

GOOD GROWTH BY DESIGN

RECOVERY

ROUNDTABLE

ECOLOGICAL URBANISM

MAYOR OF LONDON

The *Good Growth by Design (GGbD) Recovery Roundtable* series invites Mayor's Design Advocates and other external experts to discuss the most pertinent topics facing London's built environment in the wake of the global health crisis and its ensuing social and economic impacts.

This second *Recovery Roundtable* was held on 25th June, chaired by Deputy Mayor Jules Pipe, and focused on ecological urbanism. Fourteen participants, including Mayor's Design Advocates and other practitioners from the public, private and civic sectors each contributed their ideas for how London could respond to the Covid-19 crisis to address the broader challenge of the climate crisis. Deputy Mayor for Environment and Energy, Shirley Rodrigues framed the discussion, setting out the opportunity of recovery to reconfigure our thinking towards a '*fairer, more equal and greener*' city.

Participants addressed ideas including circular economy, decarbonisation, green infrastructure, building retrofit, data, education, and much more. They also identified the crucial role that citizens can play in contributing to these efforts, ensuring that the response to the crisis can also address issues of inequality and social justice.

The following is a summary of key reflections and propositions for how London can react to this challenge, and the role that the Greater London Authority should play in the recovery.

MEETING NOTE – 25TH JUNE 2020

MARIA SMITH

Buro Happold, Mayor's Design Advocate

Enforcement: 'There are many brilliant sustainability policies in the new London Plan. However, we are already seeing these being applied too gently in order to allow major developments to go ahead. Economic and social recovery is being seen as a competing interest to sustainability.'

Wider London: 'It's important that the economic recovery recognises London's impact on the wider system that it sits within. The way we measure carbon emissions, for example, if those were declared on a consumption basis, rather than a territorial basis, then we'll be getting a much more accurate picture of London's true environmental impact.'

Tackle issues directly: 'The Covid-19 crisis shows that we can no longer justify tackling social environmental issues indirectly. We can't just hope that general economic success is going to bring prosperity for all or reverse environmental damage. The only way that we can do that is with ambitious policies.'

SUNAND PRASAD

Penoyre & Prasad Architects, Mayor's Design Advocate

Ecology is urban: 'Ecological urbanism is the erasing of the contradiction between ecology and the urban condition. They are at loggerheads, and that's our biggest obstacle.'

Beyond social distancing: 'Everybody's obsessed with designing for social distancing, and of course we need to be wise about it, but that's really part of resilience. We should move on and talk about the opportunities and new ways of living and working and so on.'

Hold to account: 'The GLA [should] hold to account those developers and private companies who are claiming a sustainability agenda and say: If you're serious, then you'll have to come forward with a plan that actually delivers, and that doesn't put viability ahead of everything else. They should be long-term stewards of their projects.'

Retrofit: 'If I were to single out one thing it's *retrofit*. And I think the GLA could do a lot more about that.'

MONICA VON SCHMALENSEE

White Arkitekter, Mayor's Design Advocate

Procurement: 'The procurement process should ensure that tenders embrace the importance of the UN Habitat 17 Sustainable Development Goals.'

Example, Malmo: 'Malmo is [leading on sustainability] through self-build neighbourhoods, building within the existing population, and innovating at the building scale with zero carbon projects. London could do this as well.'

Regeneration: 'Estate regeneration could be one way of piloting innovative ways to develop ecological urbanism, by retrofitting rather than demolishing.'

POORAN DESAI OBE

Bioregional / One Planet

Simplify policy: 'I see a lot of policy which is far too complicated. We need to look at simplifying policy to the core elements that we need to make something effective, because we

are preventing more innovative developers coming into the market because of the burden of regulation.'

Zero carbon: 'I'm not keen on the idea of a zero carbon buildings policy. I think we need an energy efficiency [buildings] policy combined with a zero carbon energy policy. Mixing up energy and buildings together creates something which in my view is unworkable.'

MEGAN CHARNLEY
Public Practice Associate, LB Newham

Education: 'The level of understanding of ecological urbanism in councils is quite low, and particularly in how these ideas can be applied to the decisions we are making every day.'

Learning while doing: 'We can't just be looking at finished examples of what works, we don't have time for that. We need to be learning from each other as we are going forward. I think this is a live opportunity to test ideas, to see how effective they are.'

CIARA HANSON
LB Croydon / Brick by Brick

People, not policies: 'I don't think we need new policies. I think it's more about empowering the right people who have the expertise in natural environments – landscape architects, green infrastructure experts, ecologists. Some local authorities are devoid of these experts altogether, and in others they are misplaced or undervalued.'

Build capacity: 'We need to empower people that are already in place. The GLA could host an action group to share best practice and information to boost progress [on ecological urbanism].'

Environmental Public Practice: 'Could a similar model be used to parachute natural environment experts into key positions [in local authorities], in a way that Public Practice has made such progress with architectural skills.'

HANIF KARA
Structural engineer, AKTII

Infrastructure: 'Ecological urbanism is a very slippery term. As a structural engineer you have to jump very quickly to infrastructure, and I would characterise that as clocks rather than clouds – things that we make, we can measure, and which produce something.'

Ground plane: 'The essential datum is the ground plane itself. We should embrace tarmac and concrete, it's everywhere, and we can do a lot with it. It allows interaction, communication, and the in-between realm.'

Example, CopenHill: 'One of the best examples of infrastructure is CopenHill, a waste-to-energy plant with a public ski slope on top of it. Ten years ago when we proposed it, everyone said we were joking, but we managed to build it, and people are happier and healthier because of that.'

DAVID CHESHIRE
Aecom

Retrofit: 'Retain and refurbish is in the guidance and the policy now, but I think we need to somehow make it harder to demolish. And when we are demolishing, we need to buy more time in the programme to reuse and reclaim things.'

Incentives: 'It's great we are getting people to write deconstruction plans, but where's the financial incentive? We need to somehow link the end of life to the design concept and bring that together.'

Material brokers: 'We need to create brokers to salvage materials. This idea of 'urban mining', we've got a big city here with masses of materials and resources and value and components in it, we need to find a way to get those out.'

CLARA BAGENAL-GEORGE

Elementa Consulting, Mayor's Design Advocate

Data: 'We need to mandate the disclosure of energy consumption data for existing buildings. We can't meet our climate commitments without understanding how our buildings perform, and once we know how they perform, we can put incentives in place to make sure they perform better.'

Best practice: 'We need to remember that the London Plan is a minimum standard, and we need to be better at showcasing what best practice looks like. Perhaps the GLA could lead by example with GLA funded schemes.'

FARHANA YAMIN

Chatham House

Example, Camden Think and Do: 'The idea is to use underused buildings and spaces to allow people to reimagine what a circular economy, net-zero economy, and sustainably development goals look like in their own locality.'

Lived experimentation: 'What you need sometimes is to bring action to a scale where people can see it and live it, where it is embodied as a way of experimenting. Covid has given us a massive opportunity to do that, because people have already got used to not going into their offices, and have realised how dependent they are on their locality.'

Make spaces available: 'With the recession huge numbers of buildings are going to sit empty for a long time to come. And we have a chance now to use this existing infrastructure better. We don't need to wait for vast amounts of money for a retrofit.'

IRENE DJAO-RAKITINE

Djao-Rakitime, Mayor's Design Advocate

Make changes permanent: 'We've already seen an amazing and fast improvement in terms of pop up bike lanes and pedestrian space measures, which now need to last beyond the immediate aftermath of the Coronavirus crisis.'

'Garden streets': 'In the 18th century, street paving was a mechanism for hygiene, but what we have created is a biologically sterile and sealed environment. London is green, but it's not green enough. I suggest a network of what we could call "garden streets" across London.'

Empower citizens: 'In Tokyo citizens are working with urban designers to 'greenify' their neighbourhoods to improve health, and they're being empowered by the local government to do so. These are small actions, but they could be transformed into a bigger movement.'

TOM HOLBROOK

5th Studio, Mayor's Design Advocate

Golden thread: 'Ecological urbanism seems to offer a golden thread that runs between a larger strategy for a place, and a concrete realisation on the ground.'

Break down silos: 'The possibility of the green recovery and of Good Growth by Design is to [achieve] something greater than the sum of the parts. How do we get out of our silos? How do we bring disciplinary knowledge together? Can we create multiple things happening in one place?'

Expo: 'What is really exciting for me is a kind of expo, using a site like the Royal Docks, to look at things like air pollution, smart cities, urban retrofit. There's an opportunity here to get super concrete about these ideas, and to demonstrate how London can innovate for the next hundred years.'

AMBER FAHEY
BDP

Co-benefits: 'The prioritisation of measures such as reduced car parking and a move away from inactive transport can create co-benefits of safe pedestrian areas, improved air quality, reduced flood risk, enhancement of biodiversity, and all the attached benefits of health and wellbeing.'

Retrofit: 'Adapting existing infrastructure is key. To reach our zero carbon target, 80% of the building stock of 2050 already exists. There's a strong need for clear guidance and examples for retrofit to achieve these targets.'

NAZLI DABIDIAN
Mecserve

Undermining ambitions: 'Thinking really practically, I feel that the Covid crisis may actually undermine the environmental ambitions that we've been pursuing. As we saw happen in the previous economic downturn.'

Financial incentives: 'One positive thing about sustainability assessment tools is that they allow developers to talk about their achievements. These could be used to allow funders to decide whether to back the project, creating a financial incentive for businesses. For example, in the US, there is tax relief for the most sustainable buildings.'

Quantifiable measures: 'The most effective GLA policies are the ones that can be clearly measured and qualified. So the energy strategy and energy statements that have been in place for more than a decade now have been very effective at driving change. The Urban Greening Factor is already having a big impact and people are using it, and that's because it's very simple and it's immediately measurable.'

FURTHER READING

[Circular Economy Primer](#)

[Circular Economy Statement – guidance \(pre-consultation draft\)](#)

[Camden Climate Action Plan 2020-2025](#)

[LETI Climate Emergency Design Guide](#)

[UN Agenda 2030](#)

[Why we must not introduce a Zero Carbon Buildings Policy – Pooran Desai](#)

Mayor's Design Advocates, Advocate Organisations and GLA staff are inputting into a [shared repository](#) of literature, which is a useful resource in framing built environment issues in the COVID context.

UPCOMING ROUNDTABLES

Equality, diversity and inclusion in the built environment sector
Child-friendly city
Public realm
Housing design
Social infrastructure

CONTACT

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