

# Boris the builder: The Mayor's vision for London housing



**Kieran Long**  
18 Aug 2010



The London Housing Design Guide, published this week by **Boris Johnson**, takes us back to the Sixties in terms of housing standards. And I mean this as a profound compliment.

Since 1980 there have been no mandatory minimum space standards for housing in the UK, ever since the famous Parker Morris standards for Space in the Home, which were drawn up in 1961, were abolished by **Margaret Thatcher's** government in 1980. This has led, in recent years, to **London** having the smallest new houses and apartments of any major city in the Western world — and this at the end of an era of huge economic growth and rises in living standards. A new apartment in London now is estimated to have up to 30 per cent less space than its equivalent of 40 to 50 years ago.

The new guide contains 90 standards that will apply from next year on all new housing built on **London Development Agency**-owned land, or any developments funded by public money. More excitingly, it is hoped that the guide will be part of the updated London Plan after 2012, and as such will be planning policy — meaning it will cover all new housing in the private sector, too.

At the heart of the standards are minimum floor areas for new homes built in the capital. A one-bedroom flat must now have a net internal area of at least 50?sq?m, and there are minimum floor areas for every type of dwelling defined by the estimated number of inhabitants. For example, a house or maisonette with three bedrooms and four occupants (a typical enough family home) must have at least 87?sq?m.

It is no mean achievement to get this past the massed ranks of major housebuilders, who have a vested interest in screwing down construction costs and making as much profit as possible from their developments. They have objected to the guide's conclusions and eked out compromises from the Mayor's office, but by and large these standards should improve greatly the housing stock in London.

Developers will have to lump it — and it's easy to see that they have much to learn about how to make housing that befits a great city. Just do an online search through new developments in London. Most of them, particularly in areas where land values are low and councils are desperate for development, consist of mean, single-aspect one-bedroom apartments of about 35?sq?m, usually with a small balcony but no other storage. The websites of Barratt, **Berkeley**, St George, **Redrow**, **Taylor Wimpey** and the rest are full of them. Between them these developers have created what the introduction to the guide calls a "damaging legacy" for London.

Their defence is that the private sector knows what consumers want, and that their product still finds buyers. The latter part of this is true, particularly during the last decade of undersupply of affordable housing for young people. But these consumers are getting a raw deal. You'll find few developers, for instance, that give you the total floor areas of apartments, and this is a legacy of the strange obsession in the UK of measuring the size of a dwelling by its number of bedrooms. In almost any other country in Europe apartments are sold on the square metre size, and people are very familiar with the cost per square metre of their homes.

But these extra few square metres, that seem to prejudice so profoundly the profit margins of developers, matter a great deal. Our homes are about much more than sleeping, cooking and eating in front of the television.

The new standards rightly mention the importance of creating bedrooms that children can play and study in, space in dining areas that allows you to invite friends to dinner and, simply, places for people to relax in without being disturbed by those they share the dwelling with.

I have heard and seen many horror stories in new apartment buildings. Studio apartments with fold-down beds that actually touch the opposite wall when extended,

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award-winning housing schemes where the standard apartment has only two windows facing a wall just eight metres away, and windowless "utility" rooms that are actually sold as potential extra bedrooms.

But why should the assumption be that, when young, we all buy one of these mean rabbit hutches, before scraping together enough money to graduate to a two-bedroom version? Why shouldn't every home be built with changing family circumstances in mind? This is something the new guide tries to bring to the fore, defining technical but important standards for how homes can adapt over time.

BUILDING Design, the weekly architecture newspaper, recently voted a London housing building (the new Strata Tower at Elephant & Castle) as the winner of its Carbuncle Cup for ugliest building of the year (and the development has also been in the news because residents claim it is too hot and does not live up to its "green" credentials).

In the discussion of that award there was not much mention of the building's plan, which has lots of single-aspect apartments grouped around a lift core. None of them has balconies. This is a building that would effectively be made impossible to build if the standards in the guide become planning policy in a couple of years.

Closest to my heart of all the standards in the guide, though, is the recognition that housing is important for making pleasant and civilised parts of the city. The new housing built in London today is most often designed to maximise the units that can be crammed on to the site. These huge boxes are then clad in some random and vaguely fashionable material that has little relationship to the surrounding architectural context.

Take St George's Beaufort Park development in Colindale, north-west London. This ugly set of overscaled buildings, faced in that favourite developer vernacular of panels of brick and plaster, creates a meaningless urban plan that does not relate to its site.

The buildings are like 19th-century [Berlin](#) Mietskaserne (tenements) but with public spaces modelled on Mayfair squares (needless to say, this does not feel like Mayfair). Inside are cleverly titled apartment types (the "Manhattan") that hover somewhere between studio and a one-bedroom apartment, with bedrooms that you can barely squeeze a double bed inside.

But sensible and sensitive grouping of homes can create wonderful places. Go and see the dignified, beautiful project designed by Karakusevic Carson in Claredale Street, in [Bethnal Green](#), for [Tower Hamlets](#) Community Housing.

It's a series of cleverly scaled mixtures of apartments and terraced houses that feels completely at home with the best of the residential area between Hackney Road and Bethnal Green Road. Best of all, it creates intimate streets that are quiet for residents but contribute to elevating the urban realm part of the city. High-quality materials count for a lot here but really good planning and an understanding of the broader context of Bethnal Green has lifted this into the top league of contemporary housing developments. There are other decent ones on the way (such as Barratt's St Andrews development, now under construction in Bromley-by-Bow) but they are few. This is one reason why the guide itself mentions very few exemplars. The authors may come to rue this omission. Until there are some role models, the entrenched housing industry will find it hard to improve its product.

It's worth saying that this guidance was created by Design for London and the London Development Agency, and these organisations have uncertain futures given forthcoming spending cuts. It's vital that the [Greater London Authority](#) does not drop the ball on this, and pushes for high standards for all housing in the forthcoming London Plan. To do that, they'll need some people who know what they're talking about.

The London Housing Design Guide can be downloaded free from [lda.gov.uk](#)



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**Reader views (6)**

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Your criticisms of Colindale are well-founded. Both that and Brent Cross are in the corroding borough of Barnet (see the Allowancegate scandal in tonight's Standard).

EasyCouncil has already arrived, with developers all over Barnet calling the shots, and trying to get approval through an ineffectual planning service for low-grade rubbish, before Boris's sizing standards, and the government's environmental standards, kick in.

But it's full marks for Boris. Ken did nothing like this.

**- jay, London, 19/08/2010 23:09**

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Excellent, this is an issue which even the building press isn't raising. But you didn't mention the largest development in the country - Brent Cross! To maximise profits the 7,500 dwelling units will be built in 1980's retro 22 storey tower blocks. More Manhattan than Garden Suburb, a real blot on the landscape without even a nod to design or style. Worst of all less than 20% will have more than 2 bedrooms, so families had better look elsewhere if they want a home rather than a high-rise apartment.

**- Elsie, North London, 19/08/2010 18:16**

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None of this will address the desperate need for affordable rental accommodation. The private sector is only interested in building properties they can sell or rent to the top end of the market and housing associations simply cannot cope with the demand. The answer is staring politicians in the face but no one wants to admit that the aspiration of becoming a homeowner is now denied to many people living and working in London and until we accept this council housing waiting lists will just keep growing and growing.

There are plenty of "brown field" sites scattered around London that could be utilised and even more properties standing empty because they are either unaffordable or in need of renovation. Sadly with a Conservative led government curbing local council spending and a Conservative Mayor who still believes in the myth that everyone can buy their own home we will not see much improvement in the next five years.

**- ASLEF shrugged, Leyton, UK, 19/08/2010 07:41**

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Great, but even more important is to increase the rate of homebuilding, to bring rents and prices down from the current crazy levels.

Seems to me we need to either (a) release some green belt land or (b) allow densification of existing build up areas by relaxing planning regulations. Better still, do both.

London has grown by over 1m since the early 80s, and housebuilding has not kept up. The population is likely to increase further, given the long term positive trend of London employment, especially in business and financial services. Also, later coupling up and more divorce has led to an increase in average household size.

The result is intolerable pressure on the housing stock and many people working in the city with excessively long commutes.

We need more housebuilding now. Boris has no real ideas, and Ken/Oona aren't much better. Why aren't the politicians talking about this problem? Among the under 35s (who didn't benefit from the property boom and make large capital gains for doing very little) it is in my view one of the biggest political issues.

**- Kev, Bromley, 18/08/2010 19:58**

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Poor sound insulation results in hearing my neighbour all the time which then results in stress, anger...etc.

Also we need to consider that many of these new flats are occupied by young people who share it and a lot of times the lack of space in the tiny bedrooms forces them to convert their living room into a bedroom too. For the sake of having more storage space. This changes the entire culture of a place we call

"home".

- F, London, 18/08/2010 13:50

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Councils and Developers need to concentrate on sound insulation where neighbours are treated to every movement and motion of the property next door courtesy of stud walls. There are new developments where occupants can hear the neighbours from two (yes two) floors down. Laminate flooring and no compulsory carpet fitting in lease does not help either.

- Reader, London, 18/08/2010 13:22

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