

SOME of London's top architects have got together with experts in space management to argue that the answer to creating more family homes and building good-looking neighbourhoods is to bring back the mansion block.

This low-level, high-density home-building formula has been around for 150 years. It was tried and tested – but it was abandoned by post-war planners in favour of sky-piercing apartment towers and “multi-level” housing estates.

Late-Victorian developers, inspired by philanthropist George Peabody's flats of the mid-1800s, filled inner London with mansion blocks and created some of the streets and homes we love best today. In Maida Vale, Chelsea, Kensington, Marylebone and Victoria, Albert Hall Mansions in Kensington Gore and Prince of Wales Drive in Battersea are prime examples.

More modest but well-loved mansion blocks appeared in the suburbs, too. So why did they fade in popularity?



Mini mansion blocks: 81-87 Weston Street near London Bridge, new launch from SolidSpace, offers flats with split-level interiors above brutalist-style office space

Planning rules so often skewer a scheme as it tries to comply with day-lighting, sun-lighting and street widths while trying to achieve greater densities. But the new draft London Plan and recent Greater London Authority housing guidance recommends more flexibility with planning schemes. Successful, denser, popular blocks, built before today's regulations, can now be considered a reasonable guide to what might be allowed – provided there are generous ceiling heights, windows, shared amenities and architectural detailing.

“Instead of using ‘numbers’ to dictate the density, planners and developers are now able to look at the vision of what's trying to be achieved,” says

Simone Pagani, senior partner of Gordon Ingram Associates, who advise on designing for daylighting and rights of light. “There's been a massive leap forward in terms of how we look at the vision for a place.”

Architect Alex Lifschutz, whose firm designed blocks for Brent council in the new Kilburn Quarter in South Kilburn, NW6, says the mansion block “is about selling the dream, like an ocean liner”, and adds: “A mansion block is like a club. It's more communal.”

With one- to four-bedroom flats and duplexes, Kilburn Quarter in Zone 2 is regarded as one of London's more suc-



“Family-friendly homes”: architect Alison Brooks's practice designed blocks in Kilburn Quarter

cessful recent estate regeneration schemes. Large 1960s modernist apartment blocks, set back from the streets, are being replaced by mid-rise mansion blocks lining existing streets and reflecting the mansion blocks of nearby Maida Vale, linking the neighbourhoods back together. Half of these new homes are for social housing and the remainder for sale, to build a more mixed community and raise capital for reinvesting. From £535,000. See kilburnquarter.com or call 020 3846 8500 for more.

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Alison Brooks Architects also designed blocks in Kilburn Quarter: “The mansion block brings graciousness to denser living,” says Brooks. “Some of the blocks are nine storeys, so they are dense, but

A formula that works

Modern mansion blocks – mid-rise homes that foster community in well-designed spaces – are welcomed by Londoners, says **Lee Mallett**



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desirable. They offer family-friendly homes and there is a massive shortage of these. They offer a canvas for a new architectural approach that can be playful and more expressive. The Victorians really had fun with them, drawing on the Arts and Crafts movement. People love that. Mansion blocks can add value in a way that is underexploited.”

Richard Barrett, head of estates regeneration, leads the project for Brent council which is partnering with private developers to replace about 1,100



Eric Parry Architects. Available through Knight Frank, price on application. Call 020 3865 9798. On a smaller scale there is Kingwood in Knightsbridge, developed by Finchatton (020 7349 1120), which features superbly detailed brickwork, also designed by Squire and Partners and 81-87 Weston Street near London Bridge launched by developer SolidSpace last week (020 7234 0222).

Chelsea Barracks: private flats with a mansion block air in Belgravia designed by Squire and Partners

Weston Street is a pairing of two mini-mansion blocks of eight apartments within a single architectural form, served by two cores and designed by AHMM. The split-level interior of all apartments creates a spectacular open volume linking living, dining and work spaces, expressed externally by the block's L-shaped windows.

PUTTING THE FAMILY FIRST

Developer and architect Roger Zogolovitch says London's smaller “gap” sites can help solve the housing shortage: “We don't have to build up or out. We're not building on the green belt. We're building in the city's ‘holes’. It's a much richer challenge and the mansion block offers distinction and character that is missing from apartment blocks. The enjoyment of living in the spaces we've created is very different to conventional apartments.”

Tom Mann, director of residential development at Savills shares this view: “Planners need to ‘tool up’ to assess schemes for quality.”

“It is essential that developers make mansion blocks easy to build and that they give people the spaces they'd expect from a house and meet the needs of a family.”

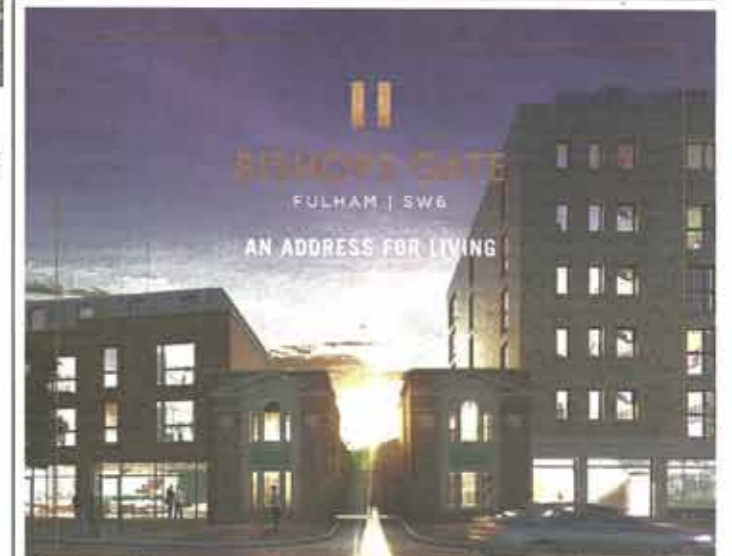
Enduring Victorian-era favourites: Albert Hall Mansions in Kensington

homes with up to 2,800. So far 229 have been completed, of which 103 are social rent, five for shared ownership and 121 for market sale. “We could have done it quicker and cheaper building flats, but we wouldn't have taken the community with us,” says Barrett. “It's the long-term quality you get from the mansion block that is generating the values and makes the whole scheme viable.”

At the other end of the spectrum are private schemes such as Chelsea Barracks in Belgravia, the redevelopment by Qatari Diar, masterplanned and designed by Squire and Partners and



From £535,000: Kilburn Quarter, a scheme of flats and duplexes including 50 per cent social housing



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