

Better streets: How can we build more of what we love?

By John Myers from [London YIMBY](#)

To walk the leafy Georgian streets of Bloomsbury is to find a mystery.

How have we become so much worse than the Georgians and Victorians at building beautiful streets? Why does an acre of sprawling twentieth-century London have only one-fifth as many homes, while often looking worse?

Tourists fly around the world to see our Victorian and Georgian heritage. Few more recent streets inspire such love.

In a world of self-driving cars, immunotherapy and translating ear buds, how has building the very fabric of our world seemingly gone backwards?

The 1947 planning system was mainly a new and untried invention. Since then it has been repeatedly altered, almost always again without prior local trials or other testing.

We do not build bridges or rockets like this. If we did, they would not last long. In part, the miracle about the current planning system is that it works at all.

Professional engineers and others who design complex systems have learned to experiment, test and monitor.

Yet we have little local experimentation in planning reform. This country has preferred to introduce sweeping change nationally, throwing caution to the wind.

We also have little monitoring using any metrics that other professions would recognize. DCLG does not even measure how the productivity of planners has changed under the barrage of untested reforms.

What little we do know implies that there is huge room for improvement.

The housing crisis has an appalling human cost. Young people lose opportunities for good jobs and training. Parents and grandparents worry where the children will live. And, as in any shortage, the poor suffer most of all.

Often forgotten is the [astonishing economic damage from the housing crisis](#) – by some estimates, up to 25% of GDP per head. There is no British productivity 'puzzle'.

We desperately need better planning.

Better planning includes planning for human nature. Few politicians are saints, and few officials are immune to pressure. If political pressure is a real problem – and politicians are

very happy to admit in private that it is – then planning must be designed to cope. We do not build bridges by pretending that storms do not happen.

Almost from the beginning, for example, the New Towns aroused a backlash. We need a planning system that works well in the real world, coping with real, fallible human beings, limited resources and real politics.

For far too long people have disliked many new buildings. We have built far too few beautiful homes in the right places. How can we get many more homes that inspire devotion and love?

Planning is hard but crucial in a world of fragmented ownership. Bloomsbury did not happen by accident. It was designed in detail by the Bedford Estate. The Cadogan and other estates upgraded their areas over time, replacing modest buildings with beautiful townhouses and mansion blocks.

Modern planning law has tried to address that challenge. It has mainly failed to enhance already-built areas. Half of the homes in London are in buildings of only one or two floors: miles of sprawling, often unremarkable twentieth-century houses. Our ancestors would not have hesitated to improve them. How did we lose our vision and courage?

How can we get back to beautifully masterplanned places like Bloomsbury? How do we build more places that people will circle half the world to see?

We cannot go back to great landed estates, nor should we. Homeowners cherish their homes and many would not wish to rent. But there are easy ways to give local people more power to improve where they live.

Permissions on a discretionary site-by-site basis, without any overarching design code, will never give the best possible result. Political science and economics have much to teach planning about the problems caused by the way we do it. The current process could not be better designed to inspire opposition and strife, because the people of the community often receive little benefit from the permission. On the other hand, imposing uniform permitted development rights across a broad area, without taking account of local needs, has often been a disaster.

Neighbourhood planning – another national reform with little prior local testing – has not helped as much as it could.

Why not? We think the areas are mainly too big. Science tells us that agreement gets harder with more people. Could Bloomsbury have been designed by a committee of thousands? Neighbourhood areas often have too many existing buildings of different types and ages.

Are there smaller areas that could be gracefully and coherently enhanced?

There is one simple and natural grouping: a single street.

A single street can have a simple design code that will work for the whole street. Very often the buildings are similar and the neighbours know each other.

How to get better streets

Streets that do not want to change should not be forced to. But, where there is overwhelming support, why not let a single street vote to give itself more permitted development rights to extend or even replace, and to pick a design code for the façades to ensure that the result improves on the original?

In a typical suburban street of 1930s semi-detached houses, permitting terraces or mansion blocks can result in a five-fold increase in living space. That can treble the value of the original house, in areas of high demand. The new buildings can have bigger homes for families to expand, or be divided into many more maisonettes and flats.

The idea is to have maximum height limits (say, six floors, like Bloomsbury) and strict rules about back gardens, overshadowing, basements and houses on street corners, to protect residents on other streets. That way, the vast majority of the effects will be limited to that street. Why not let streets who wish to enhance themselves choose to do so?

We suggest requiring a two-thirds voting majority of residents who have been there for at least three years, to prevent gaming the system.

No-one is forced to use the new permitted development rights of course. Homeowners could just sit on them, or team up with a small builder. Or they can sell when they want to, buying another home and giving the surplus money to their children or grandchildren to buy their own homes, while the original plot is turned into multiple maisonettes or combined with one or two others to build a mansion block with many more flats.

After all, many Georgian streets were built one or a few houses at a time. The Royal Crescent in Bath was built by various different builders to a single design code.

HTA Design's Fitzroofs project added graceful mansard roof extensions to rows of Victorian houses on a street in Primrose Hill. Despite a unanimous application and widespread support, it took two years and hundreds of pages to get approval. One person involved described it as a 'nightmare'. It should have been much simpler.

In our recent paper, [*Yes In My Back Yard – how to end the housing crisis, boost the economy and win more votes*](#) – we describe our suggestion in more detail. We also suggest giving



local communities more power to green their green belt, and more devolution of power to the mayors of cities and city regions.

All of our suggestions aim to ensure that local people benefit from and take control of improving where they live.

There is no need to compromise. Beauty need not be expensive. Beauty makes us happier, healthier and more kindhearted. Beauty helps clear the political logjam that caused our housing crisis. Let us build places of ethereal beauty. Let us build more of the places that we all love.

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