# A NEW LONDON HOUSING VERNACULAR

urban design london

**PORTOBELLO SQUARE, KENSINGTON**
**Catalyst Housing group, PRP Architects**

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# 01 Introduction: A New London Housing Vernacular

**ROYAL ROAD, SE17**
**Affinity Sutton, Panter Hudspith Architects**

# Introduction

*Fig 1. Canning Town regeneration, Countryside Properties, Maccreanor Lavington*

The design of new residential development across London is converging. Among entries for the government's 2012 Housing Design Awards, marked similarities were observed across London schemes from developers with disparate business models and target markets. Buildings developed for rent by local authorities shared characteristics with buildings aimed at investors and owner-occupiers. Apartment buildings had details more usually found in houses and, in some cases, even presented as 'terraced' houses. The concurrence was not limited to winning schemes. A majority of all entries used variations on an emergent universal feature, an unambiguous street-based form and style recognisable as London's (Fig 1).

The principle driver has been the direction of the Mayor's housing design guide, signposted since 2009 with a draft that spelled out a formula for improving new homes' urban design and amenity. The guide's demand for an obvious point of entry* (3.1 From Street to Front Door) from the street to all buildings has pushed architects to borrow from London's stock of Georgian terraced houses. They take comfortably familiar elements, such as doors to the street, the portrait-shape of sash windows and London brick, then pare back decoration so that the fenestration pattern appears machine made in its clinically repetitive punched-out rhythm (Fig 1).

After a decade when landmark (or trophy) architecture was used to promote regeneration, that riot of one-off statement buildings is giving way to this restrained architecture of a few common details, such as parapet roofs and deep window reveals. Similarly there are limited variations in materiality. This self-imposed discipline has seen developers and their architects drop cladding in any material, colour or shape. Today's choice appears is rarely more expansive than picking between a standard 215mm long British brick or a 240mm Continental one.

This extraordinary consensus around details and materials has prompted the term a 'new London vernacular'. Vernacular architecture is not chosen but dictated by the natural occurrence of materials suitable for construction, such as the beds of London clay that led to brickwork's ubiquity. The new London vernacular is an intellectual, combining construction tradition and the capital's most popular urban design, the Georgian. It admits only a few outside influences, notably contemporary Dutch architecture's love of sheer masonry that make buildings look extruded rather than built (Fig 2)

*Fig 2. Machine made appearance of brick facade, Ijburg.*

*Fig 4. St Andrews, Bromley by Bow. Barratt London, Glen Howells Architects.*

Hidden beneath this polite architecture, there are powerful drivers, chiefly the avoidance of complicated access arrangements, a compelling choice for all tenures. Owner occupiers have never welcomed management charges. Now money is tighter the chance to miss out on contributing to lift maintenance or the repainting of common parts is a popular offer. In parallel, caps to rent and income support mean that access arrangements that require regular or intensive maintenance are becoming a drain on RSLs who are unable to recoup the costs from tenants. Maisonettes, whether used as the ground floors of apartment buildings or double-stacked in the form of 4 storey terraced houses offer relief (Fig. 4)

The mixed-tenure developments of recent years tended to have blocks of market-sale apartments, often with bombastic architecture, built alongside modest two-storey terraces for families to rent. The contrast highlighted the gap in residents' incomes. The new vernacular addresses this risk of stigmatization. Apartments that share characteristics with houses subtly blend market-sale and social-rented homes. The first building in the new Vernacular reworking of a Georgian terrace may be a pair of stacked maisonettes for social rent, the next four storeys of market-sale flats, and the third a £2.5m market sale townhouse with roof terrace hidden behind its parapet wall (Fig. 3)

Combinations are endless, but the identity of the resident group is as discrete as in the original stock today where only the number and type of door bells tell you whether you are looking at an aspirational 3500 sq ft residence or luckless bedsitter land. It's not just the brickwork of the new London vernacular that is promisingly robust. This discrete organization of accommodation offers a low-risk solution for mix and management.

# 02
# Identifying common characteristics of the New London Vernacular

**ST ANDREWS, BROMLEY BY BOW**
**Barratt London, Allies and Morrison Architects**

# Identifying common characteristics

*Fig 5. Bridport House, London Borough of Hackney, Karakusevic Carson Architects.*

*Fig 6. Muro Court, Library Street, SE1. London and Quadrant, Metaphorm Architects.*

It is possible to draw up a list of features that first debuted in the 2011 Housing Design Awards and then reappeared as a dominant pattern of 2012's. They are principally:

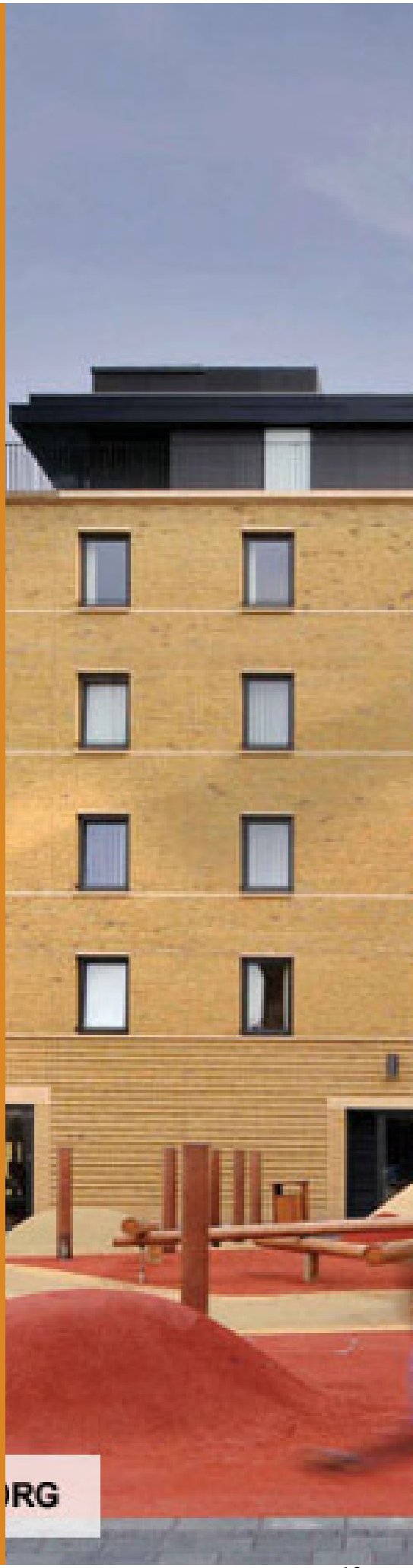
- Maximum number of homes have own front doors directly opening to the street, often through the use of maisonettes at lower levels (Fig 5)
- Ground floors are taller than intermediate floors, or combine with first floor as maisonettes to create a pronounced podium to upper floors
- Elevations are wholly or predominantly faced in brickwork
- Elevations are topped with a parapet
- Brick parapet functions as a balustrade to units set back on top floor and in some cases is raised to around 3m with cut-outs offering views from behind (Fig 6)
- Top-floor units are oversized as penthouses or wheelchair accessible apartments for larger families, with very private outdoor space behind brick parapets
- Internal circulation space is rarely shared by larger family units, which either have direct access from the street or are served by galleries or decks on the top floor (Fig 7)

*Fig 7. St Andrews, Bromley by Bow. Barratt London, Glen Howells Architects.*

*Fig 8. Church Street, Plaistow. One Housing Group, AHMM.*

- The number of homes sharing an access is reduced compared with the practice of a few years ago, owing to the use of multiple cores or short access decks serving typically 4 to 8 apartments (Fig 7)
- Semi-private outdoor space within a block is visible from the public realm outside. It doubles as amenity space and access route to doors, functioning more like a quad than a perimeter block's more private internal courtyard which invariably has apartments overlooking it but no direct access
- Some car parking is on street and the balance in either an under-ground car park or an undercroft wrapped on the street elevations with maisonettes (Fig 8)
- Windows are portrait shaped mimicking Georgian fenestration with very regular grid pattern (Fig 8)
- Windows are recessed in deep reveals
- Access decks are sometimes behind a brick façade, the access gallery reinforcing the fenestration pattern
- Balconies are often recessed, sometimes with brick reveals (Fig 8)

# 03
# Identifying the benefits of New London Vernacular



**PEABODY AVENUE, PIMLICO**
**Peabody Trust, Haworth Tompkins Architects**

# Identifying the benefits of New London Vernacular

*Fig 9. Georgian terrace, Stepney.*

*Fig 10. Vaudeville Court, Finsbury Park Homes for Islington, Levitt Bernstein Architects.*

This vernacular could aid the delivery of both more and better homes because the typologies are street based so strengthen urban design, building right up to pavement and carriageway and using land efficiently. Similarities in their design are because they are drawing on proven practice and forms. These have comfortably familiar aspects to them, such as doors to the street, allowing planning authorities to approach them with less apprehension than unique designs that need rigorous assessment. This mix of known risk, allied to the comfort of an architecture derived from popular antecedents, ought to lead to quicker planning decisions.

Just like the original Georgian forms (Fig 9), nothing is lost through repetition of these buildings as they are designed to work together as a continuous street frontage rather than individual buildings. Small variations or even direct repetition can only help the commercial development process by:

- Reducing sales risk
- Reducing design and construction risk
- Allowing contractors to price without a significant contingency
- Helping make prices obtained for components to be more competitive through the use of more of the same
- Enabling more accurate land valuation

*Fig 11. Highmead, Enfield. Countryside Properties, Hawkins Brown Architects.*

*Fig 12. Peabody Avenue, Pimlico. Peabody Trust, Haworth Tompkins Architects.*

Finally, the value of these typologies for reducing management risk cannot be underestimated. The Mayor's design guide was very particular about the need to reduce the number of people sharing access arrangements (ref 3.2 Shared Circulation).

Removing the pressure of large numbers of children living in apartments served by double-banked corridors will save significantly on maintenance. The guide set tough targets for private amenity space (4.10 Private Open Space). It set limits to the use of single aspect apartments (5.2 Dual Aspect). But these are all part of a palette of details that collectively ensure residents are happier in their homes, and have less reason to find communal arrangements daunting and more opportunity to get on and build a community.

Communities can be extremely useful in self-policing the types of challenges found in big cities. Couple to a rigorous urban design and the selection of famously robust materials, the new London vernacular also has the potential to cap management charges, just as they become an increasingly onerous issue for both owner occupiers and tenants.

04

# How did we get to a new London Vernacular?

**CAMBRIDGE AND WELLS COURT, SOUTH KILBURN**
**Brent Council, Lifschutz Davidson Sandilands**

# How did we get to a new London Vernacular?

*Fig 13. Broadwall Housing, Coin Street Community Builders, Lifschutz Davidson Sandilands.*

*Fig 14. Barking Central, Redrow Regeneration, AHMM.*

The past decade was a rollercoaster for housing design. It began cautiously, haunted by the loss of confidence from the shockingly quick failure of public housing estates built in the council housing boom that ended in the early 1970s. The fear of repeating failure had been so total that in 1992 when Coin Street Community Builders proposed to build a modest 10-storey tower of one-bed apartments for rent next to the Thames, the proposals were attacked for inviting disaster. (Fig 13) Only low-rise housing was felt to be safe, especially for people that did not own their own homes.

Yet by 2000 a revolution had begun. The UK needed to regenerate its cities and drew up a blueprint with the 1998 report of the Urban Task Force which illustrated how good amenity depended on higher density. But away from London's landmark river frontage schemes, raising density required removing planning restrictions. This came with the March 2000 issue of Planning Policy Guidance for Housing, PPG3 which created the parameters for a boom in housing-led redevelopment which transformed many parts of London, such as Paddington basin and Barking town centre (Fig 14).

Developers and landowners tested the limits of what is allowable, practicable and commercially possible in terms of increased housing densities in the capital. The design community enthusiastically responded with more experimental proposals. In 2002, during preparation of London's first spatial development plan, Mayor Ken Livingstone announced that all new planning applications in London would require 50% of homes to be affordable by the plan's 2004 issue.

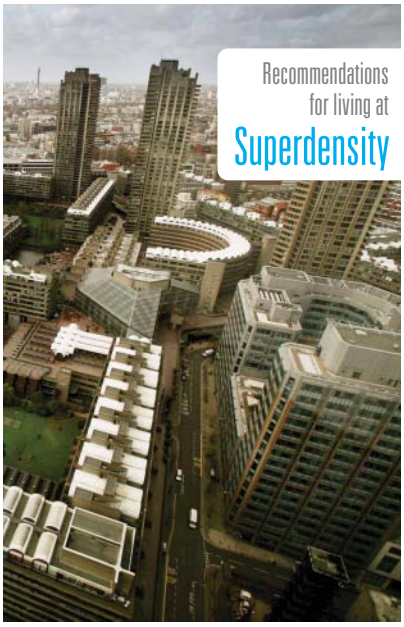



*Fig 15. Recommendations for living at Superdensity.*

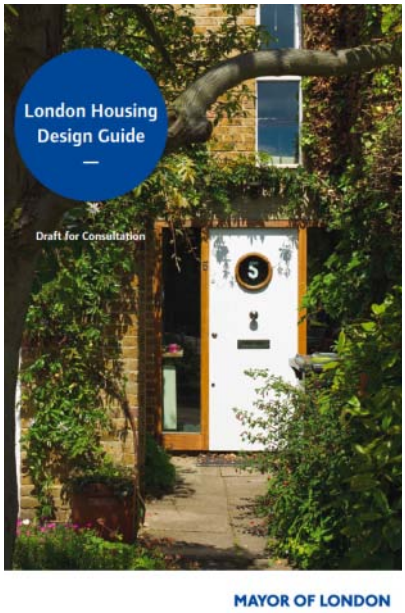



*Fig 16. London Housing Design Guide draft.*

Developers who had bought sites in preparation for planning application without allowing for selling 50% of homes at cost to RSLs had to seek more from planning authorities with revised applications, a request favourably received by London councils keen to tackle their housing waiting lists. Developers considering sites grasped that the only way they were likely to be top bidder was to revise the number of units upwards. By the time London's first spatial plan emerged in 2004 average density across London had more than quadrupled from its 2000 level. Tower Hamlets, for example, saw density rise from 100 dwellings to the hectare in 2000 to 485 dwh in 2004 (URS report for GLA, 2005). And on it went.

In 2007 research group Design for Homes issued a report highlighting how that in the post-war building boom schemes above 150 dwellings to the hectare were considered testing for human habitation (Fig.15). Applications above 150 dwh were automatically reviewed by an expert panel run by the housing minister. The report, produced with four consultant architects (PRP, Levitt Bernstein, HTA and PTE) whose core business was the renewal of failed housing estates (so were experienced in what failed and why), argued that soaring density needed safety valves, chiefly on-site management, access to private amenity space and less dependence on double-banked corridor access. The report dubbed the phenomenon 'Superdensity', arguing that it would only succeed with a set of rules. The report included a foreword full of caution by Peter Bishop, at that time charged with steering planning and design across the capital's 33 boroughs.

In 2008 Boris Johnson, concerned that quality of new housing in London was being compromised by a gold rush to higher density, took the Mayoral office on a platform to improve housing standards. The London Housing Design Guide has since been published and is in the process of being formally adopted into planning policy. There is no question that it has already been influencing new housing design since its draft publication in 2009 and even in the year before that, through the use of a steering group of London-based architects who could see what was going to be asked of the next generation of designs in the capital (Fig16).

Emergent from this period of turbulence, there now appears to be clear convergence. The period of experimentation is giving way to a consensus that there are relatively few appropriate solutions for housing a broad range of households, especially where larger families are to be accommodated. The terraced house and the maisonette have emerged as the answer to the requirements of the design guide to both increase the quality of urban design and decrease the pressure on shared access arrangements.

*Fig 17. Myatts Field, Lambeth. Higgins Group, Notting Hill Housing, PRP Architects.*

*Fig 18. Cambridge and Wells Court, South Kilburn. Brent Council, Lifschutz Davidson Sandilands.*

There is also something fundamentally democratic about the new vernacular. After a long period of soul searching since PPG3 about how to deliver tenure-blind housing, the reality has dawned that the terraced housing long found all over London is probably the most successful solution. It is hard to tell which houses in Islington's Georgian squares belong to the council and which to the bankers. Moreover houses, flats and even 'bedsitters' present to the street in exactly the same way, the only clue being the number of bells to the front door.

In the same vein, as the Georgian London town house is mostly four storey, the same as a pair of stacked maisonettes, architects have also chosen to incorporate the latter in something that closely resembles the former. This works just as well for four-storey Victorian semi-detached villas that superseded the Georgian terrace (Fig 18).

Similarly taller apartment buildings now frequently begin at ground level with maisonettes for families, with the intermediate levels composed of 1 and 2-bed apartments for smaller households. Again these buildings are clearly apartments but retain many of the characteristics of the Georgian terrace, notably the fenestration pattern and the façade being topped with a parapet.

On larger sites where there is space to reintroduce the historic grid, the apartment buildings tend to face the busier principal roads while terraced houses lined the quieter cross streets, the mix of houses and flats different in stature but perfectly attuned just as the Georgians once lined thoroughfares with grander houses served by complimentary muse streets behind (Fig 17).

# About us

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## Who are we?

UDL is a not-for-profit organization whose objective is to help practitioners (primarily in London) create and maintain well-designed, good quality places. We do this by offering:

- training
- advice
- information on latest policies and publications
- practitioner networks
- design surgeries

We do not design schemes, write policy or offer formal comment on proposals.

## Who are our partners?

We are a membership organization. Our subscribing members are London Boroughs and Housing Associations, who pay an annual membership for us to deliver services to their staff. UDL is based within Transport for London. We are supported by TFL, GLA and London Councils, who each have representatives on our Board. We work closely with these organisations to ensure our training and networking services reflect the most up to date policies, research and best practice.

## What do we provide?

Lots of training, events, meetings, online resources and more. UDL runs a big programme, which has been growing steadily year on year since 2005. To give an idea of scale, we have received over 2300 bookings since April this year.

## Getting involved

We are not a commercial training provider and work hard to ensure all income we receive is used to support our members. So although we do take some individual bookings for events charged at a day rate, most of our users are staff from member organisations.

# About us

## Who are we?

Design for Homes champions the value of good design in the housing industry. We are a not-for-profit limited company advised by a cross-industry Board of Directors. We incorporate the Design for Homes Architects Group which is RIBA's linked society for architects in housing and The Friends of Design for Homes.

## How we promote the value of good design:

- publishing, though website and print partners
- research, through website, publications and email
- education, through learning tours, website, seminars, publications and conferences
- industry and public recognition, through website, specialist and mass media

# A NEW LONDON HOUSING VERNACULAR

**This pamphlet is the joint work of Urban Design London and Design for Homes.**

**It is based on analysis of a range of schemes selected from entries to the Housing Design Awards, the national assessment programme of new development which is now into its seventh decade of being sponsored by Government. The Greater London Authority is a sponsor of the Awards and each year a selection of the schemes is promoted as the capital's best.**

**The deputy Mayor for housing, land and property, Richard Blakeway is one of 16 judges which shortlists and visit the best.**

**The analysis has been written by Housing Design Awards judge David Birkbeck, also chief executive of Design For Homes, in partnership with Urban Design London's Julian Hart.**

**This is the beginning of a programme of work into assessing and understanding the phenomenon termed the New London Vernacular.**

**Urban Design London will be producing a series of workshops to look at this in more detail.**

For more information on the Housing Design Awards go to www.hdwards.org

You can also download a free app showing all the London entries in detail from Apple's Appstore which works on iPads. It is a comprehensive record of 68 schemes submitted in London in 2012 and is the largest record of what is happening in the capital available anywhere. You will find it as "London New Homes" in the Appstore.

For more information on Design For Homes go to

www.designforhomes.org