

The future of density in London

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London is an amazing city in which to live, to study, to work, to meet interesting people. Its economic success helps the national levelling up agenda. Threatening its vitality are its high cost of living and inadequate housing supply. Key workers, young professionals and families are priced out of neighbourhoods where they might have grown up, destabilizing communities.

Land is a valuable commodity in London. Demand exceeds supply. Spreading horizontally, green belt or not, is no answer; most of the qualities we look for are more easily—perhaps only—achieved through higher population density.

What population density would help to support those desirable qualities? London's most populous boroughs are, by no coincidence, its most popular. Tower Hamlets, Islington, and Kensington and Chelsea count approximately 10-12,000 inhabitants per square kilometre, while London as a whole only 4,500. Compare those figures to Paris, four to five times denser, averaging 22,000 across the entire city, even outside the Périphérique ring road. Some popular neighbourhoods reach 44,000. Paris achieves that density despite zoning regulations limiting building heights to 28m, which is fairly well utilized across much of the city with many buildings eight or ten storeys. Not needing higher density, Paris has nonetheless recently inserted new towers marking key gateways to the city along the ring

road, connected by a new tramline and sponsoring the regeneration of defunct industrial zones.

London would benefit from a higher population density that would support walkable neighbourhoods, with reasonably priced homes and services. Denser neighbourhoods would start to give a chance to emerging local entrepreneurs who need more customers to compete with ubiquitous brands found in "Anywhere High Street". London has a good public transportation network. Available land surrounding stations should be catalogued on a database so that private developers can consider opportunities to insert new homes. Planning policy needs to be streamlined to encourage development, recognizing the challenges brought by climate change and high construction costs.

It's a design challenge as well as an economic crisis. London has large Conservation Areas which are well below 28m, but no one would advocate replacing the heritage assets that are emotionally linked to history, providing character and continuity. In historic areas, adding a floor to a two or three-storey terrace house originally designed as a single-family house benefits the owner but does little to contribute to density or modern living standards. Inserting tall buildings of at least twelve to fifteen storeys at public transportation nodes is necessary to create more homes designed for actual demographics while supporting desired

services and amenities.

In suburban London, where people are isolated, why not replace detached housing built before climate change regulations with well-designed zero-carbon apartment blocks distributed around green parks and connected by a public transport network? An example is the Boulogne-Billancourt Rives de Seine master plan built in a Paris suburb averaging 20,000 people per square kilometre. A recent development on the former Renault automobile factory site, with closely-knit housing of five to ten storeys surrounding a new park, offices buffering the highway, a quirky tall building by Jean Nouvel, an island in the Seine River with another park with sports facilities and a multi-purpose venue designed by Shigeru Ban in collaboration with Jean Le Lay hosting concerts, exhibitions and shows.

Back in London and looking ahead, we need to re-focus the debate on tall buildings around how population density can contribute to making healthy sustainable communities across the capital.



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