

One hundred years of housing space standards: What now?

Julia Park introduces her new e-book



Cover image, Brunswick Centre, Camden. Image by Ed Hill

Just 18 months after the government introduced the Nationally Described Space Standard, (NDSS) there are signs that it is considering withdrawing, or relaxing it. The White Paper proposes a review; suggesting that space standards are a 'one size fits all approach', and 'rule out new approaches to meeting demand'.

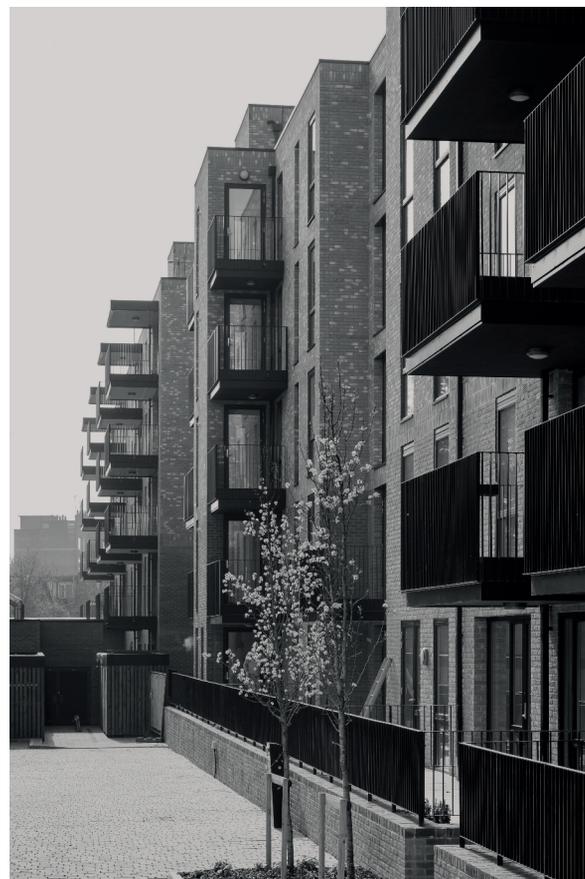
This new book, written by Julia Park, architect and Head of Housing Research at Levitt Bernstein, is therefore timely. Part history, part insight, part opinion, the account begins with a summary of the evolution, or perhaps more accurately, the comings and goings, of the various space standards that have been applied to new housing in England. Wavering is nothing new when it comes to the highly controversial subject of space standards, but few governments have wavered this soon or against a backdrop of such, rigorous cross-sector debate, and such overwhelming public support. When asked in the 2013 consultation whether a space standard was necessary, 80 per cent of respondents agreed that it was.

Reflecting on what history tells us, the book examines the role of space standards in the context of the current housing crisis and explores how themes such as under-occupancy, overcrowding, density, mix, land value, viability and politics are all part of the story. The final section offers informed thoughts about the way forward.

The chronology reveals that housing space standards can be traced back almost exactly a century to the Tudor Walters report of 1918. This ambitious document was produced as the First World War drew to an end. Relief that the fighting was over and optimism about the future were accompanied by some harsh realities. War is all consuming. As the soldiers returned it was obvious that general living conditions had become very poor, quite apart from the widespread bomb damage. A huge house-building programme became a social and political priority.

The Housing Act of 1935 defined minimum bedroom areas as a means to control overcrowding. Seen then as just a starting point, it still holds today. It was not until the 1960s that we got our first set of comprehensive, evidence-based space standards. If not aspirational, then certainly 'decent', the 'Parker Morris' standards are probably still the best-known space standards in England; perhaps even internationally. They were widely lauded and held for two decades before being abolished in 1980 by prime minister Margaret Thatcher, who considered them an 'unnecessary barrier'.

The historic account pays particular attention to the last ten years; a decade which seems certain to go down in history as one of the most interesting in the evolution of space standards. In 2012, the Mayor of London set a bold precedent by officially



Buccleuch House, Hackney. Image by Tim Crocker

extending his new housing space standards to all tenures. That same year, concerned by the uncontrolled proliferation of 'local housing standards', the government initiated a major review of housing standards. The introduction of the NDSS in 2015 was one of the chief outcomes. Cross-country and cross-tenure, it is now the only space standard that can be applied by any local authority in England. Despite being 'optional' (subject to need and viability testing) it is arguably the closest we have ever come to a national, universally applicable space standard. All the more remarkable given that the review was part of a cost-cutting, deregulatory exercise.

It is unclear how many authorities have adopted the new space standard, and it will be many more years before we understand the impact it will have. This informed account reflects on a process that saw the pros and cons of space standards rigorously debated by a pan-industry, 'expert working group'. After fierce, initial opposition from the housebuilders, the mood changed and >>>

Download the publication for free here: <http://housingstandards.co.uk/>

Julia Park is an experienced architect who has specialised in housing for almost 30 years. An expert in housing policy and standards, she is currently Head of Housing Research at Levitt Bernstein, a multi-disciplinary practice based in London and Manchester. Continually pushing for higher quality housing, Julia contributes widely to debate and publications, tests new ideas and shares theories. She writes a regular housing column for *Building Design*, contributes articles to other journals, and co-authored the 2009 HAPPI Report and the National Housing Federation's *Housing Standards Handbook*, 2016. Julia carries out training, works with national organisations and policy makers, including the GLA and HCA, and is the chair of the RIBA Housing Group and a member of the Housing Forum. She was seconded to the Department of Communities and Local Government to assist with its review of housing standards in 2013-14.



the new space standard eventually received an overwhelming mandate through public consultation.

Space is likely to remain a highly contentious issue. Many people believed then, and still believe now, that it would be simpler, better and fairer for the space standard to be regulated. This evidence-based report reopens the debate in the context of the housing market as a whole. It concludes that the benefits of regulation are likely to significantly outweigh any disadvantages, and could be a catalyst for far-reaching, positive changes in the way we live; assuming that is, that it lasts long enough to allow history to be the judge of that. ■

TOP: Brunswick Centre, Camden. Image by Ed Hill.

LEFT: Dombey Street, Camden. Image by Dennis Gilbert

BELOW: Dial House, Haringey. Image by Jo Reid & John Peck



Mobilising Housing Histories

Julia Park reviews *Mobilising Housing Histories* edited by Peter Guillery and David Kroll; RIBA Publications

This book is beautifully written and immaculately timed. Its 11 chapters combine personal experience, professional insight, well-framed views with meticulous research; so don't expect to get through it in a weekend. There is nothing sentimental about *Mobilising Housing Histories*. Instead there is deep concern about what London has already lost, what remains at stake, the pace of change - and our apparent failure to learn from history.

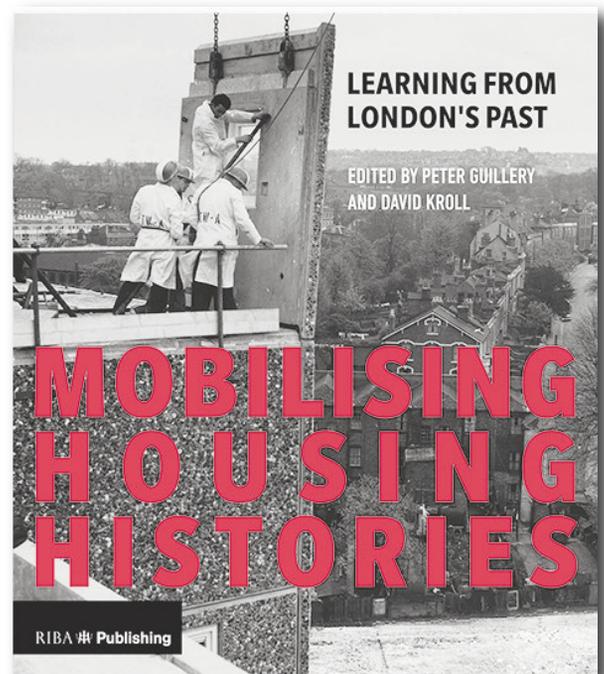
In his foreword, Owen Hatherley recounts his own experience of living in London. Arriving at 18, his first London 'home' was a hall of residence in New Cross (with 'a view of what was then the only tower in Canary Wharf'). He progressed to a shared flat above a shop, followed by a series of similarly impoverished, rented rooms; moving further and further out in an attempt to beat rising rents. It is, as he says, a very familiar story.

David Kroll's introduction prepares the ground for the rich patchwork of essays that forms the individual chapters of the book - each written by a different author. Most focus on a specific era but others cover a much longer period. Some concentrate on the history of a particular building (such as the Balfour Tower), or on a particular theme, (such as the 'sink estate'). They are presented in roughly chronological order and stand alone, as well as together - not by any means a complete history of London but a series of insights that collectively tell a powerful story. There has been no attempt to unify the style, or even the message, but that works well and there are links if you look for them. Although the essays mobilise London's past from varied perspectives, they all comment on design, social, economic and policy issues - as they must if they are to offer meaningful lessons for the future.

The book does not claim to offer solutions but it helps by first posing, and then probing, some clear questions. Kroll asks, 'What kind of housing is needed? And how to go about providing it? Housing has a crucial role in contributing to quality of life and wellbeing. These are therefore ultimately also questions of the kind of place that London will be in the future. Affordable housing should not be confused with building cheaply, which would have little impact on house prices; construction costs have only been a minor factor in the escalation of housing costs over

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Julia Park is an architect and head of housing research at Levitt Bernstein



recent decades. Part of the challenge is therefore to take a long-term and holistic view of affordability, which also means making London's housing more energy-efficient and sustainable.' He picks up on the big issues that beset the city.

What makes this book so timely is that London seems to have reached a tipping point. Until very recently it has felt like a city for everyone - a culturally diverse mix of young and old, rich and poor - and that has been critical to its success. It is a cruel irony that this success also risks being its downfall by damaging the very thing that made it so popular. London is only just hanging on to the rich mix of physical and social fabric that has created the mixed-use, mixed-scale, mixed-style architecture and the mixed-tenure, mixed-income, mixed-ethnicity communities that have made it uniquely welcoming and real.

New developments in inner London now routinely exceed 500 dwellings per hectare. The definition of 'mid-rise' is being stretched as much as the definition of 'affordable housing' and fewer spaces are genuinely 'public'. It's beginning to feel like a city for an unknown elite. Faced with a monumental challenge, the new Mayor and his team at City Hall have listened to many of the warnings and are beginning to provide some of the answers.

But this book makes you wonder whether they have asked themselves the right question. Before 'How do we build 55,000 new homes a year?' it would be good to ask, 'What kind of city do we want London to become?' Those responsible for the next London Plan would do well to read this book before deciding whether it's possible to achieve both at the same time. ■

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Classic Columns: 40 Years of Writing on Architecture by Robert Adam

Reviewed by
Riette
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Classic Columns: 40 Years of Writing on Architecture by Robert Adam (Edited by Clive Aslet with foreword by Sir Roger Scruton)

This collection of the Classicist Robert Adam's writings, spanning a period of 40 years, is an intellectual and passionate tour de force. At times it is highly provocative.

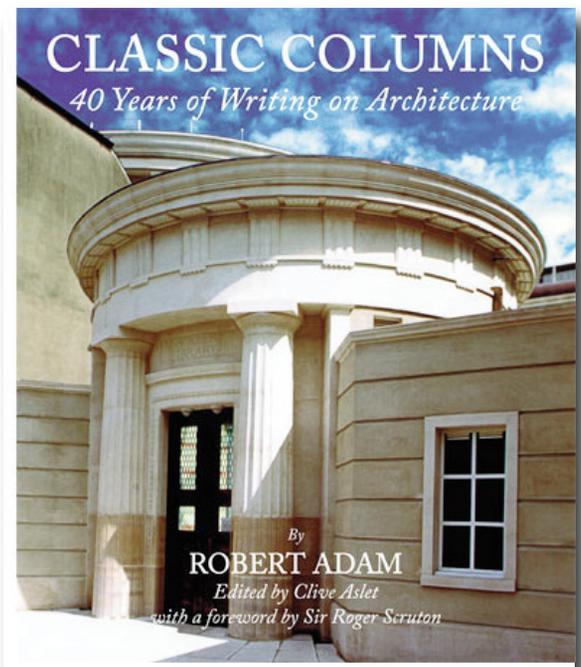
It covers a wide range of subjects on architecture as a reflection of wider societal change. Major topic areas include the role of traditions and traditionalism; classical composition as a design framework for today in contrast with modernism; our cities as having lost the focus on human scale and beauty; the disappearing architect (for example estate agents defining 'value' and therefore driving the quality of new mass-market homes); the impact of globalisation; the British desire to create arcadias; and a warning of what the future may hold.

I found *Classic Columns* to be an informative, well thought through and insightful perspective on the interaction between built and artistic form and changing cultural, economic, and technological forces. Adam focusses on the importance of incorporating tradition into architecture instead of meaningless 'copying' – the latter something the mass housing market in particular suffers from. To incorporate tradition is to incorporate humanism for Adam. He is fiercely against Modernism, even refers to it as banal. For him, life and our surroundings are never

"For Adam, in order to improve life in the city "... we must restore city identity, civic life, and communal responsibility but ... we will not do so if we try to recreate an idealised past that will not fit with the important changes in living that have taken place in the last two centuries"

just new, but always a continuum of aspects from the past, the present and future. He argues: "We no longer need to feel some duty to be just to prove that we are being modern, or true to our age, or of our time. This is an historical concept, not a traditional concept. The destruction wrought by the idea that deliberate difference was the only way to be authentically modern in an historic environment has been devastating" (p80).

Adams makes the case for the importance and contribution



of the traditionalist in architecture in many ways. I found his argument that built and spatial heritage must be for the benefit of an identifiable group or community particularly interesting as in planning policy terms 'conservation value' is generally the realm of the somewhat removed expert. Unfortunately there is no example in the book of a design outcome where an identifiable group or community was closely engaged in ascribing value and meaning with the architect: this would be an interesting outcome.

Adam conclude his book with a warning: "It is possible that we are witnessing in architecture and urbanism precisely the dialogue between homogenisation and fragmentation that is found in society, economics, and politics. We are, nonetheless, likely to see the continued espousals of the cult-like doctrine of modernism; the attraction of exclusivity, radicalism, and historical determinism will take a long time to pass. As a consequence, the persistence of what has become an almost ritual disparagement of traditionalist will continue" (p227). For Adam, in order to improve life in the city "... we must restore city identity, civic life, and communal responsibility, but ... we will not do so if we try to recreate an idealised past that will not fit with the important changes in living that have taken place in the last two centuries" (p129).

Whether you agree with Adam or not, he makes thorough, well-argued points even if at times highly personal. A book well worth reading. ■



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