

As we move towards a denser London, is it time to rethink the rules?

It may seem ironic that in looking for ideas for the future, we are starting with the solutions of the past says Terry Farrell

I've spoken many times about the challenges facing London. In the last five years we've added the population of Edinburgh to our city and in the next ten years we will add a 'Birmingham'. Looking beyond that the GLA have identified in their Infrastructure Plan the pressures that will be placed on the capital including the need for doubling the capacity of the underground system and building 600 schools for the predicted population in 2050. Meanwhile, London is still only half the density of other world cities like Paris and New York. So what are the big issues facing us as we move towards a denser London?

There has been much debate about a new generation of towers planned or under construction, and much of the criticism has been centred on the rejection of the fabric and DNA of the city we know and love that makes it uniquely 'London'. Density does not mean building tall, something which is often misunderstood. Many have questioned why we are not building more of the typical, street-based residential blocks that are found in areas like Islington and Covent Garden. Areas that we preserve and make 'conservation areas'. One of the major constraints, in my view, is the set of rules we have come to accept around daylight and sunlight. These rules are actually based on a suburban model rather than the urban model we need to move towards a denser London with a variety and mix of uses.

With higher density comes greatly improved quality of life – access to amenities and public spaces. The closer buildings are together and the more compact the city as a result, the less reliance there is on cars and the easier it is to walk and cycle with all the associated health benefits and reduction in carbon emissions. So it is incumbent upon us to review and refresh the rules, and how they are interpreted, and to understand the unintended consequences.

Our industry is starting to understand the scale of this issue and I've attended a number of events that capture these high level statistics. But when I say 'understand' I believe this is in the abstract, in a non-engaged and often purely theoretical way. Technocrats come to the fore with their habitable rooms per hectare and plot ratios but what really interests me is what it means 'on the ground'. This discussion, in my view, should be led by practitioners who are planning and designing the new and infilled parts of our city – architects and planners that are creatively addressing the issues of delivering new homes in a multi-layered metropolis.

Whether we like it or not, we are moving towards a denser London and with the mayoral election now in the minds of the public and the construction industry, there is no better time to start reimagining our future city. In the last few decades we have seen swathes of the capital transformed from former industrial land into publicly accessible, greened spaces support-



ABOVE: Kensington Court Mansions

ing new communities and vibrant new places. These reimagined parts of the city have been made within the framework of planning rules, often responsive in nature and created in isolation to each other. Layers of technical advice and guidance have been applied to new buildings, which reduce the opportunity and flexibility of design and leads developers to rely on a small number of 'safer' typologies and devices. These controls range from city-wide rules, like the abstract London Views Management Framework, to architectural detail like the BRE daylight guidance. Surely it is time to review these rules and question whether they are fit for purpose in order for us to move towards a denser London?

I've recently been working closely with Gordon Ingram, who's company GIA have carried out some fascinating studies on existing daylight levels within some of London's best-loved districts. These areas are full of life, character and charm but if they were to be assessed at planning stage using our current daylight methodology they would never have been built. It will be argued that the BRE guidance is simply that, however it >>>



Sir Terry Farrell CBE

BELOW: Bird's Eye View of Marylebone –
High Density, High Value & Tight Knit.
Courtesy of Bing Maps



takes an experienced and confident planning officer to capture the full opportunity and flexibility of its wording. Similarly, the distances between buildings in these areas go against the often quoted 18m face to face 'rules' of many development control officers. Our collaborative research with Savills is looking to establish that proximity is no barrier to quality or value. It is interesting, for example, that many of our most valuable streets in Kensington and Chelsea measure little more than 14m.

This has led me to looking again at some of the capital's finest streets and the emerging thinking in respect to mansion block typologies, which give a tried and tested alternative to the formulaic perimeter blocks we see all too often these days. Mansion blocks by their nature have good percentage of ground coverage (I'm always questioning my design teams to tell me the footprint of our schemes) and this means that a site's use can be optimised. An important factor considering less than 29 per cent of London's brownfield

sites are larger than a hectare. In turn, we can build lower and more cheaply which is increasingly important in a cooling residential market. This approach goes against the rules though. Typically, as we increase densities, buildings get taller and further apart in their 'search' for daylight.

The mansion block typology is closer and tighter and through its architecture moves the debate into a more expansive discussion of quality and experience rather than one based on numbers. Its elevated ground level together with its heightened ceilings on lower floors creates a spatial experience that goes beyond its Sub-BRE daylight levels. Its angled bays change the orientation of its rooms relieving the face-to-face relationships between neighbours and asking more demanding questions of architects. It may seem ironic that in looking for ideas for the future, we are starting with the solutions of the past. But it is the long standing popularity, flexibility and ultimately value of these buildings that may hold all the clues. ■