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From our own corRUPSpudent: Site visit to Goodman's Fields

From our own CorRUPSpudent – A series of blog posts written by students and alumni of the MSc Regional and Urban Planning Studies programme at the LSE.

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One recent morning I cycled around the Aldgate one-way system^[1] to Leman Street to visit Goodman's Fields, a new Berkeley Homes development. This 10-acre site, formerly occupied by a bank check-sorting centre, will provide almost 1000 new homes in a mix of high- and mid-rise towers. The group that looked around that day—which included developers, planners and academics—discussed some of the issues around achieving more such developments, as they are key to reaching the Mayor's ambitious housing-supply targets.

The developers said they tried to work in close partnership with local authorities (in this case Tower Hamlets). Berkeley offered excellent contributions to the public realm—often far better than local authorities demanded—and built affordable housing first; in return, the local authority might allow more units than the plan envisioned. In recent years, though, it had become more difficult to engage with local authorities, as planning departments have been downsized and de-skilled. 'You go into a planning department these days, and half the people have left and the other half are on flexi-time,' said one developer present. 'When you ask for a meeting to move your multi-million pound project forward, the earliest they can see you is in three months' time!' Developers said that results would be better for

Planners aren't the only specialists in short supply: construction workers are as well. We were told that wages for bricklayers had more than doubled over the last two years, and that a top bricklayer working as foreman could earn as much as £100,000/year. Bricks too have nearly doubled in price, and the lead time for delivery has lengthened to a year and more.

Is there a shortage of land too? Not necessarily—we heard that as far as developers are concerned there's no lack of buildable sites in the capital. But most had some combination of problems—fragmented ownership or leases, difficult access, contamination—that needed to be sorted out. Only the public sector could do that, and it was not being pro-active enough. The GLA had a 'vision' for tens of thousands more new homes per year, but no specific and detailed project-management plan for accomplishing this.

The development sits where the expanding eastward pressure of the City has made incursions into Tower Hamlets, one of London's poorest boroughs. Berkeley tries actively to employ local labour (it has agreed a target figure of 20%), and is setting up a training centre to give people the skills to work in the businesses that will open on the site. As a developer, it sees its role as making places, not just housing. But how can a genuine *community* be nurtured? The residents of market-rate apartments in this area are unlikely to include many children—British families prefer houses. But the social rental units *do* have gardens and their own front doors, and the families that live there will add to the mix of the area—ditto students living in the (already occupied) dedicated student block onsite.

[1] Very cautiously—several cyclists have been killed here in recent years

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