



DRAFT HOUSING DESIGN GUIDE

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Design must shape space standards debate



Marc Vlessing is a founder director of Pocket

One size does not fit all, and nowhere is that more true than in London argues Marc Vlessing.

Every now and again, we come up with a new bit of sticking plaster to try and hold together our rambling planning system rather than opting for the braver course of root and branch reform. Everybody involved in trying to deliver development knows that the planning system needs to become more prescriptive and that the political process is too fragmented; the absence of any kind

of formal glue between national and local government is causing endless misfiring between well intentioned long-term national targets and local delivery. What's more, the emergence of localism – which is sending shivers down the severed planning spine of this country – is going to make things worse still. Everybody knows these things and yet we are told that culturally, this

country will never adopt the political and planning frameworks which seem to work so well in places like Germany and the Netherlands. So we keep reaching for quick fixes, which serve to frustrate hard working planners and developers alike.

The latest rubber band in the battle for order and cohesion is: The Space Standard and this time things are getting really serious. For how could anyone argue with Mayor Johnson that London has not suffered a deluge of poorly designed homes in the last ten years? Indeed, no-one can deny that some flats in the Capital - where land is at a premium have got smaller, although more often than not the issue is not about their net floor area, but simply that they are just badly designed. Add to this that we have a planning system that has blithely been delivering far too many one-bed flats in places where nobody wants them, and it is hardly surprising that some are calling for change.

So, we now have a Mayor who appears ready to invest much political capital in better design and Boris ought to be congratulated for opening up this can of worms. The job now is to ensure that his desire for a quick win doesn't get in the way of a good idea: for the truth is that if space standards are to work we, the professionals who have to live with

A Pocket flat. Plan over page



the consequences many years after Boris has moved on, need time – indeed we need the space – in which to have a considered debate and help create the structures which will allow us to perfect outcomes in the longer-term.

Parker Morris Standards, introduced in the 1960s, were strongly evidence based and involved a huge research budget to help improve the quality of social housing. Whilst similar resources are not so readily available in the present climate, it is particularly encouraging that City Hall has extended the time frame for consultation – which demonstrates an appetite to seek advice from all quarters and get a broad view. However, maybe Boris should relax a bit and take a longer run at this subject – nobody is going to be building much in London anyway over the next couple of years. So, like Edinburgh City Council, there is no reason why the GLA can't say that it will take its time over getting them right

A longer-term approach to the problem of poorly designed homes is not about introducing a one-size-fits-all space standard, but instead rests on evolving detailed design standards. Indeed the Dutch, who are endlessly invoked as setting best practice in this area, don't even have space standards. Instead, development in the Netherlands is entirely prescribed by a code of design standards and building regulations called the *Bouwbesluit*. When I asked a Dutch architect friend recently how it was possible that a country with a prescriptive planning system and a highly codified set of design standards was nevertheless capable of delivering some of the most imaginative housing in Europe, he responded, non-plussed, that it was precisely because of this strict regime that Dutch housing architecture was

so exciting. In other words, once Dutch architects have delivered against their quota of regulatory requirements, they are free to do whatever they like or as Friedrich Engels put it: *freedom is the recognition of necessity*.

But these kinds of design standards take time to sort out – you don't put them together by utilising the down-time of a few architects during the summer months – or indeed a recession. The Dutch *Bouwbesluit* has been around since 1992 and has been updated only twice since. Nothing politically flashy or dazzling about that then – but then I don't think this Mayor is engaging with space standards

because he wants to impress us with his political savvy. I think Boris really cares about this stuff, which is why I hope he will give the subject more time so that we can collectively deliver a regime which will last and be worthy of attaching his name to.

Whilst the Mayor is taking such an interest in housing, it would also be helpful not only to take stock of what the housing options for Londoners are today, but also how we want them to look in the future. Improving the quality of housing is an admirable aim, but going about this in the right way is absolutely crucial as the ramifications will be far reaching and impact on generations of Londoners to come. Family

housing is frequently talked about and this is only right and proper. But the reality is that 70 per cent of future housing need is for 1 to 2 bed flats, so an element of refocusing is required to get a better handle on the Capital's actual housing need. Indeed, rather than focussing so much on supply data, it might be a good time for the Mayor to commission some decent research on demand trends.

From Pocket's view we deliver non-grant affordable intermediate housing on small sites – for those Londoners salaried out of social housing, but priced out of the private market – and our housing falls below the proposed space standards.

Fortunately, officers at the GLA

understand that the intermediate market affects some 40 per cent of people in the capital and meeting this housing need is vital to London's infrastructure and prosperity. It seems that the GLA is supportive of what Pocket does as it meets a clear need in the market, doesn't use up precious public money and only applies to small-scale development rather than the volume house builder end of the market. By recognising innovation and Pocket's unique way of boosting London's affordable housing stock, an exemption has been proposed to safeguard our non-grant led intermediate housing model for smaller sites and this will hopefully help define it much more

clearly in the planning system. The latter is really important: a planning system which historically has suffered from being bi-polar – prioritising as it does only social and private housing – really needs to be reminded that intermediate housing can not just be treated as the forgotten bedfellow. So it is particularly welcome that the need for a clearer focus on intermediate housing has been recognised by the Mayor in all his recent consultation documents.

Since we launched our flagship development in Camden last year we have been nominated for all the main housing design awards and have also won a number of them. Essentially, Pocket offers a ground-breaking solution to help thousands of Londoners own a home of their own. Designed for singles and couples on a household income of less than £60,000, Pocket flats are sold outright at a price that is at least 20-30 per cent cheaper than that of the average home in the same area. Pocket homes remain affordable as the next purchaser also has to have a household income of less than £60,000.

At 38 sq m, our flats are all about the best possible use of space and the highest quality of design which minimises undesirable dead space, includes floor-to-ceiling windows, built in cupboards, bicycle storage and under floor heating to free up walls. It really is all about tremendous attention to detail.

The consequences of increasing Pocket's 38 sq m one-bed to 45 sq m, let alone 50 sq m, would be to increase delivery costs of the flat by 2 to 3 times more than the mere cost of building the extra space. Now not many people will feel much empathy with developers winging about the financial impact of space standards. However, the consequences for Londoners wanting to get into home ownership – and even in the current

economic climate we know this aspiration has not gone away – are severe when costs are reconfigured according to the prescribed space standards.

Pocket's next generation of grant-free 38 sq m one-beds in Camden and Westminster are priced at £180,000 and will be affordable to 60 per cent of London's working population. At 45 sq m, fewer than 45 per cent of London's working population can afford to buy. At 50 sq m, fewer than 40 per cent of London's working population can afford to buy. The impact, therefore, of higher pricing through, say, 50 sq m one-bed space standards is particularly far reaching. Moreover, the sales we have made across our first three developments, demonstrate that fewer than 8 per cent of our current buyers could afford a Parker-Boris compliant one-bed flat. What's more, increasing the household income threshold doesn't solve this problem seeing that our buyers stubbornly straddle the £25,000 - £40,000 household income range – above that level it would appear that people are finding solutions within the private market.

To be clear, I don't think space standards are a bad thing in themselves, but I do strongly believe that in London the challenge has to be to offer consumers variety and in our case that means incorporating good design into a compact space to ensure a high standard of living and

quality of life for people who are otherwise stranded between the social and private markets.

Cities like London are land-starved and the planning system is too slow at releasing consents - i.e. it is housing under-supply which leads to fast rising prices and thus smaller flats. Imposing space standards across the board, is therefore, probably, not the best way to deal with the problem. Moreover, it is certainly the case that they need to be graduated to reflect density – nobody can disagree that what works for Bexley is not necessarily right for Camden. My main fear, however, is that space standards may well end up exacerbating the situation by creating even less supply and artificially jacking up prices and overcrowding - i.e. if we're not careful, space standards could actually lead to a market in which, eventually, because of the sheer demand for new housing, unit sizes drop further still.

So take your time Boris, why the unseemly rush? You're onto a good thing and as the housing sector is on its uppers anyway, there is a fair amount of time and talent kicking about with which to re-think things properly. Put the sticking plaster back in the cupboard and give us something with enough stretch in it to last the distance. One size does not fit all, and nowhere is that more true than in London.

