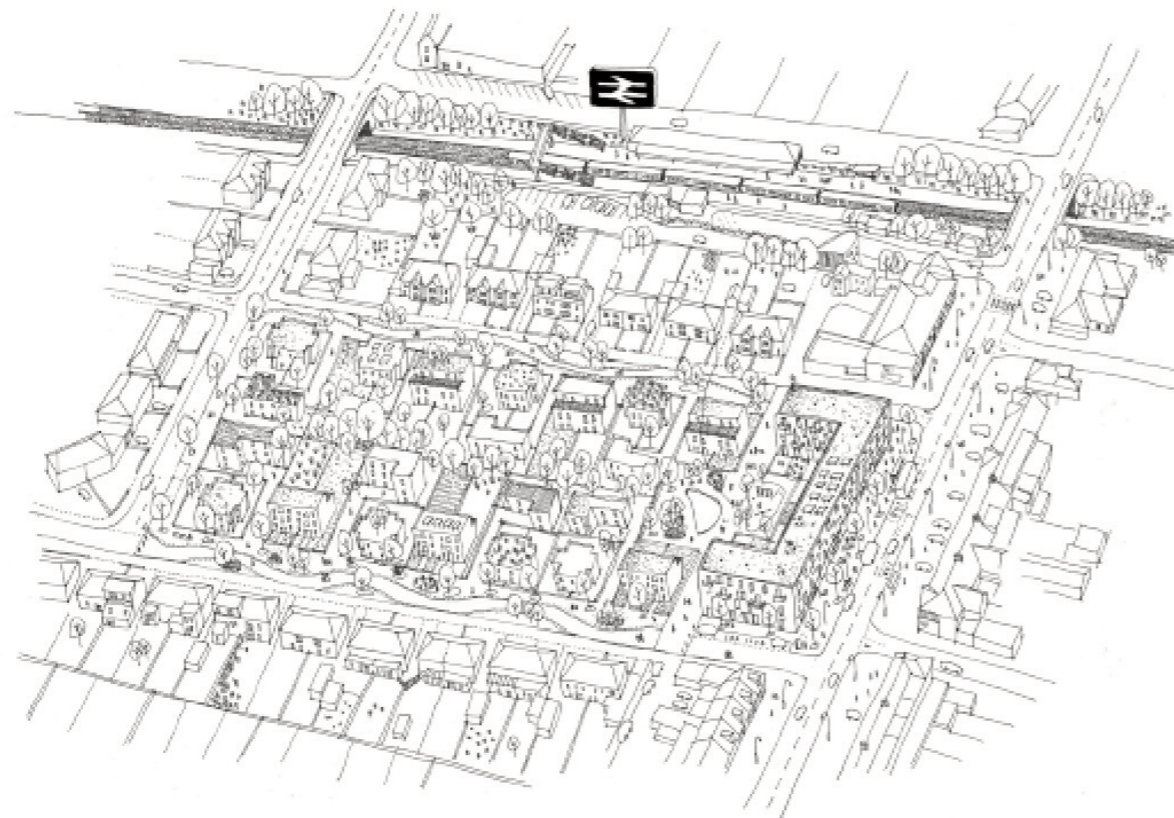


Figure 2. Supurbia by HTA Design LLP

Bishop of UCL in his contribution to a London Society debate on 5 February 2015.

The relationship between London and the green belt, the GLA and the home counties should not be seen in terms of a polarised debate between city and country dwellers on whether to build homes in the green belt or to prevent this, come what may. Bishop argued that there is surely a way that we can both protect and enhance the green belt as one of the country’s (rare) planning successes, at the same time as meet-

ing the housing and other needs of the capital.

The London Society proposes a royal commission on planning and governance for the capital

Despite the Minister of State’s strictures in his recent letter to the GLA, The Mayor did convene a conference in March 2015 bringing together its Local Authority neighbours in an attempt at collaboration over planning in the region. On the upside, these authorities must at least find a way to agree about the

threads of transportation infrastructure that bind them together.

But there is very little prospect (despite the similar political affiliations of the mayoralty, the outer boroughs and the home counties) of a meeting of minds over the binary debate over whether and where to build homes.

National planning policy imposes a duty to cooperate between neighbouring authorities, but the reality of local politics means that there is little hope of this happening in practice. With the abandonment by the Coalition of SERPLAN, and with the desperate pursuit of votes from the political middle ground and such wide disagreement on the issue, it is too much to expect that one party or one government would be able to reach a conclusion on appropriate structures for the Governance of London’s economic region. But we are completely disabled by the fragmentation of power and authority between central government (The Treasury controls 95 per cent of public investment decisions in London compared to the Bourse’s 15 per cent in Paris Region), the Greater London Authority, 33 Local Authorities and the Home Counties.

It is in this context that the London Society is proposing a Royal Commission on the effective governance of planning and housing in the UK’s City Regions such as London to break through to the level of intervention and degree of compulsion required to make progress. Highlighted in the Society’s previous Paper Green Sprawl, this would extend beyond the questions raised by the current mayoralty’s calls for more powers for local tax and spend to propose political structures for a city capable of determining for itself where and how to set the

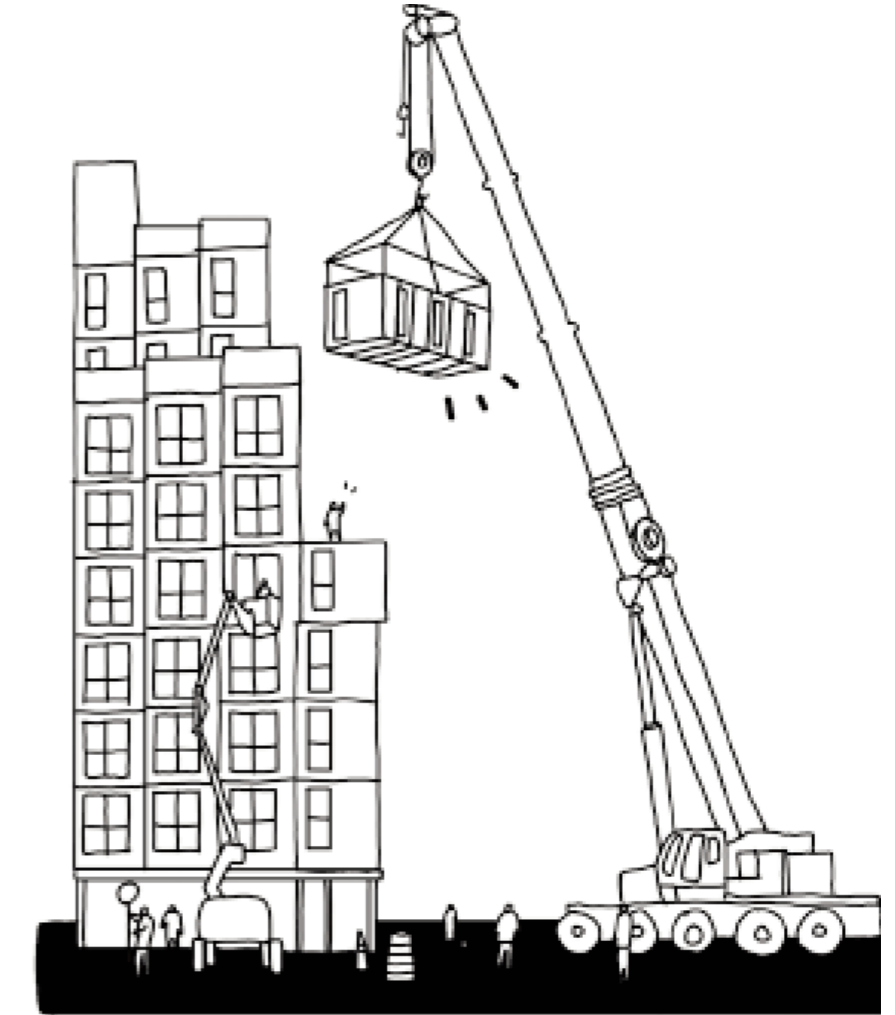


Figure 3. My Micro NY by nArchitects

boundary between its built footprint and an enhanced, accessible, more bio-diverse and sustainable green belt.

Building Greater London

What might be the outcome for a future government of London with control devolved from central government and a new settlement between the Greater London Authority, the Boroughs and Home Counties? Let’s call it a plan for Building

Greater London and speculate about a diverse range of initiatives that might emerge from suitably empowered civic leadership. Success will be dependent upon good on going management of space, public realm and buildings. Increasingly we need to acknowledge the role that management of the environment has in delivering sustainable outcomes of all sorts, and in particular that if we regulate management appropriately, we can and should entertain a wider diversity in the range of opportunities.

High quality management, in other words, is the antidote to inappropriate standardisation and the race to the lowest common denominator that results from it. Lest anyone leaps to the wrong conclusion that this paper is nothing more than an apologia for building over the Green Belt, let’s start with that.

As engineer Alan Baxter pointed out at the London Society debate on the future of the Green Belt, London’s phenomenal >>>



Figure 4. ‘A boutique hotel’ approach by The Collective



Figure 5. Inhabit

economic success generates all kinds of challenging demands apart from the commonly expressed requirements for housing and transport infrastructure: leisure, recreation, biodiversity, animal and plant husbandry, health, and psychological wellbeing can all be obtained from our relationship with the green belt if we protect it and invest in it appropriately. The question is how to think of the built and unbuilt footprint of the capital in such a way as to enhance the sustainable wellbeing of humankind and the natural environment at the same time.

We should thus reaffirm our commitment to protect and enhance the Green Belt with a new charter that enables investment in its natural resources. The CPRE and other protagonists are apt to view criticism of the quality of countryside as a Trojan horse for development interests. But in any event it's not acceptable to put up with the examples of rural degradation that are often cited as reasons for doing away with it: the scruffy fields of rusty containers, the monocultural agri-business, the failing golf courses. London has a duty to offset the environmental impact of its growing population. We must invest in biodiversity to bring back the stag beetles, hawk moths, hedgehogs and other species whose populations have collapsed during my life-



Figure 6. Quinta Monroy by Elemental

time. At the same time we should harness the opportunity for human well-being by improving access to and appreciation of the natural environment. An audit of the capacity of London's unbuilt land would reveal different degrees of suitability for

Figure 10. Soltag by Velux

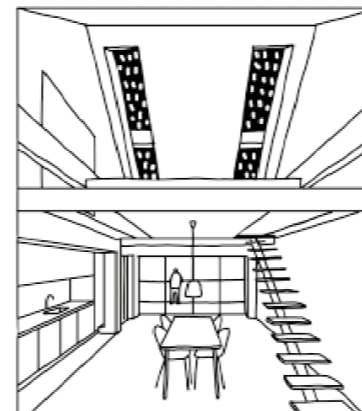


Figure 8. Paris Block by Gair Williamson & AnkenmanMarchand

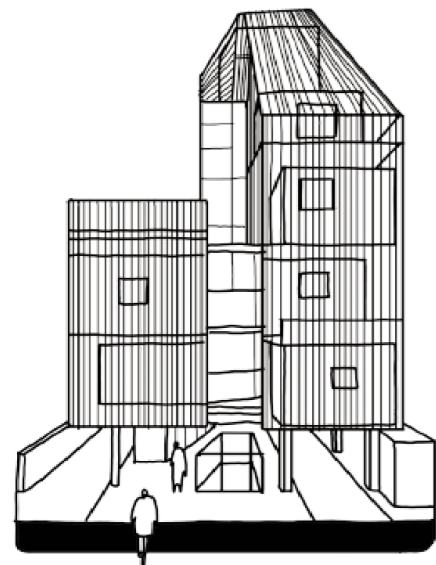
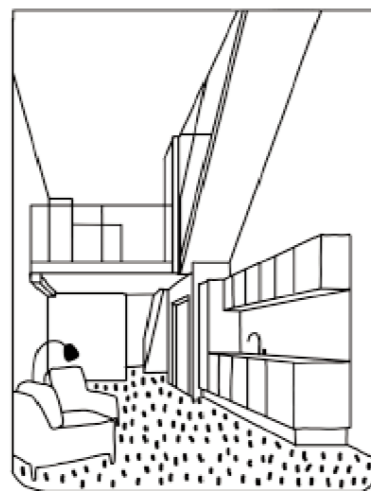


Figure 7. Songpa Micro Homes by S&D Architects

Figure 9. WeLive by WeWork - Communal kitchen



environmental enhancement.

The London Society undertook such an exercise almost a century ago and published its conclusions in 'London of the Future' under the Editorship of Sir Aston Webb in 1921. In David Niven's chapter on The Parks and Open Spaces of London we read that one of the great ideas cherished by the London Society is "the preservation (and where necessary the clearing) of a continuous Green Belt completely encircling London proper and providing a chain of parks, gardens, playing fields, allotments and 'nature-preitenes' within reasonable reach of the citizens. On the inner edge of this belt the ragged fringe of London could be neatly finished off with groups of new and seemly buildings—particularly where the great arterial roads cut across the green and enter London—both officially and actually. As it is, the town spills itself untidily and indefinitely out along the main roads, making a dismal trailing-off transition that is barely complete before the first 'free town' is reached. The London Society has prepared a detailed map showing how this great, green mantle might yet be thrown protestingly about the capital—the satellite towns and garden cities clinging about its outer hem."

How might 'the ragged fringe of London' be neatly finished off with groups of 'new and seemly' buildings? A clue to this might be found in the outcome of the HCA's Hanham Hall competition in Bristol, where developers were asked to come up with schemes to meet a 'zero carbon' development brief on a brownfield site on the south western green belt boundary of the city.

Achieving a negligible carbon footprint demands a design that encourages collective behaviour, sharing in the creation and consumption of resources and the disposal of waste. This principle of engagement impacts on the design of the new homes at Hanham Hall in such a way as to facilitate social interaction between residents, the landscape which is subject to communal husbandry and the relationship with My Micro NY by nArchitects.

The lesson of these schemes suggests that a newly empowered Mayoralty might have the confidence to encourage the reuse of all kinds of spaces of presently dubious environmental value. Such spaces are not confined to the city's interface with its green belt or to its low density extremities - re-useable spaces exist throughout the urban fabric in space left over after planning (SLOAP). Colonising them successfully will require encouragement and support for bespoke solutions that fit the particular circumstances of each.

Standard solutions won't work well. A confident city should encourage the kind of small scale collective effort that harnesses the entrepreneurial energy of its citizens in widely diverse ways. There are plenty of precedents for this, illustrated in the following paragraphs. Transforming London into a city of



Figure 11. Hillside Hub by Cullinan Studio

sharers is actually a process that has already begun out of necessity. Unaffordable property values have eroded the tradition of individual ownership and residential property as family investment so that now the majority of Londoners live in rented, often shared, accommodation. This has triggered interest in a new breed of purpose built development, and growing acceptance for the introduction of a class of institutional investment in well managed property rental businesses. Here the Mayor's Private Rented Covenant exemplifies how management might be regulated in such a way as to tolerate a great deal more diversity in the products on offer to Londoners.

At present there are few exceptions to the Mayor's Housing Standard which sets minimum design requirements. But, reassured as to the quality of on-going management, we could be comfortably tolerant and should promote a much wider range of possibilities. New York City's Mayor promoted a design/developer competition to demonstrate affordable living in downtown Manhattan. My Micro NY by nArchitects the surrounding countryside, connected to the built environment with green fingers and cycleways.

Meanwhile our once 'great arterial roads' are now in decline in many outer Boroughs, where the under-occupation of the surrounding low density suburban housing contributes to a declining service, and retail offer and flats over run-down shops remain empty. The recent 'Supurbia' study by London Society members illustrated how a change in the planning regime might enable the occupants of such neighbourhoods to share in the benefits of urban intensification. Collective consumption and the internet of things have the potential to hugely increase the capacity and sustainability of suburban areas, >>>

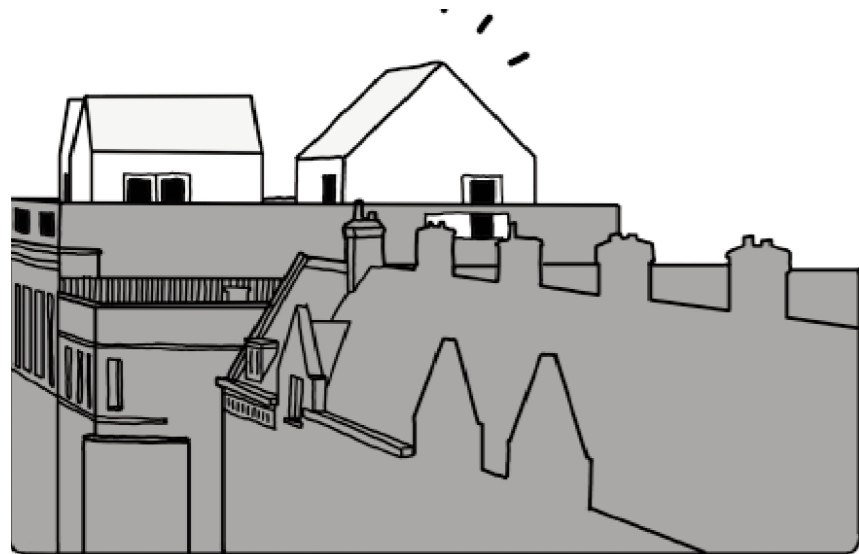


Figure 12. Didden Village by MVRDV

reducing excessive carbon consumption to virtually nothing, improving choice and diversity through enabling private home owners to add value by combining and developing adjoining plots.

Here in London, the Mayor has invested in Pocket Living, a developer of high quality apartments built to space standards below that normally required on the basis that homes are sold at 20 per cent below the prevailing market values to qualifying key workers and the discount is passed on to subsequent purchasers. The Collective, a developer of private rented accommodation, is calling on the Mayor to further relax restrictive design standards to facilitate 'co-living' environments on the boutique hotel model with an emphasis on clever design and shared amenities with added value services like pre-paid council tax, laundry and so on.

The Government has been rather half-heartedly promoting custom build as a model of development that permits both individual self-expression and the opportunity for households to contribute sweat equity. In London, the modest allocation of resources by DCLG to the Custom Build and Community Right to build initiatives was insufficient to stimulate significant activity. The future leadership of London should reflect on the immense success of the GLC's past 'Homesteading' schemes and recast these programmes.

Inhabit is a London based custom build company offering the option to buy homes at various stages of completion from



Figure 13. Carillion Igloo Genesis floating development in Royal Victoria Docks

bare watertight shell to fully furnished. The urban regeneration specialist, igloo, is developing a suburban model where customers first buy the plot of their choice, then select from a range of customisable manufactured homes from six different suppliers.

A much vaunted example based on the 'Supports' principle of Dutch pioneer, Habraken, is the Quinta Monroy social housing project in the port city of Iquique, Chile, where gaps left in the provided structure have been variously adapted and infilled according to the individual requirements of occupying families.

In denser urban areas the city should be promoting co-housing models in new or refurbished buildings. Initiatives of this sort require municipal patronage to compete for space with commercial development, but would meet the almost insatiable demand for housing which offers mutual support in like-minded communities sharing particular requirements with manifest social and community benefits.

In Paris, Unit 303 by Gair Williamson and Ankenman Marchand architects offers artists affordable live/work/gallery space. The Songpa Micro House by SsD Architects can be recombined to give single units or larger spaces for couples or families with a flexible interface between public and private space. The co-working organisation WeWork has launched WeLive in a converted office block, with two story 'neighbourhoods' sharing large communal areas and commercial grade shared kitchens.

There are other opportunities for the occupation of under-exploited space that should not be overlooked by future city leaders, especially the rooftops of occupied social housing and London's extensive network of waterways.

Building homes on top of other facilities in this way can create a compellingly positive centre point for a new development. The Hillside Hub on the Stonebridge Estate in Brent designed by Cullinan Studio, integrates a health centre, community centre, small supermarket and cafe with 50 mixed-tenure apartments and private facilities for residents. By grouping all these uses under one roof, the building creates opportunities for social interaction, and brings residents' homes right into the centre of a thriving community.

In Denmark, the Velux company built a prototype modular maisonette capable of being hoisted into place atop existing buildings, but this was never put into production.

The innovative Dutch firm MVRDV designed a stylish rooftop extension in contrasting blue on a brick built commercial building at Didden Village, the same firm's Pampus Harbour proposes a village of 500 floating dwellings for Almere, an idea

that has been taken up in the Royal Docks by the GLA in a competition for living afloat won by igloo in physical and



design terms is therefore immense, and is matched by a similar range of possibilities to improve affordable access to accommodation for Londoners, all of which come closer to realisation the more that London can take control of its own resources. Key amongst these is shared ownership and especially the so called Genie 'rent to buy' model pioneered by the Newcastle housing agency, Gentoo.

Building Greater London requires a complete overhaul of the governance of an area that extends well beyond the boundaries of the present GLA. The London Society is promoting a Royal Commission to consider appropriate mechanisms for UK's City regions alongside the rapidly emerging devolution agenda. We should re-assert the primacy of the Green Belt, refine the policies that protect it, invest in it to improve its biodiversity and improve access to it for Londoners.

This requires city leadership with a purpose and a plan to deliver diverse housing in a sustainable context of the kind London's citizens want - a plan for delivery, not just a spatial one. A century after the London Society first proposed it, we should finish off the ragged fringe of London neatly with groups of 'new and seemly buildings', particularly where arterial routes cut across the green and enter London. The vision

should embrace the concept of collective responsibility and shared ownership of the capital's precious assets.

At present, less than 2 per cent of London's existing stock is in shared ownership and the proportion of new supply in this tenure is around 15 per cent - nothing like enough to satisfy demand. Thus we look forward to a Mayoralty that has the wherewithal to provide a much increased supply in a range of tenures to ensure a sustainable future for London as first amongst world cities.

The Mayor's Private Rented Covenant exemplifies how management might be regulated in such a way as to enable the sharing of resources, including space, and simultaneously open the door to more diversity in ways of living available to Londoners.

The Mayoralty would thus be in a position to promote and encourage diverse, not standard, solutions to Londoners' housing needs, as others have done in Melbourne, Paris, Berlin, and Copenhagen, New York and in the port city of Iquique, Chile.

Such a diversity would be an appropriate response to the lively entrepreneurial and culturally inventive mix that has come to be such an attractive feature of contemporary London life. ■

THE LONDON SOCIETY

The London Society is for all those who love London.

The Society was founded in 1912 by a group of eminent Londoners concerned about the lack of vision for the future of the capital. Early members included architects, planners and engineers in addition to politicians and artists.

For over a century the Society has played an active part in debating key issues about the future of the city; including housing, roads, railways, the channel tunnel, bridges and airports. All of these remain high on the agenda today.

In the twentieth century the Society developed the first Development Plan of Greater London (1919) which was far ahead of its time and hugely influential; both framing the way we think about shaping places and the post-war planning put forward in Patrick Abercrombie's Greater London Plan (1944). This thought leadership continues today.

A century after its founding, the London Society is growing from strength-to-strength with a programme of regular tours and debates in addition to a well-regarded Journal. It's also at the forefront of debate around the future shape of London.

London needs a forum in which its people can discover and discuss the hugely important matters which face it over the coming years. The Society has been and remains that place.

www.londonsociety.org.uk

Figure 1. Hanham Hall by HTA Design LLP

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Figure 3. My Micro NY by nArchitects

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