

RESEARCH FOR THE WORLD

City living in high density

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Kath Scanlon is a Distinguished Policy Fellow at LSE London. She has a wide range of research interests including comparative housing policy (across all tenures—social and private rented housing as well as owner-occupation), comparative mortgage finance, and migration.

London needs more housing, and with land at a premium, high density housing has become a popular solution. To help inform best practice for future development, **Kath Scanlon** and LSE researchers have been studying residents' experiences.

Girdled by a green belt of land that cannot be built upon and experiencing a rapidly growing population, London faces the problem of constriction. The city cannot expand outwards – so London must go up.

Consequently, apartment blocks – providing homes to both private and social residents – have grown up across a city long characterised by its low-rise Victorian terrace houses and private gardens.

These developments have challenged the stigma of the tower block. In the UK, high-rise blocks have been associated with the social housing built with optimism in the post-war period, but later often beset by poor maintenance, anti-social behaviour and crime.



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LSE London and LSE Cities have undertaken research to find out what it is like to live in the new high density developments, with the aim of understanding how to ensure that they are good places to live, both now and in the future.

What makes a high rise block a home?

High density in London. Residents of several high-density developments show us what they like and don't like about their homes

Kath Scanlon, Distinguished Policy Fellow at LSE London, said: “We were interested to know how these places work as homes, given that they're so different to the traditional houses that people in the UK have aspired to live in.”

The researchers looked at 14 high density schemes in London with more than 100 dwellings per hectare, including recent developments and three historic ones. Amongst them are Stratford Halo in Newham, Woodberry Down in Hackney and the Millbank Estate, Tachbrook Estate and Lillington and Longmore Gardens, which are all in Westminster.

Kath explained what the residents enjoyed about the new blocks: “They like that they’re very light, because they have floor to ceiling windows. They’re modern and so things work. And if they live on a higher floor they often have good views.

“Importantly, the residents do not see their homes as a compromise - they have actually chosen to live there. They’re not cheap places to live, being generally more expensive than an equivalent sized place in existing housing stock.

“On the other hand, most people don’t see them as their home for life. They see them as appropriate for their current lifestyle – most residents were childless people in their 20s to 40s. A lot of them said, ‘When I have children, I want to move to a house with a garden’.”



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What do residents want from high density living?

In choosing their homes many – nearly 70 per cent – said transport links were an important factor. Other major factors were price (43 per cent) and liking the neighbourhood (33 per cent).

In general, considerations such as being close to family and friends were well down their list of criteria for choosing a home. Which may explain another aspect that many residents like about their homes: their concierges.

“People absolutely love their concierges in the schemes that have them!” said Kath. “They greet people by name, remember details about them and provide a sense of security and perhaps also neighbourliness.”

Not all developments are the same

In contrast to the newer developments, the historic schemes were originally built as social housing and are fairly low-rise, despite their density. They tend to have a lot more families living in them and many have lived there for a long time. In the Tachbrook Estate – built in three phases between the 1930s and 1950s – there are families that have lived there for three generations. This means that many residents have a far stronger attachment to where they live and do regard their estates as their long-term homes.

One of these estates, the award-winning Lillington Gardens with its gardens threaded through the development and extensive landscaping, provides a lesson for developers thinking about designing green space in a way which encourages people to walk through or use them.

“People really appreciate useable green space when they don’t have any of their own,” said Kath. “Some of the newer estates such as Woodberry Down which looks out on two London Wildlife Trust managed reservoirs, have created really inviting environments for their residents. Others are less successful in this respect, with shaded and bleak common spaces which nobody ever uses. This is an area that needs to be improved upon when designing these high density developments.”

Service charges and hidden expenses

Another issue that could be improved upon are related to service charges. These are a point of frustration, with residents feeling they are expensive and often increasing with little transparency about why.

Most of the research was done before the tragedy of the fire in the Grenfell Tower, which is likely to shape attitudes towards living in towers. But is the dream of high density, city living also under threat from concerns about COVID-19, especially given research showing that the virus might be exacerbated by air pollution?

“That remains to be seen,” said Kath. “But the impact of COVID-19 is not about just about the residents but also about the buyers. A lot of these schemes only get under construction when a certain amount of units have been pre-sold and a huge amount of these pre-sales come from the Far East, and to a lesser extent the Middle East. So that is a big question mark – is the demand still going to be there? I think the financial model might be the thing that has cracks, rather than people necessarily deciding they don’t want to live this way.” ■

Kath Scanlon was speaking to Sue Windebank, Senior Media Manager at LSE.

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