

The story of the Packington Estate

In the late 60's, the regeneration of the Packington estate in Islington saw a dense network of Victorian terraces flattened to make way for 27 six storey slab blocks. 'Victoriana should stay in the scrapbook, for it has no place in the space age,' wrote one contributor in the Islington gazette in 1965 as the cranes loomed over the 122 acres of land.

Among the residents however, the regeneration was deeply unpopular and controversial. Objections were that the estate didn't need to be knocked down; that there was a wilful disregard for 'the old English flavour' of the streets; and that residents were systematically ignored throughout the process. Principles for the regeneration were 'outlined' to a select group of Tenants Association representatives who were 'broadly in agreement.' The Police, meanwhile, were in favour of the proposals which were also forwarded to the Fire officer for his comments.

The scheme was also opposed in a campaign led by local Labour councillors. They succeeded in limiting the new estate's encroachment into surrounding streets, but many hundreds of homes were designated as slums and cleared away along with the streets they lined. When this went to appeal, the Department for Local Government quickly pushed the scheme the case, forcing them to accept it as a done deal.



1960s estate on the left, new estate on the right

538 flats and maisonettes were built in 27 six-storey slab blocks, linked by overhead walkways. The large panels of the exterior façade gave the buildings a 'kit-built' look and interior layouts were often of a complicated staggered arrangement that increased the number of different neighbours who shared party walls.

The estate quickly became unpopular and hard to let – as well as notorious for a 'gang culture'. Even residents who liked it complained about problems with the estate's central heating system; roofs leaked and empty homes attracted squatters who congregated by night. Throughout the 80s, improvements were made to remedy fundamental design errors, but it was a case of sticking plasters on gaping wounds. Intervention was required again.

The (second) regeneration

In a 2004 survey of residents' views about redevelopment, 86 per cent wanted a new development to reinstate the traditional street pattern. And in a November 2014 discussion about the estate's regeneration, one participant summarised the three main themes which

emerged during consultation as: a dislike of pre-fabricated modern methods; a vivid fear of developers (the phrase used was 'raping and pillaging'); and a desire to live in houses.

Residents said that they felt isolated from their neighbours because of how the Packington estate failed to fit in with its neighbours in terms of scale, massing, arrangement and visual characteristics. The lack of a front door number was a small yet significant factor in undermining residents' sense of ownership.



The new Packington Estate

In 2006 a residents' ballot approved transfer of ownership from Islington council to the Hyde Group. Hyde subsequently made plans to demolish and rebuild all blocks in several stages, allowing all existing residents to be rehoused without decanting them offsite. A large part of the funding of the rebuild was to come from densifying: reconfiguring the estate with taller blocks to enable an increase in units.



5-storey element of the new development, which reaches 8 storeys in places

Several bidders presented Hyde and the residents with proposals to redevelop the site. The winning bid from architects PTE was distinguished by its plan to reinstate streets into the heart of the estate. This proved exceptionally popular with residents. PTE architect Stephen Fisher explains, 'The residents' steering group was part of the assessment process for the applications from bidding developers.'

Meaningful, as opposed to the standard manipulated and tokenistic resident consultation would appear to have been a successful feature of the Packington estate regeneration. All developers, RSLs and councils now claim that they 'consult' but there are many cases where this appears to be a rather insubstantive exercise in window-dressing with all real design decisions presented as not open for discussion.

y that they have accepted 'lots of compromise' some of the argued for have happened. Although design-wise not perfect, with some confused backs and fronts, and some planned open spaces fenced off due to

regulations on privacy, the influence of residents' preferences means that Packington stands apart from other large estate regeneration projects in London in a number of ways.

Create Streets has researched 18 of London's largest estate regeneration schemes, all following the model of densifying to add private sale units in order to fund regeneration. The 18 schemes had an average increase in maximum building height of 227 per cent. Packington was the only large scheme we found where the maximum height was under ten storeys: its increase was 33 per cent (from six storeys to eight). At eight stories, Packington had the lowest maximum height of all the schemes. Moreover, the increase in density of units, at 56 per cent (from 538 homes to 839), was well below the average we recorded of 171 per cent.

Resident consultation appears to have been a key driver in constraining heights and densities to within optimal limits. In the 2004 survey cited above, local residents were very opposed to increasing the height of buildings at all. 91 per cent of respondents wanted no development greater than 3-5 storeys and 81 per cent opposed proposals to build up to eight storeys. The most popular spontaneous feedback to the survey was a request to prevent any building above four storeys.

With the tallest blocks eight storeys high, this was one of the few areas where their concerns were in part overridden for the scheme's viability, but Hyde concede they would probably have built higher and denser without the restraint advocated by residents and the planning authority who stood with them.

Another major factor must be the absence of a private development partner. High land values necessarily prioritise quicker returns and misguided reliance on developer money can seriously compromise the ideal outcome of a site. With finance capital at 7 per cent and desired returns at 20 per cent per year, developers need to go large and go big to maximise their short-term profit. These players are not expecting to keep hold of their investment so do not need to focus on making a place that's going to last forty years, let alone a hundred. For Hyde, gap funding from the Department of Communities and Local Government made the scheme viable in the absence of such a partner.

Along with meaningful resident consultation, and an absence of a private developer, this scheme is also distinguished in that it prioritises social cohesion. Evidence of this can be seen in Union Square where the newly built Victorian terraced houses could potentially sell to middle class families for north of £1million.



New terraced housing

CREATE streets

The key element here though is that these houses are not for sale, but have instead been allocated to low income local families at a cost of £112 a week. Steven White, Chief Executive of Hyde group said that this means that, in conventional development terms, Packington is 'a terrible investment.' It was instead redeveloped with the intention of becoming a harmonious street-orientated community, thereby yielding social dividends that couldn't be translated into cold, hard cash. The second regeneration has rewarded the network of streets, and the social benefits that comes with that model, to the residents.

Flora Neville is a Journalist