

A CITY FOR ALL LONDONERS

Housing Workshop
21st November 2016, 9.30 – 13.00

Residential design quality standards Table 5 Session 1

Facilitator in bold facilitator – comments in bold

Respondents in regular text

These notes are a summary of the conversation

Session 1, Table 5

Martin Cowie, Greater London Authority

Greg Robbins, London Tenants Federation

Robert Rumney, Rumney Design

Tatiana Telles Ferreira, Allies and Morrison

Christina McGill, Habinteg

Wilfried Rimensberger, Westminster Residents Domain WRD

Lisa Russell, City of London

Paul Plant, Public Health England

Camelia Smith, Lambert Smith Hampton

Neil Smith, BuroHappold Engineering

What we should explore today is to what extent the design standards are contained within the London Plan and how it helps the local Boroughs deliver these standards to the community. To what extent is it working, and how do we deliver quality and flexibility to allow for design innovation and speedy delivery? How do we deliver the right type of housing in the right place? We should think creatively about what we are trying to deliver and what the architect is trying to engender in terms of place. We are too segmented in the way we approach design standards. Given that we are all from different backgrounds, what do we feel about what those standards are and if they are working or need to be updated to reflect current challenges? These challenges include speedy delivery, better quality, including delivery of additional tenures of rent (engender different design standards), affordability in terms of delivering a good product but one that is cost effective. Also we are not just talking about just spatial standards, but quality of materiality, and so forth.

They have changed from the London Design Guide before, and in the new regulations, sustainability is gone. It is worrying because they don't have these standards for sustainability before. There is not a minimum standard set, so there is confusion for what should be followed.

Will there be a new guide, and what will be in there in terms of setting our social needs and affordability? And what will the developers base the information on?

I wonder if there is a conflict between affordability and longevity of buildings? We can relax space, meaning providing small homes for first time buyers, young buyers, and young families et cetera, because their standards and needs are different. Storage can also be revisited. We can be flexible, similarly, about developing quality but at different space standards. Perhaps there is a licensing system where there is a trade off between space and quality.

I wonder what kinds of standards of quality you're alluding to in terms of sacrificing space. What quality can be introduced to compensate for having smaller home?

Do we think that the general standards that are in use at the moment are too limited? Do they create housing that is too small? Are they not generous enough?

One of the things that has been lost from the previous regulation is the furniture exchange. We are not necessarily designing homes that meet the everyday needs of the user. We are not thinking of circulation, just thinking of minimum criteria of space, which creates smaller units that aren't actually livable.

For young people, people who are moving out as students, they are not creating a long term home. Two or three years down the line, those people are still there but have taken it as a property of desperation leading to massive overcrowding. There isn't a wide range of choice in private renting or social housing. This is creating a bracket of housing for people for whom these spaces are not suitable.

We are forgetting to create communities for everyone, not just for young people. You create a lot of flats and don't think about how they are fitting together. We need to create a community.

Addressing the current standards, we need to design for all Londoners of all ages and needs. How do our design quality standards address that? I don't think they do.

In the end you need to have a space for living.

If you talk to GPs, these spaces are a huge stress factor. There aren't also community spaces like recreational centers that help mental health (Agree x1).

What I'm hearing is that we can't separate the issue of standards from larger issues of mixed communities. We need to provide tenures for sustainable living, and housing types. If we are going to deliver and deliver quickly, we need some sort of guidelines to lead the approach. Some kind of consistency. How do we define quality, livability? I think the standards right now aren't unreasonable. I just think we apply them too rigidly.

We've inherited a national technical standard, and the London Plan is achieving those. But for London it should be different. We can't divorce the space standards from livability. We have to deliver much higher density.

So we need to drive forward quality in terms of application.

I do deal in outer London and the places beyond, and we are trying to get higher density in two or three story houses, which I think can be done easily. But raising higher quality would mean smaller spaces. How do you legislate for that?

We found with high density that the concern is how the different spaces relate to each other. There are huge balconies for example that are right next to each other and just don't allow for privacy.

Let's talk not only about standards but how we apply them.

Having clear standards allow designers some level of rigour that can be implemented.

Manufacturers have actually started making their furniture smaller to accommodate smaller spaces.

We did an exercise where we tried placing all the expected amount of furniture in a one bedroom flat, and it just wasn't realistic for how it could fit.

Do we prioritize some standards over others? For example natural light, head clear room.

That's one of the cases we mentioned: that London can go against the national standard.

There needs to be some sort of weighting system against the individual criteria for quality, whether that's light or ceiling height. So that would allow for flexibility, but you can rate the most essential aspects – distance between buildings, protecting privacy – which would give it more objectivity.

There are all sorts of assumptions being made about people on the other end. Who has actually reached out to communities and developed research in terms of what people want for standards? As a health professional, I'm thinking that you need to actually reach out to those user groups.

It's a totally credible approach: to ask the residents for what they want for living standards that can be delivered for the scheme. But you need a moderator to keep it in bounds of reasonability.

That would work on a larger scale, but what about on a smaller scale of development?

When you don't take responsibility, you don't take ownership. In smaller countries, there is a model of sharing, so what you can do is to engage people to help design the places where they are going to live. It creates a sense of community.

But there's not a guarantee for people that they will be living in those same spaces in two or three years.

It may not be possible in terms of guidance and legislation, but it would be useful to have residents have input into the design.

When the last housing design guide came out in 2010, there was a base of evidence that they went out to different places and gathered research. But it seemed the questions were aimed towards getting a certain answer, and they were framed very specifically, for example, "Do you

want more natural light” instead of providing a more open ended choice. The questions need to be framed more openly and robustly.

What are the most important standards to hold on to? The flexibility and adaptability factor is important to hold on to in London, and setting standards for a lifetime.

I think one of the main problems with all of this, is that the government is getting rid of all the standards and pushing development at any cost. This goes against the London Plan. They are talking about discounting right to light altogether. So how can we implement these standards when the government is pushing against it?

Depending on the people and locality, one standard doesn't fit everything.

So we need to find a way to make the standards more real and define how they can be applied. We have very little design acumen, which is frustrating, and we do need to explore typologies more carefully so we know what looks good and what feels good that doesn't necessarily tick all the standard boxes.

Obviously we have had a shortfall of affordable housing, and other issues, so we need to understand the problems with existing stock before we try to solve the problems of future stock. Density: how we apply it becomes quite rigid. Immunity: are our rules right on that?

The same can be said for build to rent. Do you have for example a balcony that you can only use a few months a year or a community space that can be used year round?

How are the spaces made for community or do they separate community?

It depends on the tenants.

The other thing is for whom all this is being built. There is still no space for young professionals who make the city and make it work, even though there are lots of buildings being built everywhere. So it's not just about building standards, but how do we actually put people in it?

What kind of fundamental approach do we want to take to provide affordable accommodation?

In central London, you have to assume that every room that can be used as a bedroom will be, and even as a double bedroom. You might wish some of that would stop, but it won't. Young families are stuck in these spaces. We need to use this as the basis for what the impact will be on the building and the people who live in it. Don't assume that a studio flat will have just one person living in it. Probably it will be a couple, and then a family as things progress naturally. It's the reality, and the reality that health services will have to live with. There can be community spaces that give you some more space, but at the end of the day, people do have to come home and live in their own spaces. Otherwise we're just building slums for the future.

If we take into account the changing nature of London, that it is aging, one would make the assumption that they need less space, which isn't necessarily true as people have a lot of stuff. But they should be making way for people who need more space, such as young families.

I'm always disappointed with how short-sighted the industry is. We tend to just throw out standard boxes, and I wonder about the way we build, construction standards etc.

The reason they throw out standard boxes is because they don't need to do anything else. But if you move to a qualitative system from a quantitative system, then there would be an incentive for them to think more in the round.

Do you think that would be applied consistently?

No, I'm sure it would be applied very inconsistently because you would have to justify the fact that you're producing a certain type of flat in a certain place.

The issue of saying we need to plan for different densities in different areas is planning out the criteria for different needs over time. There needs to be a longer term plan, 50 years instead of two or three years.

We need to look at the socioeconomics of where we do plan for density.

By the way, talking about public transport needs, data and metrics need to be rethought for what the needs are in terms of density as well.

I've been working on a scheme where the council has said that parking is used to minimize density. This needs to be looked at.

How do we drive this forward consistently and fairly?

By looking at quality of life rather than space. It's a mental health issue though. If you confront developers with choosing between providing space or amenities, it forces them to think about quality.

Sustainable homes do guarantee quality, which has been scrapped. Even if it's not on the design guidance it should be thought of.

There needs to be some kind of weighting or priority so you get a scheme that works and is balanced.

The old housing scheme had minimum standards and practice.

If you look at the guidance itself, it's a decent read in terms of quality. So what is it that's missing? Is it the fact that we're just not skilled enough as practitioners?

There should be also mandatory requirements that need to be hit for each scheme.

It's difficult to enforce though.

Mandatory could make it inflexible too.

I mean things that are important: sustainability and performance, for example.

For the building to be approved, it should hit some kind of score that fulfills a standard of quality. So it gives the kind of flexibility and a standard of living.

If developers have to hit all kinds of boxes, they would never be able to actually deliver.

How do you bring that weighting in?

If you want flexibility, instead of making everything mandatory, you make a list of things that are a priority, and if it reaches 60% of that, it works. It doesn't have to be 100%.

The key things from a developer's point of view is that we're not going back to where there are different standards for every pocket of London. Having the national technical standards is a bit clunky, but it does provide a level playing field. But there does have to be some flexibility on top of that.

Some of these big applications take years, three or four years, and people get worn down and just want to get it done at any cost. So it doesn't work in practice.

If you want flexibility, you have to set the standards by different topics. It's about trading off. Some things are mandatory, other things not.

So it's like a menu system.

This might actually drive developers to innovate and drive quality, because they would want to be top ranked amongst their competition.

It will be different from Borough to Borough, so they can choose different courses off the menu system.

What about space itself?

If you want to have flexibility of space, you could have margins like a 10% deviation from the standard. So a one bedroom flat is 30 square meters, and there can be some deviation which is linked to other quality criteria. So if you're hitting those other quality standards, there can be ways to offset the space.

This could be an idea, for example if there is community space that allows for storage.

It's not just spatial standards in terms of floor space, but also how they are configured and orientated in that context: whether they have a balcony or not for example, and the orientation.

We should also give examples of what can be achieved to developers.

We need something that can represent in a graphic way what is a good level of development.

But those exist. Things that show what is a good range of floor to ceiling space, for example.

But it's not promoted. These things should be communicated.

We need to do more across the board, promote it in a different approach.

The planning departments are so overworked that they don't have time.

We just had a case where a contractor created his own boards and promoted his own standards. It was kind of ridiculous, so we need an official standard.

Looking at residential design standards, what are the three most important things?

Flexibility, and to have a scored system to facilitate it. And how to describe a good community, how to build good communities, and building up real neighborhoods in a wider context.

My only concern about driving down space standards-

We're not driving them down.

But they're not going to go up. I can't see that. I think some developers will be more scrupulous and find a way to maximize profits.

Size and affordability are proportional: you're going to pay more for more space. It's a given.

I disagree with that. Because if you make flats smaller, there will be less of a return to the public purse and the larger community in terms of public facilities.

Well, we're not disagreeing about infrastructure but rather the number of flats.

It might create a short term windfall to the local authority, but we've got to be thinking about the long term return to the public purse.

First we need to think about what kind of development we want where, then we can reflect on the kind of living, the type of resident. In terms of the standard approach that is being applied everywhere, we need to clarify what we want and where.

I think the solution we're arriving at is that it's fitting the aspirations very well.

Who are we trying to accommodate, precisely? It shouldn't be a grey mass of people, but we need to be very clear about who we are accommodating. (Agree x4)

There are different models of living that provide different needs. The issue is that if they are considered as HMOs, there need to be exceptions made in different situations. They'll be coming from left field for planners, but they do need to be taken into account.

Residential design quality standards

Table 5 Session 2

Facilitator in bold facilitator – comments in bold
Respondents in regular text

Session 2, Table 5

Martin Cowie, Greater London Authority

Julia Park, Levitt Bernstein
Viv Evans, Royal Borough of Kingston upon Thames
Kim Hopkins, City of Westminster
Paul Clarke, GLA
Tony Mulhall, RICS

[Moderator introduces the topic for discussion] Today, I'd like to address what we deliver, who we deliver it for, and where we deliver. How do you think this current approach could change for the better? To deliver more, deliver more quickly, and at a high quality. Generally speaking, the standards for housing have improved over the years, but how do we ensure we consistently have high quality places where people want to live, and which cater to the diversity of London?

The reaction I get locally to design is fairly wide ranging. I've been in government for over 30 years, and I remember when I started it was also question of how you define design quality in terms of architecture and planning. So we're still having the same debate in Kingston, defining standards of floor space, the provision of three bedroom units as opposed to one bedroom units, and the perception that there aren't enough family homes. We are also dealing with what is regarded locally as tall buildings, as we don't have one yet over 20 stories but one is being built, which is causing a huge debate about materials and design. All the residents are complaining about design quality and have their own individual opinion for what design should be. We are seeing a significant shift in standards across accommodation in London, and the cost of accommodation per square meter. It is getting more expensive which provides a different kind of living environment that doesn't fall into any user class. The class system is outdated nationally and it needs to change. I see quality in terms of materials, location, as well as reflective of the historic character of the place.

It is a quality development.

I think it's quite shocking that collective living spaces aren't passed for housing standards. Prisons, hospitals, et cetera. Housing right now is intended for a specific person, because it isn't cheap. We need to think about what is adequate for long term living, even for students. Flat-sharing gets wearing as you get older, but about 30% of my office is still doing it into their 40s. We need to put safeguards in place. Some of those are quantitative, some are qualitative. It's concerning that developers see the solution as stacked micro-flats. The average is £22,000 per year for a one bedroom flat. Micro-homes are acceptable for a certain demographic, but ideally

should be temporary, three years tenancy maximum, and not for profit, so young people have a chance to live at an affordable price, but then move on and give someone else a chance.

Those micro-flats are part of a larger scheme of development, but yes, we need to strike a balance.

We had a 300 unit student scheme in Kingston, and leader of council has said that they need to co-opt it for other key worker residents.

Why is it that people don't understand the difference? Supposing we knew what we wanted to do and where, and who we needed to deliver for specifically, how do we define the standards we want to apply? Do we think the current standards are too rigid? Do they not allow for enough flexibility?

The point that Viv's making about the change of residents is an important point. What is the market need today for durable, affordable housing stock? It could be different in ten years. Collectives come out of nowhere, which provoke the need for different housing needs like the micro-house concept. I don't know how durable and affordable that is going forward. If there were a greater regard to housing standard in a long term sense, the lifetime of those buildings wouldn't be so limited.

We understand this student standard of living as temporary. It could be a long term sustainable product as long as its tenure was protected and didn't find its way into being permanent family homes. We know that some pocket living homes are now for families because those people aren't able to move on to something better.

So we need to reflect the current needs of the market.

We need to be thinking about broader and more diverse needs, such as older populations, and multi-generational families. They aren't classifiable under our current regulations.

How do we create this framework that provides for a broader, more refined definition, and gives us more flexibility but drives a more qualitative approach?

More urban design standards can be applied across the board, but they need to be drilled down into subgroups. There are some things we can say about London as a whole, but some things you can only say about certain parts of London and it's the same for housing.

Are there any sort of fundamental standards or requirements that we want to see through in any form of tenure or typology that are a must-have, and the rest are a negotiated type of product that we can deliver? Things around floor space, levels of light, balconies, can be treated differently.

There's a link between places and financial value. Our proposition was that if people are paying a premium for good quality places, then the developer sectors would follow that demand. If you can do that then you lift the burden of regulation off the planning system so it's self-policing. So you end up with a product that's driven by standards. We discovered that people were paying a premium for good quality standards which didn't necessarily meet the space standards. If the industry begins developing to standards which people discriminate in favor of – and they do need to have a choice, because the problem in London now is that people don't have the choice –we use these signals for getting better quality rather than getting poorer quality.

What sets these developments apart? What were the key indicators that made them work in terms of standards?

This is part of the challenge, because we ended up talking about standards as planners, not tax incentives for example.

But before we had the London Plan, homes were getting smaller and worse. That's why we got the plan. So if we adopt your hypothesis, there is high quality value in homes, but that's only for the rich, not the poorer classes at all.

The case that provides the best direction is New Holland and Harrow.

I don't think that's indiscriminate of larger areas, Kings Cross for example. It's coming through a planning system that has to respond to one individual plot.

Then is there a need for a master plan which covers that? Something within these areas that patches everything together?

I think we're talking about where we develop. Where is it appropriate to develop housing? We still need a set of guidelines or standards that we can refer to as a base, in which we can build flexibility.

I saw a scheme recently of office to residential development. The flats are thirteen and a half square meters and that's the flat, not a room. The developer was going to cut the building into four flats then got it redesigned and cut it into eight flats. So that's what happens when there aren't any standards. In Hong Kong, there are two square meter flats that are just little pods – which is potentially what could happen.

I'm arguing in favor of higher standards-

What are those high standards?

Part of them were qualitative. The design of the buildings and open spaces. A huge part was the inclusion of a school. These places are driven by good schools. It's about improving standards but also for the development sector. There's a lot of misinformation in the sector.

The London Plan is strategic for defining standards. They need to be set at a strategic level and consider what do they need to be across the whole of London, and then it should be up to the Boroughs to define what their individual needs are. The last thing you want is a universal standard because right now, we're getting this from developers that doesn't provide distinctive solutions to the local flavor.

Current standards have been applied from the national standard, as we know. Do we think that the basics are reasonable? 37 square meters sounds reasonable.

The national standard mirrors the GLA standard, so you led the way in fact. In 2008, Boris Johnson said that no home would be smaller than 50 square meters. 37 to 39 was introduced for single people, and we think that was right. But our practical needs haven't changed substantially; the only thing that has changed is the sense of desperation. There are things different about London from the rest of the country in terms of living expectations. People have much more accessibility to other facilities here. So some of those sorts of things could be justification for less living space, but the vast majority of what we do in our homes is pretty

universal – sleeping, bathing, et cetera. There are nuances, but in family life, there aren't not massive ones that suggest that we can start chopping homes in half or shaving off three square meters from a bedroom.

I find that sometimes, having worked in an outer Borough, in London there are very generous garden standards which we apply slavishly for developing a place. We could apply a significantly high density if we could apply a little more creativity to the way we configure. The Borough has to be in charge of how they apply those standards creatively.

The GLA doesn't allow for creativity though. It's up to the Boroughs and they're pretty archaic.

In the open London Borough where I am, people can be pretty precious about the space standards. We should think about what high density looks like, and what rebuilding density in suburbia would look like. It will go beyond just one Mayor's term in office.

Would you be prepared to push through a different sense of standards?

What we're trying to do is define what our community standards are.

So that means a trade off between amenities. That's what we're moving towards I think.

I think it's more within the public realm than within the private realm. Privacy distance for example, and we need good sound proofing everywhere. Accessibility is critical, and internal space as well.

What about single aspect and overheating?

Overheating is such a problem. One of the best things that London introduced was for environmental purposes.

Is there a way you could design for a more provincial provision? In the London Plan it's there – that we're not going to develop for single aspect. It's so limiting, because it switches off the architects.

One of the clever things was that you could stick a green roof on a building but trade off for soundproofing. So we need to make sure that these things, if they are traded off, still meet a baseline compensation for quality.

So how do we set a framework out that gives that baseline and engenders a bit of creativity?

But how many of them really stifle creativity? Not soundproofing certainly.

Space, amenities, distance, the things that affect how development is configured. Ceiling heights, car parking.

But you could say that however beautifully your home is designed, overlooking is overlooking. In London as a whole, we need to accept that we live in a hugely dense place, so we have to expect that privacy distances won't be the same as in the suburbs. Broadly speaking, people

have got to get used to being less selfish. I'm just wary of saying high quality can excuse this, that, and the other. If it's too small for example, it still too small and has poor functionality.

Surely there is a threshold that needs to be satisfied for functionality, or it won't work.

I think it's possible to actually develop an index of quality that can be interpreted locally.

Reflected on housing, there are mandatory requirements to meet the London Design Guide as it was originally formed. I think we have a question about densification overall. Quality should be tied in. I think we've lost the aspiration for quality, because it's become codified.

GLA has to be more proactive in the direction in the way Boroughs apply the approach. Otherwise, they simply won't deliver.

Everything in London we build should be high quality. It means mostly built to last, to have a long life: future-proofing, and suitable to be fully occupied with comfort, so we know that when every bedroom in a flat is being used the whole thing still works. Mostly I think we need to be looking for a much longer life that would make a huge difference to quality. There is potential to affect a much larger amount of people, not just the people who live there in the building but the people who live around there in the area as well. I'm worried about what these huge blocks of flats that are being put up will look like in 40 years' time. What is going to be the mechanism when they need to be serviced when there is individual ownership?

So a certain type of building needs higher quality of standards in higher density.

You've brought up a management issue, which planning doesn't get involved in. So how do we build that into what we are talking about?

From a policy point of view, there is a connection between standards and innovation. The easy thing to administer is standards. So the other challenge is the climate change challenge, and most people would think that we need some sort of innovation to respond to that.

I really don't agree with you. A good standard shouldn't stifle innovation.

I think what he's saying is we need to look at standards more innovatively.

I'm not sure what innovation means to be honest. I think people use that word when they're stuck.

So we need to look at standards more progressively. What are the top three things we need to look at? Perhaps there need to be a menu of options that serve different typologies.

Space standards are very important. No one is saying what the future density looks like, and as a strategic document, there needs to be definition about what maximum and minimum density is expected. What does the Mayor mean by higher density? What is the strategic level of defining quality? It needs to be clearer.

I think rather than a menu, it should be defining what works where and why.

At a strategic level, could there be a code of quality introduced that would be reasonable? How do we allow a degree of flexibility rather than a single table that everyone refers to and has to meet?

We shouldn't set up with flexibility as a goal but rather standards that work in certain locations. So there's flexibility overall. I do feel empowered about standards because they protect from developers who want to go to the bottom line.

We need planners to say no to developers.

You're the ultimate safeguard; we architects can only do what our clients want us to do.

There is the dumbing down of place-,

Which unfortunately goes against what you set out as an aspiration.

The bottom line is we have to increase density, especially in the suburbs. That is going to compromise spatial standards, not necessarily internal special standards because I'm passionate about those, but external spaces.

Private standards can translate into public or shared standards.

It's raising the right kinds of questions, but in a world that isn't legislated for it.

What's going to happen in ten years' time when these buildings start to look really dated?

It's raising land value and creating a new norm, making something acceptable.

But with proper safeguards and proper use of tenure, we've come to a point where we need it.