

HIGHER RESIDENTIAL DENSITIES IN THE OUTER LONDON SUBURBS

UDG Patron Sir Richard MacCormac explains a design and planning approach



INTRODUCTION

We urgently need to look at new kinds of suburbia. The most pressing and immediate reason for this is that densities of development in the outer London suburbs have risen dramatically, largely reflecting the boom in the provision of small apartments rather than family accommodation. A consequence has been a substantial increase in land values, which then require higher residential densities to achieve financial viability. These densities are also broadly supported by the Density Matrix of the London Plan.

This situation represents a challenge to the very idea of suburbia and the vision of family housing in open, green and leafy surroundings - quiet, private and a good place for families and bringing up children.

This is a political dilemma for the representatives of communities who see the values of their constituents threatened by high density development. This dilemma will be more sharply focussed as local communities gain the

power to influence planning decisions and participate in the creation of local development frameworks.

Underlying this issue is the fact that housing density is little understood, and there are preconceptions that higher densities equate with overcrowding, loss of privacy, problems of public health and social breakdown. These concerns probably reflect the failures of public housing in the 1960s and 1970s, and specifically the experience of families with young children in middle and high rise flats. However, there is a real risk that we are repeating these failures.

DENSITY AND CHARACTER

What we need is a renewed understanding of the relationship between density and residential typology or, density and the character of development. In our recent study for the Homes and Communities Agency (HCA), we looked at a range of suburban densities and the house types and layouts which match them. What these studies begin to offer are a series

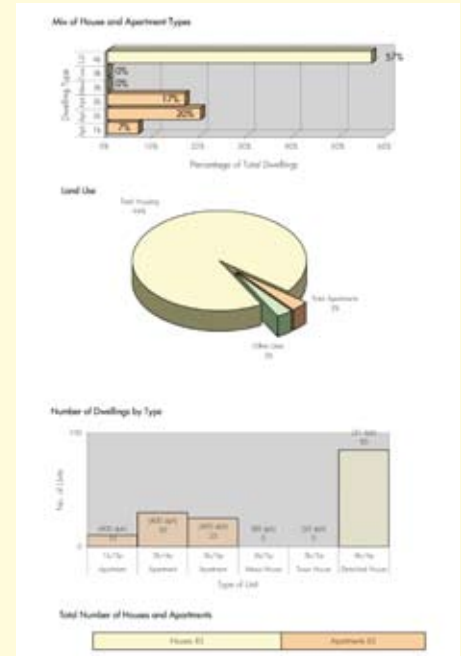
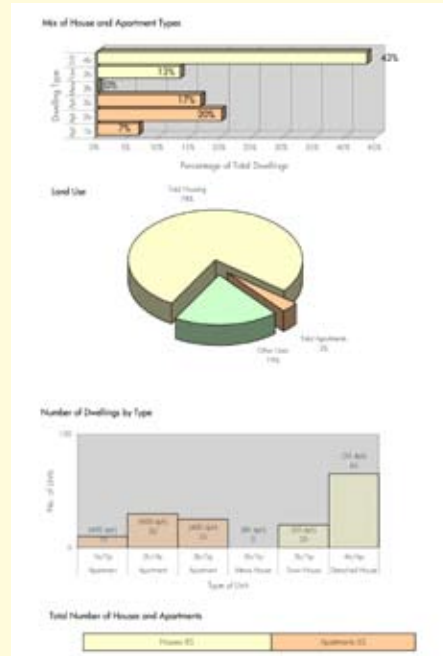
of benchmarks against which planning authorities, their elected members and local communities can evaluate developers' proposals.

These studies have demonstrated that suburban development can be achieved at significantly higher densities than hitherto, without losing the values associated with the house and garden set in leafy surroundings. Detached housing can be achieved at 35dph (or approx 14 dwellings per acre). Surprisingly, but probably the most useful benchmark is the evidence that the typical two storey house with a 6 metre wide frontage in short terraces or semi-detached forms can meet the density of 50dph (or approx 20 dw/ ac); this dwelling type is familiar to the volume house builder.

New kinds of suburbia must supersede car-dependent layouts and highway engineering which gave precedence to vehicular movement. The map extract shows a 1970s development in Milton Keynes in which the misfit between road and housing layout results in areas of left

- ← Housing at 35 dph or 14 dwellings per acre
- ←← Housing at 50 dph or 20 dw/ ac
- ↘ L Shaped houses at XX dph or XX dw/ ac
- ↘ 138 dph or 50 dw/ ac houses

- ↘ Site in Milton Keynes with poor use of land
- ↘↘ Study infill site with a variety of typologies nearby
- ↓ Proposal 1 development mix
- ↓ Proposal 2 development mix



over space which constitute nearly 40 per cent of land use.

NEW SUBURBAN PLANNING

The reformulation of suburban planning must involve a cultural shift from the picturesque, towards more formal planning which may be perceived as more urban. It actually draws on a suburban tradition of the US; think of the setting of Frank Lloyd Wright’s Prairie houses in the generous grids of the Chicago suburbs such as Oak Park.

Fundamental to this more formal approach is the recognition that land is a resource, the use of which must be accountable and given the same value given to the floor space of buildings. In the 50dph layout, the house plots and car courts fit together like the pieces of a jigsaw puzzle, and this in turn depends upon the overall dimensions of the plot which frames the housing group.

This is not to suggest that such relationships should be prescriptive, but a reminder that achieving such layout efficiency must optimise the relationship between site dimensions and housing typologies.

FAMILY HOUSING STUDIES

We studied a one hectare site in the London Borough of Merton, where the existing context was characterised by a wide variety of suburban typologies

ranging from Victorian terraces with long back gardens and front gardens facing each other across wide streets, to detached or semi-detached inter-war developments, and more recent three storey town houses and flats giving an approximate overall density of 30 dph (approx 12 dw/ ac).

Our study used L-shaped two storey terraced houses with 6 metre frontages at 50dph (20 dw/ ac) and 4 metre frontage three storey mews houses at 75dph (approx 30 dw/ ac). The proximity of the local park and the inclusion of two shared open spaces, ensured that all the private gardens also had access to recreational areas. The overall density at 50dph is substantially higher than that of the surrounding area.

What was significant, in terms of the outer Boroughs’ density dilemmas, was that the proposal would not have stood out visibly as denser than the surrounding context. The small clusters of houses which characterised the layout would probably be perceived as less urban than the long Victorian terraces.

Initially our density studies for the HCA addressed family housing, but given the demography of the UK, and the increasing requirement for accommodation for the elderly, the studies needed to include apartments. This led to a rather unexpected outcome.

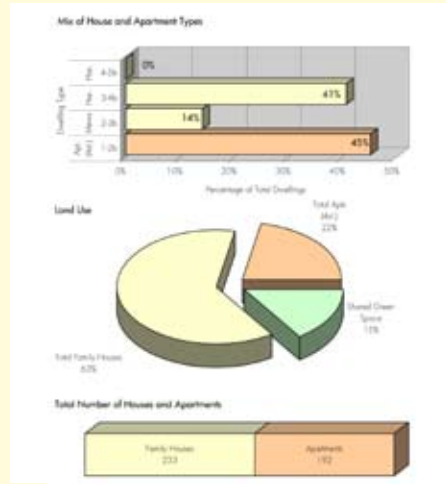
HOUSES AND APARTMENTS

Two hypothetical proposals for suburban development were tested with different residential mixes and allocations of public open space. In Proposal 1 over 50 per cent of the dwellings are small apartments at a high density of 400dph (roughly 160 dw/ ac), which might require buildings of up to eight or nine storeys, which would appear to contradict the suburban vision. However, there is a very advantageous trade-off; the density of the apartments could limit their footprint to just 3 per cent of total land use, leaving nearly 80 per cent of the development area to be two storey mainly terraced housing, and nearly 20 per cent to recreational open space, while achieving an overall density of 50dph.

In Proposal 2, the same quantum of high density apartments achieves another kind of trade-off which is that over 90 per cent of the development area could consist of detached houses while still sustaining the density of 50dph. So, in each case, the inclusion of high density apartments enhances the suburban potential of the development as a whole.

This approach to investigating the character of different development options is particularly applicable to suburban locations where the rise in land values requires high densities to achieve commercial viability. A further study was undertaken for a site in the London

- ✓ Option Master plan showing 233 houses and 192 apartments, at 64dph (26 dw/ ac), and 15 per cent open space
- ✓✓ Development mix for master plan option
- ↓ The potential within 10 minute walkable area
- ↓↓ A new vision of suburbia?



local authority and its elected members to formulate development briefs. Such studies, which can be undertaken remarkably quickly, are a way of providing the localism agenda with a practical planning toolkit.

The studies described here were largely a response to the pressure of rising densities in the outer London suburbs, but they also reflect the finding of our original report for the HCA entitled *Sustainable Suburbia*. In the research project, we concluded that higher densities which sustain the private benefits of a family house and garden, can also offer the additional shared benefits of walkable access to local facilities, schools and public transport. At 50dph, 5,000 family homes could be within ten minutes walk of a local centre. The inclusion of a proportion of higher density apartments with a reduced footprint could release up to a fifth of the development area as open space for recreation, children's play, biodiversity, rainwater management, mitigation of climate change and even local agriculture.

Higher densities offer new kinds of suburbia, with less car dependence and varied pedestrian environments connected to schools, transport and local facilities in lively and sociable communities.

● Sir Richard MacCormac, Founder and Consultant, MJP Architects



Borough of Barnet where land values require development densities of at least 70dph (28 dw/ ac). Here the stages in the evolution of the option for a development brief which includes 55 per cent of family housing at 50-80dph (20-32 dw/ac) and 45 per cent of apartments at 400dph (or roughly 160 dw/ ac), which could be limited to four or five storeys. In this case the density of the apartments is relatively modest but their footprint can still be limited to 22 per cent of the development area and their location at the north edge

of the development site is associated with existing apartment buildings beside a major road and public transport route. Family housing constitutes 63 per cent of the development area and has access to landscaped open space which constitutes 15 per cent of the site.

A PRACTICAL PLANNING TOOLKIT

This is just one of a range of possible options which could illustrate the potential character of development and enable local amenity groups as well as the