



Why aren't more architects influencing the London Plan hearings?

By Lucinda Rogers | 25 April 2019

The mayor's examination-in-public hearings are your chance to make the capital a more just place, argues Lucinda Rogers



Polite exchanges across the purple carpet of City Hall's chamber may not sound like a pitched battle. But at the examination in public (EiP) of the London Plan you can feel how high the stakes are for the parties: the mayor, developers, boroughs and above all London's citizens. Running 114 policies past a panel of government inspectors presents a crucial moment to ask the big questions of a plan that runs to 2041: What kind of London do we all want to live in? And who will count the costs of this plan's high growth agenda?

The Just Space network is a voluntary alliance of community organisations with a seat at the table at most of the hearings. We are challenging Sadiq Khan's largely business-as-usual plan that is based around a population growth of 1.9 million by 2041. At a time of climate emergency and uncertainty in the economy the mayor inexplicably ruled out exploring alternatives to his model that relies on high land values to fund infrastructure and all other needs. Apart from their mantra of growth the planners seem uncertain of what the outcomes will be for London's future wellbeing, which we find highly irresponsible and wrong.

Just Space was formed by communities when the first London Plan emerged in 2004. We want to strengthen their voice in the formulation of the plan and to bring evidence of how planning policy affects people's lives at ground level. It seems to have been forgotten that in theory and in law planning should be guided by the principles of sustainable development and participation. The network is made up of about 80 groups ranging from local campaigns to umbrella groups like the London Tenants Federation and

London Forum, special interests like the Community Food Growers Network, with input from national organisations Friends of the Earth, Age UK and the New Economics Foundation and academic input from UCL, LSE and their students.

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Over time a wealth of knowledge and common ground has been developed and in 2015 we produced an alternative strategy (*Towards a Community-led Plan for London*), which focuses the housing effort on meeting the backlog of low- and moderate-income needs, retains public ownership of public land for building and prioritises the local economy, reducing the need to travel and improving the environment.

The planners hope that by employing good design and “good growth” policies, our city will not be covered, Chinese-style, in oppressive ranks of towers. Design has been reinstated since the Johnson mayoralty, with design review, design advocates and the “architect retention clause” as part of the policy text.

In our experience few architects get involved in planning matters, but those speaking at the examination ([Levitt Bernstein](#), Allies & Morrison) are warning that design policies alone will not prevent the lowering of standards and a failure to produce the right housing. At planning decision time, the beneficial but weakly stated aims will be trumped by the mayor's blanket housing target of 66,000 units a year.

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The examination is revealing stark facts on the state of play. The 45 density-heavy “opportunity areas” (but whose opportunity?) covering 71.4 square miles of London are democratically unaccountable and will enjoy fact-track permissions. Their designation encourages the raid on employment land by housing developers, exemplified by at least 4,500 jobs at risk in the Old Kent Road's industrial areas. Tall buildings and permitted development produce little if any affordable housing while family housing has faltered. The official requirement for social rented homes is 47% of the total housing need, yet the plan prioritises “intermediate” tenures, so the backlog of unmet need will grow. Meanwhile estate regeneration will continue, a policy that callously removes people from their homes, with a net loss of 8,000 council homes since 2005. The environmental impacts of sustained demolition and construction are ignored, while the word “tree” did not appear in the public realm policy.

The core aim of Just Space is that the role of communities and Londoners should be fundamental to any development of the city, a view supported by Ft'work architects at the hearings. We propose community audits of neighbourhood assets at the outset of any change to protect the things of value that make up a place, instead of sweeping them away.

But the London Plan will see the clash continue between business-as-usual developers and the attempt to claw back vital housing and amenity needs.

At the start of the examination Just Space warned that the mayor may have unlawfully ignored the 2010 Equality Act by not addressing impacts on vulnerable groups: estate demolition and the loss of local business clusters are especially damaging. The inspectors have given the mayor a month to explain his approach and legal position. Just Space believes that without considering and involving all its citizens the London Plan will not be sound or sustainable and at the coming hearings we will continue to say this strongly.

Postscript

*Lucinda Rogers is an **artist** and member of **Just Space**.*