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Debating Density

The architects of two west London housing schemes – Brentford Lock West by Mae and Umpire View by Sarah Wigglesworth architects – consider the challenges of new development in the outer boroughs

The recent announcement by the Office for National Statistics that London will need 844,000 new homes in the next 25 years – a 24 per cent increase on the existing total – represents a significant challenge for planners, policymakers and architects alike.

The boroughs with the greatest predicted growth are in east London where, for example, the number of households in Tower Hamlets is predicted to rise by almost 50 per cent. But what scope is there for densification in west London, where there are fewer large former industrial sites, and patterns of low-density suburban living are now well established? Here, the architects of two diverse new housing projects in the outer boroughs of west London – Umpire View and Brentford Lock West Block E – discuss the ambitions of those schemes and consider the challenges of the future.



Top
Brentford Lock West Block E designed by Mae (left) and Umpire View designed by Sarah Wigglesworth Architects and (phs: Tim Smyth, Rory Gardiner).

Above
Umpire View (1) and Brentford Lock West (2).

Umpire View, Sarah Wigglesworth Architects

Umpire View is a development by Notting Hill Housing of 27 homes on a backland site in Harrow that was formerly amenity space owned by a local church. The church first considered developing the site almost 30 years ago, and made two outline applications that were refused in 2007. In the face of local opposition, an outline application by John Thompson & Partners was approved in 2012, and Sarah Wigglesworth Architects (SWA) was appointed following the sale of the site to the developer. With footprints of the houses fixed by the outline consent, SWA began “the tricky job of trying to squeeze all of this accommodation in, and make it compliant”, says project director Toby Carr.

The housing forms an L-shape around the retained green space, which has been transferred to public ownership. The scheme comprises a mix of affordable rental houses and flats, intermediate housing units and a minority of market sale houses and flats. (12 houses and 15 flats in total). There are two different house types – a three-bed, four-person home and a four-bed, five-person home, bringing variety to the streetscape. Flats are located in small blocks at the ends and corner of the development, and the requirement to work within pre-existing plot boundaries produced a relatively high number of apartment types.

The scheme “interprets the Edwardian vernacular buildings of surrounding streets, using materials which complement the adjacent red brick and clay tile roof of St George’s Church and Hall”, says SWA.



Above
The £4.3m Umpire View scheme designed by Sarah Wigglesworth Architects comprises 27 homes for Notting Hill Housing Trust, located on part of an under-used greenfield site adjacent to a church, vicarage and church hall (phs: Tim Smyth).

Toby Carr, Sarah Wigglesworth Architects

“At Umpire View the outline consent was for semi-detached houses. In fact the houses are so close together that a perimeter block around the edge of the site would have been a better model to pursue in terms of density, but that would have been a non-starter in the area, and given the history of this site, by the time we were on board there was no appetite in the project team to venture into those discussions.

So we began with the question of how to work with the semi-detached house model, and how to instill a sense of neighbourliness, or at least allow an opportunity for that to happen. Part of that was about creating generous thresholds, in which residents might spend a bit of time hanging around. That drove the inset entrances, and then the gable frontage which wasn't in the previous scheme.

We worked for quite a long time with a planner on secondment from the Greater London Authority to the borough, who could see that because of the way the project was set up, there wouldn't be a quality champion, and that as architects we had little weight to negotiate over material changes that the contractor wanted to make. So the local authority was able to make sure that key decisions around, for example, the material of the windows, were adhered to.

We also worked closely with the planners on the elevations. It's a simple scheme and from the start we wanted to avoid developing a suburban house that was a pastiche of different styles, but rather to design something that had good spatial qualities, and then some things that could be built in that might enhance the social aspect of the scheme, like deep-set entrances and external seats: things that could be built into the project and therefore couldn't be stripped out. Within the constraints that existed we wanted to take forward a type of suburban housing that could be more contemporary than the pastiche that you see elsewhere.”