

## CENTRE FOR LONDON - LONDON HOUSING SUMMIT 05/06/24

The Summit was a curate's egg - good in parts. Organisation had been gazumped by the unexpectedly called general election, which meant we lost the Minister for Housing Lee Rowley, amongst others. Nevertheless, the conference was galvanized into believing a new govt would be amenable to practical ideas about solving the housing crisis.

Unfortunately, due to the lack of analysis of causes (apart from an excellent but brief presentation from Jon Tabbush), along with the domination of presenters and attendees by the development industry and their local authority enablers, this increasingly meant a simplistic focus on just maximizing units - and inevitably entailed beating up the planning system and central government incoherence, rather than acknowledge any shortcomings in the Ponzi scheme they were seeking to expand.

Peter Apps (Inside Housing) opened angrily about the change in 35 years since he was a kid, from housing security and the availability of council housing in the 1980's, along with regulated rents, and basic standards in all rental tenures which were enforced. In that 35 years the entire local authority infrastructure of architects, builders, planners, land valuers, regulators, financial skills, institutional knowledge, political understanding - has been dismantled and largely buried like nuclear waste, with the merest trace of memory.

In the first session Pooja Agrawal (CEO Public Practice) claimed that the focus of her organisation was upskilling councils in these fields; Kieron Williams, relatively new Leader of Southwark Council, boasted of the hard process of creating inhouse teams to construct the 32,000 council homes across London in recent years. While 'good news', this would have been considered utterly piddling in the 1980s; and in the scale of things it is, since it works out at about 125 council homes per authority per year, with waiting lists of over 17,000 in Southwark's case. (Nor was Kieron's figure net: the amount demolished or lost to RTB is greater than that built, as was shown in Jon Tabbush's presentation.)

There clearly was real anxiety from Cllr Louise Brett (Cabinet Member for Genuinely Affordable Housing, Ealing Council) at the slow-motion tragedy of the crisis, the homeless families camping out on Town Hall steps, the 74,000 children in temporary accommodation in London, and the financial chaos leading towards bankruptcy by this emergency cost which the government have failed to cover.

But the conference was not about bewailing the problems, but proposing solutions for a new government, because the discussion increasingly focused on simply how to get building, how to deliver maximum units, how to build affordable housing, how to attract investment, how to make better the "build, build, build" model based on realising the uplift in land values from the property Ponzi scheme which London World City leads, in order to fund some crumbs of 'affordable' housing. It wasn't just that Anna Minton didn't challenge this approach (she Chaired the first session), nor that Mariana Mazzucato didn't appear at all due to illness (we watched a video of her 2023 speech to the UN), nor even that the Minister was replaced by the incoherent Shaun Bailey (he'd only had 18 hours to prepare, we were told).

All of those squibs weren't really the problem, but it was those that were there that were the problem - and those that weren't there. There were only two people out of 200 from the community, only one voice of challenge from Shelter. This was a summit as approached by Edmund Hilary, rather than a conference engaging the people.

My breakout session was entitled 'Unlocking Institutional Investment': it was facilitated by BeFirst and had another BeFirst executive on the panel, plus a series of people from the

world of investment. I sat next to - and had good conversation with - Adam Challis, head of JLL leading 'Opportunity London'<sup>1</sup>, a 'partnership' of the Mayor of London and London Councils with Lendlease, Berkeley Homes, LandSec, Barrett etc, which boasts "*High levels of liquidity, as the second most traded global real estate market last year with transaction volumes exceeding £31.3bn, behind only the USA*" - isn't that the problem???

And we were told not to talk about planning – Centre for London didn't want a conference focused on maligning planning or moaning about the problems in general, but a focus on solutions, particularly asks from government, and they didn't seem interested in what would appear to be a reactive defence of planning.

The problem with that approach is that the convocation of problems around development is not considered – the right mix of land uses, the need for a whole panoply of infrastructure required and spatially planned (parks, shopping centres, roads, trains, public transport, schools, health facilities, leisure centres, faith centres, community centres etc), nor the impact on the neighbourhoods and communities.

Perhaps the most depressing moment was when cuddly Uncle Tom Copley, Deputy Mayor for Housing, final speaker, proudly announced "we are progressive YIMBYs and our priority is 'build, build, build'"! He seemed thoroughly and depressingly captured. Looking at the pictures of the swank launching the £3tn Opportunity London its obvious why...

In fact it was left to Rob Perrins, CEO of Berkeley Homes, to bring us back to reality in bewailing the 750,000 under-occupied homes and 90,000 empty homes in London. The fact is that the govt-in-waiting is expected to facilitate the developer's and investor's tanks, which are all ready to roll - but a turbo-charged 'more of the same' is going to simply result in a speeding up of the crisis.

The most sensible comment was from L&Q's Fiona Fletcher Smith, who reminded us that Nye Bevin was Minister for Housing and Health, because it was widely recognised that these two issues were hand in glove: a new govt needs to put the Minister for Housing at Cabinet level and recognise it is critical infrastructure for the nation's health and economic capacity.

Dare I suggest we need a Minister for Communities and Planning at Cabinet level as well?

Michael Ball, Just Space

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<sup>1</sup> [Opportunity London](#)