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Densifying suburbia

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Localism and small-scale interventions could play an important part in increasing housing densities, writes Matt Goodwin. But the inflexible reality is enough to deter all but the richest players



Matt Goodwin, director of Architecture Initiative

People choose to live in suburbia for a number of reasons: amenity, infrastructure and relative affordability, among other lifestyle-related choices. While the creation of new suburban communities will potentially deliver large numbers of new homes, the delivery timescales as well as the cost of introducing new infrastructure is substantial.

The “city suburb” has its origins in post-industrial Britain. Peripheral London was transformed into a “city of villages” connected by an excellent transport infrastructure to the metropolis. Development densities in these areas of 50 dwellings per hectare (dph) were established at a time when the requirement for housing was much lower and are largely based on the traditional terraced house form.

To be economically viable in today’s market conditions, development densities need to be at least 70 dph. In certain circumstances within existing suburban settings, densities of up to 150–200 dph are achievable, while still responding to the established local scale. One- or two-bedroom apartment projects that achieve these densities can work alongside the existing stock to encourage a more diverse demographic to include single people, first-time buyers and key workers as well as families.

Adding diversity to local housing stock also encourages positive movement in the market, offering “empty nesters” who remain in under-utilised family housing the opportunity to move into more appropriate accommodation while remaining in their local area, freeing up much-needed housing for the next generation of families.

Densifying suburbia will not be achieved through large-scale development but more likely through a range of interventions which, at the smaller scale, will include the high-density development of infill sites, redundant commercial premises and re-use of existing buildings. At the larger scale, this may involve more complex initiatives which require innovative master-planning and site assembly to transform under-utilised

areas within these communities.

Localised development is by its nature almost entirely site-specific and can often be in conflict with established and more strategic NPPF and LDF (Local Development Framework) policy. While forming an essential part of planning protocol, these policies often take years to prepare and implement. Specific site allocations in particular are a rather blunt instrument that offers little sensitivity to local conditions. In a constantly changing development environment planning policy can be rigid and inflexible, deterring all but the boldest and those with the deepest pockets from pursuing innovative but non-policy-compliant projects, particularly on smaller sites where the opportunity cost of challenging policy potentially outweighs the potential commercial benefit.

Architecture Initiative is currently working with a local developer on a series of projects within a defined local area of south-west London, parts of which are designated LSIS (Locally Significant Industrial Sites). The site-specific designation makes sense in principle, but the Berlin Wall approach to defining the extent and boundaries of the LSIS is nonsense. Working with the developer we have generated a masterplan that would re-invent an under-developed area into a vibrant mixed-use development, significantly improving the industrial offer alongside a much-needed residential intervention. The initiative requires the LSIS boundaries be redefined and while planning officers provided excellent feedback and support for our tabled proposals during pre-application consultation, the policy team have brought the shutters down on the project on the basis of non-compliance with the local plan.

In principle, the 2012 Localism Act offered the opportunity for a more bespoke approach to the development and agreement of planning policy, but in practice the complexity, cost and requirement for any Neighbourhood Plan to comply fully with adopted NPPF and LDF policy seems to contradict its own core principles which were based around devolving decision-making powers to individuals, communities and local authorities and promoting innovation.

Planners, particularly in London are already stretched to breaking point and I am not sure how realistic it is to expect them to shoulder the additional responsibility of working with the local community to manage, ratify and implement Neighbourhood Plans. The implementation of the Localism Act has diverted large amounts of capital and manpower away from primary planning activity which again appears counter-productive.

Where localism has been successful it has been largely dominated by agenda-based local community groups, who are more likely to stifle rather than encourage innovation. Their processes are hugely cumbersome and impractical, evidenced by the lack of interest and traction achieved to date across London.

The approach to developing and agreeing local development strategy needs to be more nimble and adaptable and the only way this can be achieved is by developing trust between the various stakeholders, including developers, local residents, business and the local authority. There needs to be a mutual recognition of the value that each party can bring to the table to facilitate a successful development.

In the current scenario, inflexible planning policy, entrenched stakeholder positioning and a lack of a workable mechanism for moving initiatives forward is slowing the process down and precluding development on many sites particularly where the proposal involves complex land assembly and challenging adopted policy. One has to ask if resources currently used to administer a failing localism agenda could not be better utilised in supporting and adapting the current planning system to allow more flexibility in the implementation of policy at the local level.

Developers are likely to be the innovators in the development process. Commercial activity by its nature promotes lateral thinking, recognising and developing opportunity and this needs to be supported through access to an accessible forum where initiatives can be presented and tested confidentially and at pace at a

level above that currently available through the pre-planning consultation process, to allow strategies to be agreed and jointly promoted to local communities by developers and the local authorities.

Local developers and contractors are often part of the communities in which they work and their success is quite likely to be based on their track record of delivery in the local area, their established relationships within the community, businesses, local authority officers and politicians.

We are working with some excellent smaller developers who understand the value of good design and innovation, and who are delivering successful projects which are openly promoted by local authorities, but who are held back by the high cost and risk involved in challenging Local Plan policy even when the proposal is wholly sensible and sustainable. Surely these are the parties we should be encouraging to engage at a local level to deliver smaller but crucial local intervention projects that will help to re-invent the city suburb as an important part of the city structure.

We are in danger of losing a whole raft of opportunity in a blur of bureaucracy and red tape while central government and the Mayor of London scratch their heads and return to the drawing board for another few years of consultation, policy development and implementation.

In our experience

Architecture Initiative schemes in Pirbright Road and Revelstoke Road, Southfields

Working with a local developer and London Borough of Wandsworth, Architecture Initiative developed a series of projects based on the principles set out above. Pirbright Road and Revelstoke Road in Southfields are the first to successfully negotiate the planning process. The quality of the design was recognised by the planning committee as instrumental in achieving an implementable approval at the higher residential density. Planning Committee chair Sarah McDermott commented at Revelstoke Road's recent planning approval meeting that this was exactly the sort of development the borough should be encouraging.

Both projects utilise redundant infill commercial sites within established suburban residential areas, characterised by typical densities of around 50 dph. Site values in the area are high, so delivering a relatively high density is the only way of ensuring an economically viable solution.

This simple and robust development model exploits the potential of the site through the introduction of a full basement and mixing duplex and lateral apartments over four floors. The duplex form allows the basement to be used for bedrooms, linked to living accommodation on the level above. Private gardens and balconies ensure all the apartments have appropriate external amenity space.

Careful thought has been given to the building typology. Despite achieving a density three times higher than their neighbours at 150 dph, we believe the design of both projects reflects the local context and sits comfortably within the street scene, re-inventing the local residential building stock.

Many suburban communities are designed around the car, which is perhaps becoming less relevant in London and other areas with a well-developed transport infrastructure. As the integration of the car can [reduce residential density by as much as 40%](#); the projects described here are based on the premise of zero car ownership and parking.