

# A House of God?

**In the rush to fill the affordable, renewable, sustainable void, we may neglect the inspiring, renewing, sustaining fullness to the detriment of our humanity... and our divine spark, says the Rev Dr Paul Blackham.**



**If I wasn't** a Bible teacher I would have been an architect. Ever since I was a boy I have been fascinated by the power of architecture.

To see a venue for life emerge from the earth is always a thing of wonder. It is at least as inspiring to witness the resurrection of a structure from a former age as its vestigial elements are stripped away and transformed with the life of a new age.

Human life can flourish in a well-designed house, but it will also wither when it is crammed into an ill-conceived nightmare given form. When we find a home, a context, a setting where we blossom, then the architectural achievement disappears from our minds and we simply live. When we constantly bump up against the ham-fisted grid then we are all too aware of the architect's work.

Architecture is currently being

invested with such high hopes. We need so much new affordable housing and yet we want to preserve swathes of undeveloped land. On TV and in print we yearn for homes that will 'make us into better humans', and yet we surround the enterprise with the meanest, soulless standards. If earlier generations dreamed of utopias of political freedom and communist living, we are content with smaller visions of renewable, efficient, affordable habitats. From such building blocks perhaps we intuit a new kind of utopia.

The instinct to live in something more than a functional box may have deeper roots than we know. The ancient Hebrew Scriptures begin with the enthralling description of the LORD God calling all life and light into being through His Word. When the camera zooms into human life on planet earth we are given a fascinating perspective on the design brief fulfilled by the Divine Craftsman.

The LORD God made all kinds of trees grow out of the ground – trees that were pleasing to the eye and good for food. *[Genesis 2:9[1]]*

The trees are defined as first "pleasing to the eye" and second "good for food". How intriguing that aesthetics trumps function in the Divine Mind! It is not enough for the trees to be constructed as mere dispensers of nutrition. Before that the trees must delight the eye... and may we say, inspire the soul, elevate the spirit.

At the other end of the Scriptures, this time from the Greek writers, we find another architectural insight. The final vision of reality is a renewed universe with an urban development at its centre. The city is built with the finest materials and is, apparently, capable of drawing the diverse complexities of the nations and cultures into a single polis.

The wall of the city had twelve foundations *[Revelation 21:14[2]]*. From "pleasing to the eyes" is added

depth and stability. Our own London polis searches for identity. We look for words that will describe the kind of city we desire to be: tolerant, compassionate, diverse, creative, eccentric, multinational. From what foundation will the ongoing London rise?

In the rush to fill the affordable, renewable, sustainable void, we may neglect the inspiring, renewing, sustaining fullness to the detriment of our humanity... and our divine spark. The flat roof that does not draw our eyes and hearts to the sky; the absence of green amongst the grey; the bulb-illuminated gloom; the dense populace without communal space; the carefully guarded rigor mortis of an architectural corpse... is there not a higher dream, an ancient purpose, a deeper foundation?

*Rev Dr Paul Blackham is incumbent at All Souls Church, Langham Place.*

## Greening London's boroughs

**Over the last year our green and pleasant Capital has been getting less green by the day, says David Gwyther**



**Green** landscaping in new commercial and residential developments is a vital part of providing

sustainable communities across London. Yet over the last year our green and pleasant Capital has been getting less green by the day. Analysis by the Horticultural Trades Association suggests the country's track record in maintaining existing levels of green planting, and in initiating and safeguarding new projects,

is deteriorating rather than improving. In fact, evidence from plant producers and landscapers who for many years have supplied London Boroughs, other local authorities and the private sector with the green plants for us, suggests a reduction in the demand for shrubs and trees for large landscape and amenity projects of around 50 per cent over the last ten years.

Therefore new private developments in London's urban areas are seeing a greater proportion of hard landscaping installed as developers

seek to cut costs and reduce maintenance budgets. Empirical evidence suggests that even when planting is identified on drawings for approved planning applications, actual planting is subsequently scaled down in size and quality as the resources in the planning departments in our urban areas are too stretched to ensure the correct level of enforcement.

The problem is exasperated by a lack of recognition amongst urban authorities about the positive health and well-being contribution that plants could make to London.

Evidence of such contributions can be found in research collated for the Horticultural Trades Association by Reading University, who found that building projects with high levels of planting had 52 per cent fewer total crimes, including 56 per cent fewer violent crimes. Good planting therefore can reduce anti-social behaviour on London's streets.

It is not only on the streets that people benefit though, further research shows that work place productivity is improved with visible greenery (concentration, creativity,

patience, reduced aggression) and effects of "sick building syndrome" are reduced, with sick leave falling by 23 per cent.

There are other environmental benefits to green planting. A decrease in streets-scene and garden planting also impacts negatively on climate change and maintaining the water table. For example, joint research between the Horticultural Trades Association and the University of Reading has shown that urban trees are 10 times more effective in reducing CO2 pollution than forest trees, while green spaces and soft landscaping help maintain the water table by allowing rainfall to be absorbed into the earth, not directed

straight into drainage. This will be particularly important in new developments such as the Thames Gateway as maintaining an adequate water table and therefore water supply for such an increase in high density housing is one of the Gateway's major challenges.

This drainage is also vital to protect ground-level and below-ground level housing as with increasing levels of flash flooding planting ensures that excess water is absorbed into the ground and does not flood residents property as has already happened in parts of Hammersmith and Fulham earlier in the year.

It is vital that positive policy decisions are taken, properly implement-

ed and enforced to allow urban areas to enjoy the benefits of plants and green spaces.

The Horticultural Trades Association believes that London's Boroughs have a vital role to play in ensuring a step change in how we view our local environment. With their direct role in the delivery of regeneration schemes, approving new developments and enforcing planning permissions only they can drive the change need to stop London's urban areas slipping into environmental decline.

As a first step the HTA will in the New Year submit a model motion to all London Boroughs requesting the council assembly to:

- Increase the amount of tree and shrub planting required within planning documents from Regional Spatial Strategies to Local Area Action Plans.
- Support exemplar schemes which reflect the importance of green space and green planting on both public and private developments, including the use of planting to improve the council-owned street-scene.

*For more information about the campaign 'Greening the UK', email the campaign team at [GreeningtheUK@bellendenpublicaffairs.co.uk](mailto:GreeningtheUK@bellendenpublicaffairs.co.uk)*

*David Gwyther CBE, Director General, Horticultural Trades Association*

# Summer all year round

**Phil Flaxton, chief executive of Work Wise UK, says that If everyone travelled one day per week outside peak hours, commuters during peak hours would drop by 20 per cent.**



**National Commute Smart Week** is encouraging smarter commuting. In the UK, 25 million people commute to and from work every day. Most use a car (71 per cent), with walking (11 per cent), buses (eight per cent), rail (six per cent), cycling (three per cent) and motorcycles last at one per cent.

Workers in the UK have the second longest average daily commute in Europe: in many cases adding an entire working day each week. The average daily commute is 8.7 miles (a six per cent increase since 1995/97), taking on average a total of 54 minutes. One in ten commuters has a daily journey in excess of two hours, with three per cent of UK workers being 'extreme commuters', travelling at least three hours every day.

Many towns and cities around the country suffer from road congestion and public transport overcrowding,

especially during the morning and afternoon peak periods.

Commute Smart Week, which is organised by Work Wise UK, a Government-backed not-for-profit campaigning body is encouraging employers to take steps such as introducing flexible working times (including flexitime, condensed hours and nine day fortnights), staggered journeys and part home working. These will reduce the overall need for their staff to travel, with flexibility in the times when they have to travel allowing them to avoid peak times.

As is seen every summer with schools closing and annual holidays, even a small fall in the number of people travelling alleviates road congestion and public transport overcrowding. Wider adoption of smarter commuting will allow the levels of travel in the summer to happen all year round.

If everyone travelled one day per week outside peak hours, commuters during peak hours would drop by 20 per cent, or if everyone worked just

one day every other week from home, overall commuting would drop by 10 per cent. We have all seen what the impact could be on the roads and public transport.

Transport for London (TfL) promotes smarter working to help manage demand on the Capital's transport network. To support employers with practical guidance on creating smarter working in their organisations, a new Smarter Working Guide for employers is available from TfL.

Ben Plowden, director of travel demand management at TfL says: "In the next 15 years or so, the Capital's population is expected to grow by 800,000, which will greatly increase the demand on the transport network, particularly during peak hours. As London's population continues to grow, it's more important than ever for employers to take advantage of the opportunities smarter working practices can offer both their organisations and their employees. London already has one of the highest levels

of teleworking in the country with 10 per cent of workers teleworking all or part of the time. TfL's new Smarter Working Guide is a really practical way to help more organisations put more flexible working practices into place."

Smarter commuting does not only impact on transport usage, there are quantifiable benefits to businesses. The CBI estimates that road congestion costs the UK economy some £20 billion per year. Even a limited take-up of smarter working could save £1.9 billion per year within five years.

BT's home working policies have resulted in a 31 per cent increase in productivity; with savings of £69 million each year from reduced accommodation and overhead costs.

*Work Wise UK and the RAC Foundation have developed ten top tips for commuting smarter. These, and further details about Work Wise UK can be found at [www.workwiseuk.org](http://www.workwiseuk.org).*

# APP1: the looming crisis

Our previously published concerns about the impending imposition of the new 'standard' National planning application form together with onerous non-standard validation requirements seem to be shared. Here is Martin Goodall's Legal Commentary on the RTPI's [www.planningmatters.co.uk](http://www.planningmatters.co.uk)\*



**It seems that** the fears I have previously expressed about the new planning application form and the validation process

which will be put in place to coincide with its introduction may prove to be well-founded.

I was worried about the extent to which LPAs will be able to add their own local requirements, and it now looks as though we are going to get a plethora of differing local demands for extra information, which will entirely defeat the original object of APP1, which was to produce a uniform national planning application form for all purposes.

Planners have simply not been able to resist asking for ever more information, with the result that the form itself is going to be extremely cum-

bersome to use, and this will be compounded by demands for anything and everything the LPA's officers can dream up, including the architect's inside leg measurement and the site foreman's shoe size. It will produce a situation which would have made a worthy subject for a Monty Python sketch. It would be hilariously funny were it not for the fact that real time and real money is going to be wasted in this grotesque bureaucratic nightmare. And the government says it wants to speed up the planning process!

If you thought it was already a problem getting LPAs to register applications, the current difficulties will pale into insignificance compared with the Kafkaesque labyrinth in which we are all likely to find ourselves after next April.

The only way in which a development control disaster can be avoided

is for the implementation of APP1 and the government's accompanying advice on the validation of applications to be postponed from its already delayed introduction in April, while APP1 is thoroughly redesigned to cut it down to a length which is no greater than the application forms which were traditionally used by LPAs only a few years ago, coupled with a firm ruling (in the form of an amendment to the T&CP General Regs or the GDPO) forbidding LPAs to request any additional information before registering the application. There would still have to be the opportunity in certain cases for an LPA to request further information before determining an application, but only after it has been registered, and the scope of any such request should be strictly limited, both by reference to the type and size of the development and by ref-

erence to the nature and scope of the information which could validly be requested. This again would need to be limited under the terms of relevant subordinate legislation to avoid unreasonable requests on the part of LPAs and resulting expense and delay for applicants.

Unless the government grasps this nettle and tackles the APP1/validation problem, it will entirely cancel out any improvement in the performance of the development control system which might otherwise be achieved by the 2008 Act.

*The RTPI's legal commentator, Martin Goodall is a consultant with Sisman Nichols in Bristol. © 2004-2007 The Royal Town Planning Institute. Reproduced with kind consent.*

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# Students need to be housed as part of the community

Enabling young people to go to university is now an important and progressive initiative. Likewise, increasing the housing supply. Neither can be properly achieved without the other, argues Jagdeep Bhogal.



**Most people** would think twice about moving next door to a house full of students. Tales of late-night parties and anti-social behaviour have become the stuff of urban legend, reinforced by lingering stereotypes such as TV's The Young Ones. Yet paradoxically, each year conscientious parents across the country anxiously seek suitable accommodation for their student sons and daughters.

The massive growth in tertiary education

means that having students as neighbours is a reality that more and more people in the UK will face for the foreseeable future. And nowhere is this truer than in the nation's capital. Currently home to 218,500 full time students, in 2006 34,000 students originating from outside the city started their first year in London in private rented accommodation.

As the government pledges to increase the number of school leavers attending university to 50 per cent by 2010, these numbers are set to continue rising. Few would argue with the merits

of a policy that works to ensure that more young people have access to further education and the potential life benefits this offers them. So we have to be prepared to live with students. And just as importantly, they have to be prepared to take a constructive role within the communities in which they live.

At the core of UNITE's business is a recognition of both these facts. Wherever we build accommodation, we also strive to create long-lasting relationships with those around us. By providing high-quality, well-managed developments with hospi-

tality teams and security staff on hand to manage any problems or concerns, we nurture relationships between UNITE as a responsible developer and our local communities. Basing our business model on the re-development of brownfield sites and disused buildings, we also play a constructive role in the wider process of regeneration.

Similarly, by providing students with a better standard of living we aim to encourage a more positive collaboration between our tenants and other local residents. There is compelling evidence that students, in common with other sectors of society, respond well to a positive environment. By feeling part of the community, students can add vibrancy and richness to a neighbourhood that complement their fiscal contribution, typically £2.2m a year for every UNITE development of 400 beds.

All this is brought even more sharply into focus by the current problems with housing supply in the UK. Although laudable, the government's drive to get more people into university will undoubtedly place

increasingly significant pressure on privately rented accommodation over the coming years. Whilst the Mayor of London has acknowledged both that the private-rented sector has a vital role to play in housing Londoners and that it houses the bulk of students not in their first year of study, there is a distinctly worrying lack of evidence that these facts have registered at a Central Government level. Equally these issues do not seem to have been accepted by many of London's local authorities who are not keen on student only developments.

This year central government has issued two key planning documents in the Planning White Paper and the Housing Green Paper. Both conspicuously fail to propose specific measures to deal with the 'student factor' – something that a holistic and comprehensive solution to the housing problem must consider. This absence of joined-up thinking on higher education and planning policy must cast serious doubts on the new Brown administration's ability to address its objectives collectively.

Intelligent and responsible devel-

opment of tailored student accommodation can be an important part of the housing solution. As the mayor's Housing Strategy itself recognises: "Building specialist accommodation for students and others willing to live in higher density developments may also help release family homes currently used for sharing". A key example which reinforces this view, is that for each UNITE development occupied, up to 80 terraced houses may be released from student use and become available to other markets in the privately rented sector. These are homes which could then be occupied year round by young families or newly qualified professionals who are not yet in a position to buy their own property. Students will receive greater access to accommodation that better suits their needs. And privately rented housing will provide a much needed step on the property ladder for more appropriate tenants.

Enabling young people who would not in previous generations have had the opportunity to go to university is now an important and progressive initiative. Likewise,

increasing the housing supply is undoubtedly an imperative for the UK in the 21st century. What the government must realise is that neither can be properly achieved without the other. And the major lack of clear and succinct policies on student housing are proving to be an obstacle to development. Planning policies rarely consider student accommodation which is why the Mayor's recent publications have been so refreshing. This attitude now needs to filter down to the local authority level who have a lot to benefit from purpose built and appropriately managed student accommodation. The Mayor appears to have grasped the nettle, and has set about harnessing the impact of specialist student housing on the private-rented sector, itself a vital and under-utilised tool in the UK housing challenge. Local and central Government must now follow.

*Jagdeep Bhogal is head of London planning at UNITE 'The heart of student living'.*

# Criminalising breaches of planning control

The price of liberty is eternal vigilance, says Martin Goodall in 'Planning Matters'



**There is** one provision buried in the part of the Planning Reform Bill dealing with major infrastruc-

ture projects which made me sit up. Clause 130 introduces immediate criminal penalties for the execution of major infrastructure projects without the requisite consent. Two comments occur. First, why should it be felt necessary to threaten such sanctions when the developers will in most cases be public bodies or authorities, former nationalised

industries or other large corporations which are hardly likely to go about their business in the same way as Fly-tipping-R-Us Ltd or Cheapskate Developments (A Daley and D Trotter, props)?

The second point is that these criminal sanctions abrogate for the first time the principle which successive governments have maintained, even in the face of some vociferous lobbying over the years, that a simple breach of planning control should not in itself give rise to immediate criminal liability. Is somebody in DCLG trying to be very clever by

introducing criminal sanctions in a situation in which they are extremely unlikely ever to be invoked, and are therefore unlikely to be seriously opposed in this instance, so that it can later be argued that the principle has become established and accepted and the extension of criminal sanctions to other breaches of development control can then be justified on the basis of this precedent?

We should remind ourselves that the price of liberty is eternal vigilance. One hopes that this clause in the bill will be replaced with the orthodox enforcement procedures

which are already available in respect of other breaches of development control, including Temporary Stop Notices, Enforcement Notices, Stop Notices and, if necessary, an Injunction. Criminal sanctions are already available for subsequent non-compliance with an Enforcement Notice or Stop Notice, and that would seem sufficient.

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# Victoria transport interchange

...is no interchange at all, and would serve the public very poorly. A personal view by Tom Ball.



As a key transport node of Central London, Victoria Station is vitally important for surface

rail, the Victoria, District and Circle Underground lines, and proposed Cross Rail; London Transport bus links; enormous Taxi demand; and the nearby Coach Station. It is a Railway Station of international, regional and local importance. The pressures at Victoria are huge and growing, as a result of natural growth, and by London Plan proposals for substantial increases in employment and residential provision. This is understood and recognised as part 'natural growth' but substantially by London Plan policy.

The Proposals are for demolition of a huge area - of all but the theatre and adjoining pub ! Local history, climate and sustainability, reuse and recycling of buildings being upgraded, are of not considered. The development may be over ten years, but from here on the position is speculative, and problematic. At a stroke the huge area is frozen, while the enormously powerful land owner Land Securities, plays with the centre of Westminster. There are no guarantees.

There is considerable opposition and detailed criticism of the per-

formance of both Land Securities and TfL. These cover issues such as the poor overall planning approach; the lack of urban and civic design; the impact on the Royal Parks and the established urban environment; no respect for the historic surroundings or the indigenous commercial economy; and the lack of any provision of community facilities. The possible Section 106 benefits are understood to be taken up entirely by contribution to the improvements to the District and Circle line, and not to the local community, who bare the affront. The view commonly held is that Land Securities is in 'cahoots' with TfL ( which is the Mayor for London's responsibility ), and is only interested in maximising floor space, to the detriment of the public realm.

The Proposals offer windswept barren areas, as between Victoria Station and Victoria Street, with one 40 storey tower located in the bus station (stand 38), - the bus station being demolished; and another similar tower on the opposite side of Victoria Street. Bresenden Place is to become a canyon flanked by buildings of up to 90 ms: while Buckingham Palace Road has a continuous wall of 60 ms height, in places over-hanging the pavement. Visibility of Grosvenor Gardens, and the only mature trees in the vicinity being cut off from Victoria Station.

Given the wind turbulence already experienced in Cardinal Place, concerns are raised.

Given the Proposals' title, a rational and qualitative scheme for the Transport Interchange is sought; but the Proposals fail to provide this at even the transport and people movement level. The Proposals dismiss the provision for taxi services with the exception of a lay-by for 4 taxis; they claim it is another's problem ! The solution to the bus interchange is not to have one; to scatter bus stops far and wide. This results in all manner of exposed cross pedestrian movements, no concern for travellers with baggage, difficulties in walking children, international air arrivals, and subsequent confusions as to where to connect; and all with no weather protection of any kind. This for our "world city" is deplorable and must not be allowed.

It was reported that Mike Hussey of Land Securities was unaware there was opposition - and is dismissive of it. Viewing at the first public presentation before the Planning Application submission, generated



Station forecourt: as existing and proposed

substantive objections. It is astonishing that apart from reducing the towers to 40 storeys, no material changes were made, and no attempt to respond to the public disquiet has been offered.

*Tom Ball is a retired architect, planner and urban designer, and local resident. He represents the London Forum of Amenity Societies on the London Planning & Development Forum.*

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