

THE CASE FOR BUILDING TALLER RESIDENTIAL ACCOMMODATION IN LONDON OUTSIDE THE CENTRAL AREA, WITH SPECIFIC REFERENCE TO A SITE IN HONOR OAK, IN THE LONDON BOROUGH OF LEWISHAM

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Revised

Present planning guidelines tend to favour the grouping of taller buildings, and 'clusters' of them have emerged or are emerging not least in The City and Canary Wharf, but also in areas such as City Road in Islington and Hackney, or Blackfriars Road in Southwark. With current property values many of these taller buildings are residential but are built in areas with few local social amenities such as open space - City Road and Blackfriars Road notably lacking in them. The target market is often foreign investors, who frequently leave them vacant for long periods, so they contribute little to easing the local housing shortage resulting from London's rapidly increasing population. The towers are often also extremely high, such as the 50-storey No. 1 Blackfriars Road currently under construction, or the residential upper storeys of the 72-storey 'Shard', both in Southwark, or the 40-storey towers in City Road, and provide a questionable framework for normal family life.

However there would seem to be scope for building more modest residential towers in outer or suburban areas of London. Such towers would have no more ground coverage as a percentage of their sites than a typical development of two-storey family houses, and could be typically of about 12-14 storeys. Such towers could do much to increase the amount of housing available for ordinary locally-based households without building on the green belt or in new towns beyond it, and without reducing the much-appreciated green-ness of the suburbs. With the average size of household constantly declining, many such towers could be angled at households without young children for whom the suitability of life above ground has most often been questioned. Such towers could look out over the roofs and gardens of the low-rise suburban housing around them, and enjoy optimal conditions of sun, space, and greenery. Indeed where towers are too closely 'clustered' - as at Canary Wharf for example - they can lose those desirable conditions by creating canyons between them.

The argument against such developments in suburban areas is generally related to the question of whether a tall tower would be 'out of scale' with its surroundings in a low-rise area and detract from them. My own view is that on the contrary, the existing large suburban areas around London can be monotonous precisely because of the absence of contrasts of scale. Taller towers at certain widely-spaced points could provide a much needed variety of scale and emphasis. There have been many developments where low houses have been combined with towers on the same site. For example single-storey cottages are combined with 11-storey towers on the famous 1950s LCC Roehampton Estate in Wandsworth, and 3-storey terrace houses are combined with 31-storey Trellick Tower in Ernö Goldfinger's GLC Cheltenham Estate in North Kensington, both now being listed at a high level. Going further a-field, Mies van der Rohe's famous Lafayette Park housing development in Detroit from the 1960s successfully combines 2-storey row houses with 20-storey residential slab blocks. Even Frank Lloyd Wright with his dispersed 'Broadacre City' ideal imagined that it would be dotted by residential towers for those not willing or able to participate in his proposed semi-agrarian life-style. The taller blocks do not detract from the lower houses but benefit from being able to look out over their roofs and gardens. Indeed it might be argued that such low-rise housing with generous gardens will look after the necessary green space at the foot of

towers which can, if not adequately maintained, be unsightly or uncared for. The Appendix to this text illustrates the wider application.

COURTRAI ROAD SITE IN THE LONDON BOROUGH OF LEWISHAM

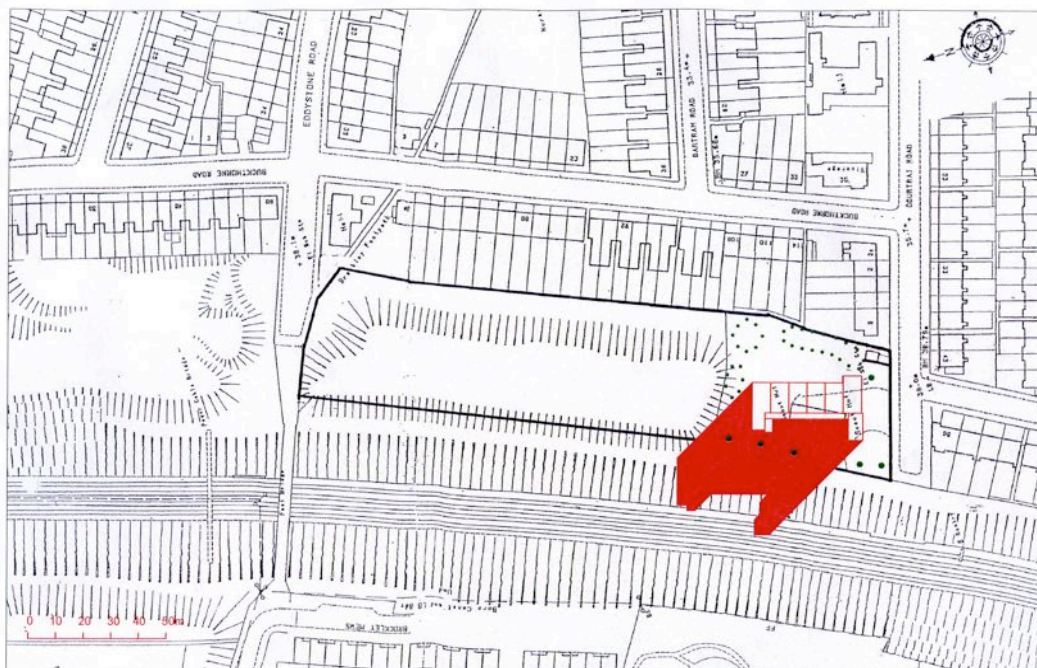
There is a vacant site of just under one hectare in the Crofton Park ward lying between Courtrai Road and Eddystone Road, London SE4 and backing onto the London Overground railway line between Honor Oak and Brockley Stations stations, which it appear could be a trial location for a development of the kind described above. Photographs of the site as seen from the pedestrian bridge over the railway at the head of Eddystone Road, and as seen from Courtrai Road are reproduced here:



The site is vacant except for a little-used Scout Hall at the southern, Courtrai Road end, and is included within the Forest Hill to New Cross Gate Railway Cutting designated as a Site of Importance for Nature Conservancy (SINC), with a number of trees covered by Tree Preservation Orders - although unlike the rest of the SINC the site is not actually within the cutting. For these reasons no development has taken place on the site. However indications following an independent professional survey in the past are that the local natural assets are few, in part due to the fact that much of the soil on the site is spoil excavated when the railway cutting alongside - originally a canal cutting - was dug. The value from a nature conservation point of view seems primarily to be that it forms part of a 4km-long corridor allowing wildlife to move along it for a considerable distance beyond the site on either side. However it is adjacent to a narrowing of that corridor since the gardens of the houses in Grierson Road on the other side of Courtrai Road run down to the edge of the cutting itself. Nevertheless what natural assets it has should clearly be protected.

The 'footprint' of the Scout Hall is of about 270 sq m and together with the hard-standing and paved area around it as shown on the OS map it covers about 850 sq m. Purely by way of an example, the drawing I409-SK2(2) reproduced below shows an existing 14-storey block - Glenkerry House in London E14 designed by Ernő Goldfinger (on which the author of this article was for a time 'job architect') superimposed on the site of Scout Hall, with a

footprint of 600 sq m. With hard landscaping around it, the total 'hard' footprint might equal that of the Scout Hut, and so, it would seem, should not have any greater impact of the natural assets of the site than the Scout Hut. It is also worth noting that such a block could be wholly or partly 'open' at ground level, the building supported on stilts or 'pilotis' above ground and thus interfere even less with natural life and movement on the ground surface. It could in fact have a smaller footprint than the existing Scout Hall. Glenkerry House provides a total of 76 residential units varying from 'six-person' to 'two-person'.



Courtrai Road site SE4 - James Dunnett Architects -1:1000 approx at A3 - 28.07.14 1409-SK2(2)

Running very nearly due north-south, and backing onto a railway line on the other side of which lies Honor Oak Sports Ground and the New Camberwell Cemetery, the shadow cast by a block of this kind would fall for only a very limited part of the day on neighbouring houses or their gardens. The scheduled trees on the site which - with the block sited as shown - need not be disturbed, would provide generous protection from overlooking. A photograph of the block, built 1972-5, is included below, purely to illustrate the idea. A wholly new design reflecting current demand and building practices and regulations would be developed. The main elevation shown is square in proportion, about 38 m high and long. The ground rises considerably up Courtrai Road and such a block on this site would command wide views especially towards the east but also to the west over the well-landscaped cemetery and Honor Oak Sports Area.

It is worth noting that partial developments in SINC-designated areas are considered, and an application for the Gifford Street Railway Embankment SINC in Islington (P2014/0609/FUL) involving much greater coverage of the ground by buildings than here proposed is currently under consideration after an extended consultation exercise.



LEWISHAM POLICY ON TALL BUILDINGS

The London Borough of Lewisham produced in September 2010 a *Draft Tall Buildings Study - an evidence-based assessment*. This identifies six areas within Lewisham where 'tall buildings' might be considered suitable and, in accordance with The London Plan 2009 draft policy 7.7 on tall buildings, they are limited to 'sites in the Central Activity Zone, Opportunity Areas, Areas of intensification or Town Centres...', and they therefore do not include the Courtrai Road site. 'Tall buildings' are identified as those 'significantly taller than their neighbours... that have a notable impact on the skyline... that are more than 25 metres high adjacent to River Thames or more than 30 metres elsewhere...', and it is assumed that they would be likely to be clustered with other substantial buildings as part of a major development on the identified sites. An eleven-storey residential building might in fact come in below 30 metres in total height, and so purely on that ground might not come within the terms of the Tall Buildings policy, though by the other criteria it might do so.

Generally Lewisham's *Tall Buildings Study* is therefore devoted to analysing in greater detail the suitability of the six selected sites for tall buildings and so it does not address in detail the criteria that might be applied to tall buildings elsewhere. But it is the contention of this paper that moderately tall residential buildings might have their greatest benefits in locations elsewhere in the Borough.

Applying as far as possible the criteria described to the Courtrai Road site, however, it is worth noting that it does not lie under the protected sightlines from strategic points to St Paul's Cathedral and the Palace of Westminster identified in the London Plan. It does lie within the 'Local View' cones from Blythe Hill Fields and Hilly Fields Park shown in the *Tall Buildings Study*, but at some considerable distance such that little impact on these views would be likely. As regards accessibility to public transport, the site is in a well-connected area and is within easy walking distance of Honor Oak Station and the bus routes along Brockley Road. The fine listed Arts and Crafts church of St Hilda's Crofton Park lies at the far Brockley Road end of Courtrai Road, but there is no reason to think that its setting would be adversely affected by a taller building at the other end of the road. Indeed it might be enhanced by there being a focal feature at the far end of the straight rising road, as might the local townscape more generally. The site lies just within the area shown in the *Lewisham Study* as being 'deficient in local and small parks', however it is possible the residents might have access to their own green site of nearly one hectare (nature conservancy permitting), and otherwise have easy access to the One Tree Hill open space and Honor Oak Sports Ground across the railway in Southwark. There is no suggestion the area is short of local welfare, educational or social amenities.

CONCLUSION

The London Plan Policy 4B.9 is quoted in the *Lewisham Study* to say that 'The Mayor will promote the development of tall buildings where they will create attractive landmarks enhancing London's character', which at least implies a measure of acceptance of tall buildings that would not have existed twenty years ago. But it continues to see them in 'scenic' terms rather than as possible contributors to human welfare in terms of providing light airy accommodation with a wide outlook and pleasant green space at the foot. The Courtrai Road site provides an opportunity for a demonstration project that could be a model for additional housing throughout wide areas of low-density outer London.



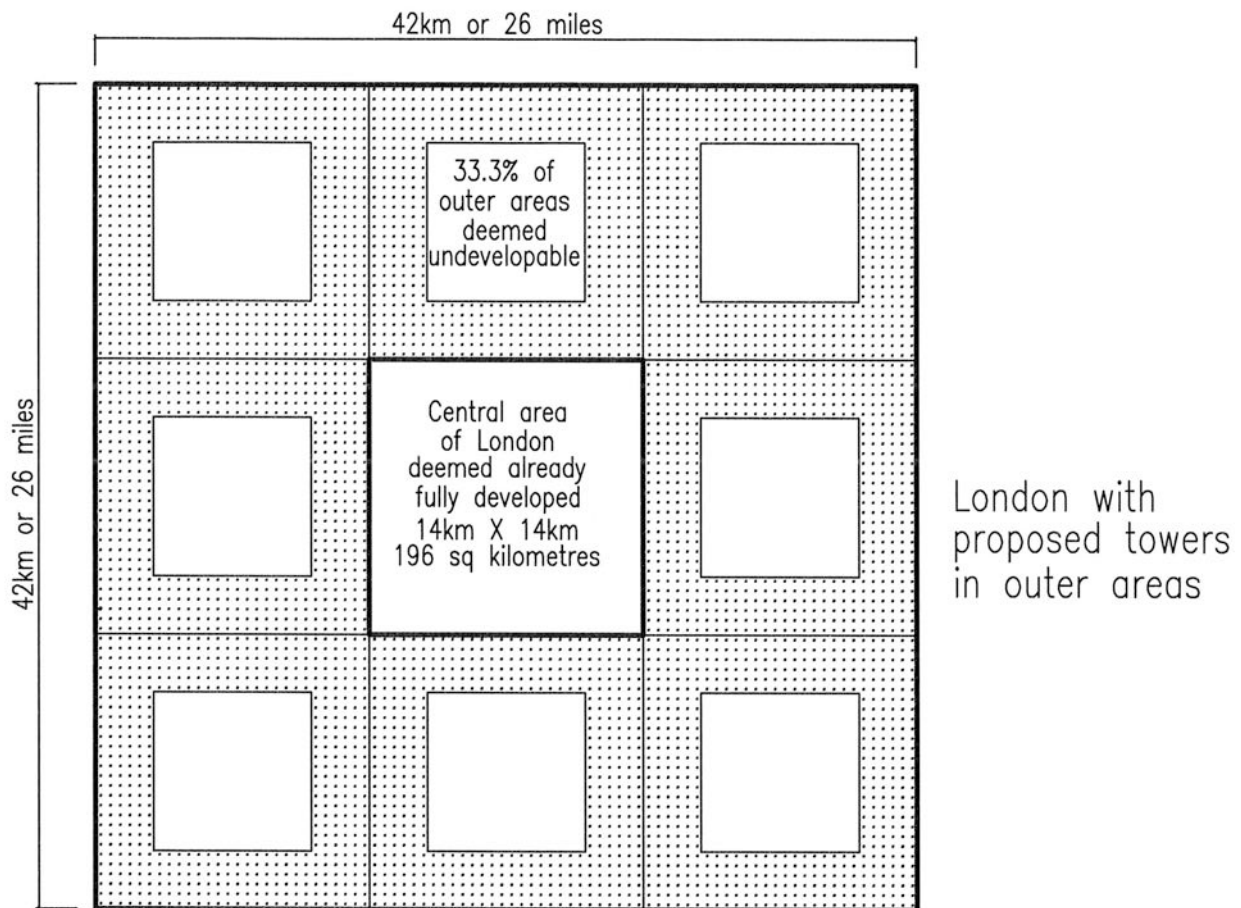
Visualisation by D. Kessissoglou of the impact of a Glenkerry House built on the railway-side site, as seen from Courtrai Road, Lewisham.

APPENDIX SHOWING POTENTIAL OF LONDON-WIDE APPLICATION

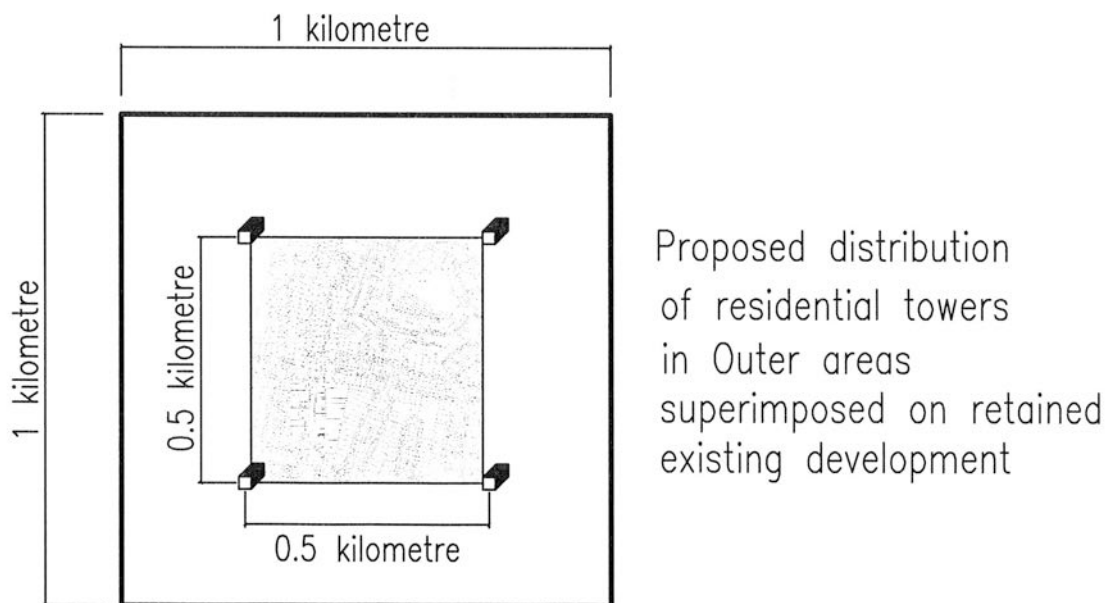
The attached diagram CC01 below is intended to illustrate how in principle a policy of building residential blocks comparable to Glenkerry House at half-kilometre distances throughout outer or suburban London might provide housing for an additional population of 1.4 million within the existing built up area of London, without building on or beyond the greenbelt. 1.6 million is the current forecast of growth in London's population up to 2036, according to the 2014 *Report* of the Government Inspector into the GLA's proposed Further Alterations to the London Plan. The additional population provided by such blocks within the outer areas would help support social services and especially public transport in areas where their viability can often be marginal. These blocks would also in my view enhance the areas concerned visually, provided they were of adequate architectural quality, by introducing much-needed contrast or variety of scale, as discussed in the main text above.

For the purpose of the diagram I have assumed London to be a square of 42 km breadth and depth, 1764 square kilometres in overall area (the actual figure is 1738 square kilometres). This area can be divided into nine squares of 196 square kilometres, of which one represents central London, and is excluded from this calculation on the assumption that it is already fully developed and unsuitable for the kind of blocks envisaged (the nine inner London Boroughs of Islington, Hackney, Tower Hamlets, City of London, Southwark, Lambeth, Kensington & Chelsea, Hammersmith and Fulham, Westminster, and Camden, together amount to 184 square kilometres). One third of each of the remaining eight outer squares is assumed to be unavailable for the building of such blocks because it is open space or in some form of institutional or industrial use. The remaining area amounts to 1035 sq kilometres in total. If the proposed blocks were spaced 0.5km apart, four would be accommodated in each kilometre square, and a total of 4140 such blocks would be built.

Glenkerry House, used here as an example of the kind of block envisaged, provides a total of 340 'bed spaces' in 78 dwellings on 14 floors. 4140 such blocks would therefore provide accommodation for 1,421,200 people - see diagram CC01 that follows:



Greater London Urban Area = 1738 sq kilometres (Wikipedia)
 Area represented by diagram above is 1764 sq kilometres
 Area deemed developable in outer areas is 1045 sq kilometres
 With 4 residential towers per sq kilometre there would be 4180 towers
 The towers shown are of 8400 sq m on 14 floors like Glenkerry House (GLC 1973) E14, which offers 340 bedspaces in 78 dwellings.
 Construction of such towers would house 1,421,200 more people within the Greater London Urban Area or 1,247,580 within the GLA area, on incidental sites generally without disturbing existing development.



'Green Towers' proposal for Outer London housing – James Dunnett RIBA diagram CC01