

## **DISPERSED DENSIFICATION** **as a Solution to London's Housing Problem**

The Case for Taller Residential Development in Outer London, with a Study of a Specific Site in Honor Oak, Lewisham

**James Dunnett RIBA, Architect**

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*Eddystone Road, Honor Oak, Lewisham, London SE4, looking east, with existing terrace housing and tower*

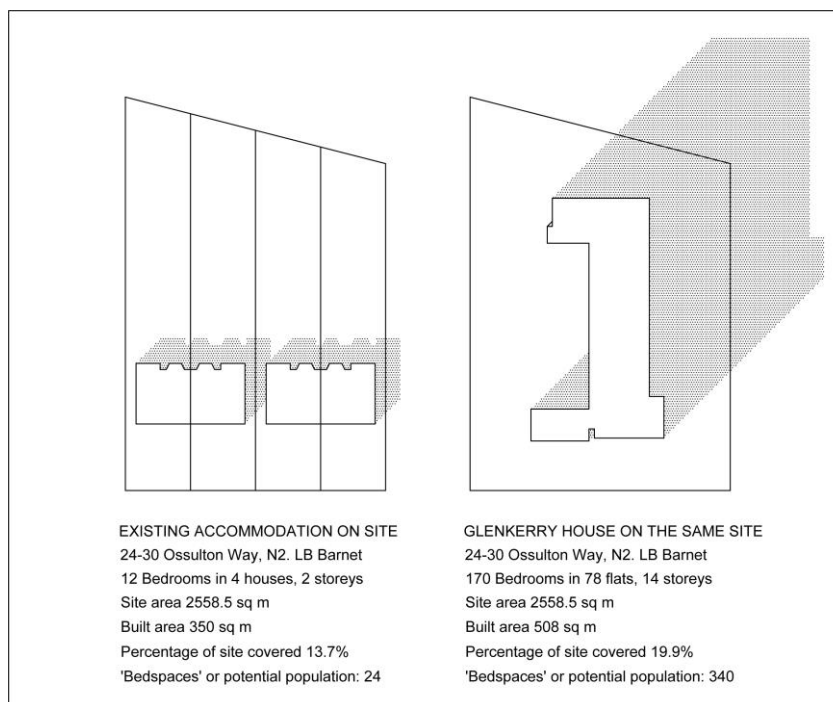
The urgent need for more housing in London is well known. The population is currently forecast to rise by 1.6 million by 2036, and the provision of additional housing has failed over many years to keep pace with the population growth that has already occurred. The result has been the soaring cost of housing. One solution that is frequently advanced is that we should relax greenbelt restrictions, and allow more housing to be built in another concentric ring around the existing. Although encroachment on the green belt is, regrettably, something that to some degree is constantly occurring, there is no doubt that enforcing the greenbelt is one of the most popular planning policies and has been one of the most effective in preserving amenity. The shapeless and wasteful sprawl of low-density development over green countryside is something that almost everyone deplors from a visual, ecological, social, and even agricultural point of view. Whilst more concerted strategic efforts should certainly be made to shift development pressures away from the South East, their efficacy is likely to be long term, and the need for large amounts of new housing will remain. So where and how is it to be provided?

In fact if the residential density of London is compared to that of other European cities, it looks as though its present built up area should be able to accommodate a substantially

higher population without needing to encroach on the green belt. Take Paris for example. The Greater Paris region, roughly equivalent to our Greater London Authority area in that it covers effectively all the built-up area centred on Paris, has a population density nearly 60% higher - in a country with an overall population density only 42% that of the UK. If the residential density of the GLA area was comparable to that of Greater Paris, it would house 5 million more people than it does. So on the face of it it should be able to house an extra 1.6 million without too much difficulty. But how?

The possibility of building taller needs to be re-examined - especially, it will be argued, in the outer areas of London beyond the inner London boroughs, where densities are lowest but social amenities such as green space and sports facilities are most plentiful, which could benefit most from the additional population, and where small incidental underused or unused sites suitable for the pattern of development here proposed are most widely available. The 'densifying' of the suburbs here proposed has been advocated by others, and is a core policy in London Mayor Sadiq Khan's Draft London Plan, but detailed suggestions as to how it might be done, such as the 'Supurbia' proposal advanced by RIBA President Ben Derbyshire, seem problematic. His proposal would require the densification of whole blocks of suburban housing at one time, requiring the co-ordination of large numbers of owner-occupiers for which legal powers of coercion would presumably be required. Gaps between suburban houses would be progressively filled in with matching low-rise development, including the development of the bottom of long gardens, and the result would be much disturbance and much-increased ground coverage by buildings, inevitably reducing the greenness and spaciousness of the suburbs which is their principal allure. The monotony of the suburban environment due to uniformity of scale would not be addressed.

By contrast, the proposal here advanced, whereby mid-rise residential blocks of 10-14 storeys would be built on the kind of small under-used or unused sites that are quite widely available in the outer parts of London; little disruption of existing occupation need be involved. Even if there was to be some demolition, a block of the kind envisaged can be built on the site of two pairs of semi-detached houses, and would be within the scope of mid-sized building contractors, of the kind the Mayor wishes to involve. As an example, the diagram below illustrates 14-storey Glenkerry House, discussed later, occupying the same site as two pairs of semi-detached houses, and achieving a 14-fold increase in density on that site. It is planning control policies that would currently prohibit such developments.



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 are 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 designed for 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 the optimal conditions of 'sun, space, and greenery' sought by Le Corbusier. Indeed where towers are too closely 'clustered' - as at Canary Wharf for example - they can lose those desirable conditions by creating canyons between them.



*Image of how a fourteen-storey residential block - in this case Grade 2-listed Glenkerry House by Ernő Goldfinger of 1972 -, might look if built in a suburban setting, in this case a railway-side site in Courtrai Road, Lewisham. Visualisation by Daphne Kessissoglou.*

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 Trelick Tower in Ernő Goldfinger's GLC Cheltenham Estate in North Kensington, both now 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. Issues of overlooking and overshadowing are also relevant, but I believe can be managed by placement, orientation and landscaping, as in example described below. Any overlooking would generally be from a considerable distance.

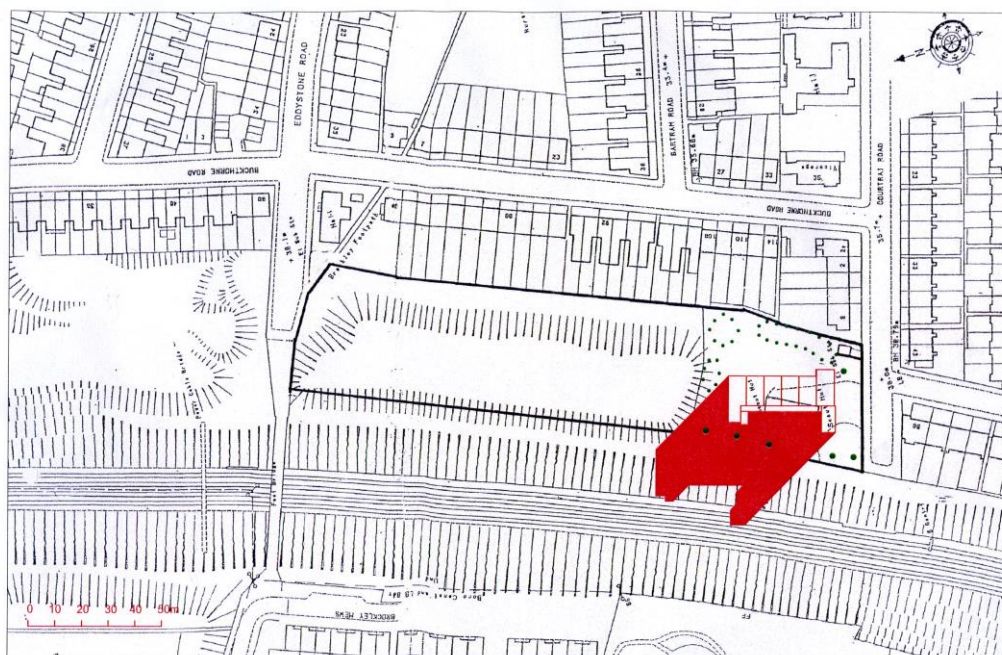
## COURTRAI ROAD SITE IN THE LONDON BOROUGH OF LEWISHAM

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, which it appears could be a trial location for a development of the kind described above, involving no loss of existing housing. Photographs of the site as seen from Courtrai Road looking west, and from the pedestrian bridge over the railway at the head of Eddystone Road looking south, are reproduced:



The site is vacant except for a disused former 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 cutting alongside was dug. The value from a nature conservation point of view is primarily 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 1409-SK2(2) reproduced below shows an existing 14-storey block - Grade 2-listed Glenkerry House in London E14 designed by Ernő Goldfinger (on which the author of this article was for a time project 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 78 residential units varying from 'six-person' to 'two-person'.



Courtrai Road site SE4 - James Dunnott 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 has been approved after an extended consultation exercise.

*Ernö Goldfinger's grade 2-listed Glenkerry House of 1972 as it exists in Poplar, London E14.*



## 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 Courtraï 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 Courtraï 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 Courtraï Road, but there is no reason to think that its setting would be adversely affected by a taller building at the other end. 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

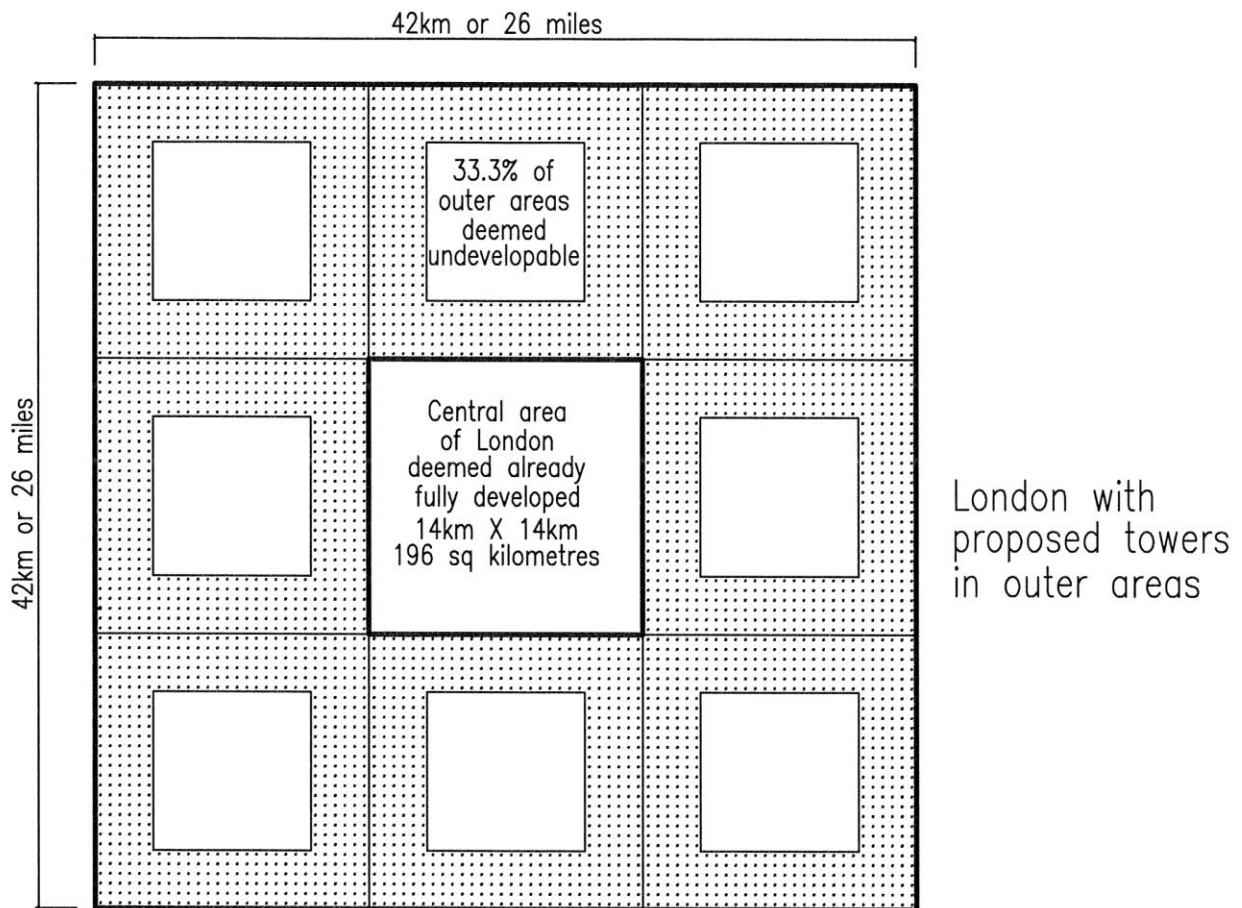
light airy accommodation with a wide outlook and pleasant green space at the foot. The Courtrai Road site provides an opportunity for a demonstration project that could be a model for additional housing throughout wide areas of low-density outer London.

## **APPENDIX SHOWING POTENTIAL OF LONDON-WIDE APPLICATION**

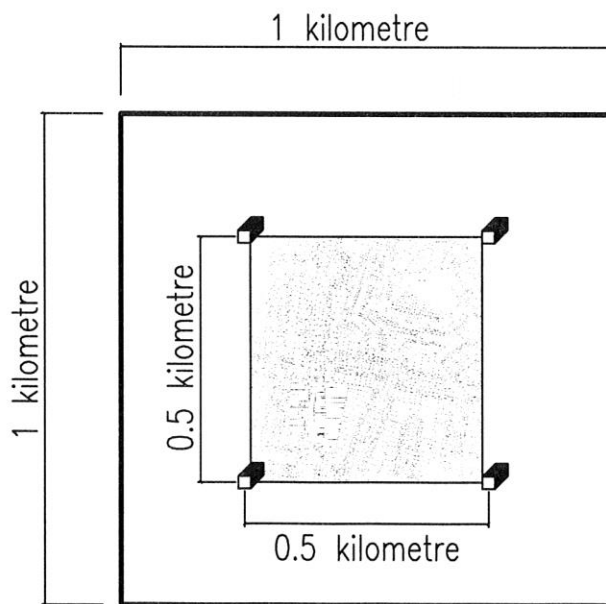
The attached diagram CC01 below is intended to illustrate how in principle a policy of building residential blocks comparable to Glenkerry House at half-kilometre distances apart throughout outer or suburban London might provide housing for an additional population of 1.4 million within the existing 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 and 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.



Proposed distribution of residential towers in Outer areas superimposed on retained existing development