



# GET WITH THE PLAN

One of our leading architects tells *Martina Lees* why shouty design and garden cities have had their day

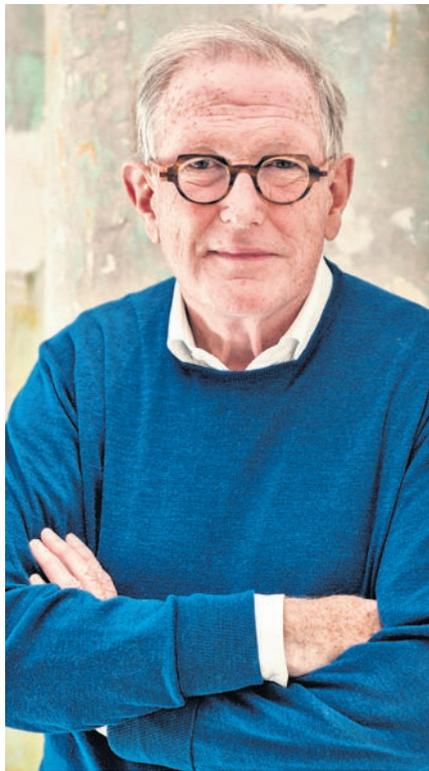
**T**o build enough new homes, we need “to be less obsessed with overlooking and rights to light”, says Michael Squire, the chairman of judges at The Sunday Times British Homes Awards. The architect’s London landmarks include the once controversial Chelsea Barracks, and £1.5m-plus flats next to Tower Bridge. “Why do we have this notion that we have to live somewhere we can never be seen? You can draw the curtains.”

Sitting in a glass-domed turret at the top of Squire & Partners’ south London offices – an extraordinary conversion of an Edwardian department store that proudly bears the chipped plaster and graffiti from its days as a squat – Squire gestures across Brixton Road. “This street is eight metres wide. No planner will let you do that now, but I think it’s sociable.”



Planning requirements for 20-metre gaps between apartment buildings result in a “relentless” march of blocky towers, he says. At Britain’s biggest regeneration project, around the distinctive white chimneys of Battersea Power Station, south London, “everything will be 17 storeys high – quite a nasty height – because someone said you can’t go higher than the shoulder of the power station.

“Wouldn’t it have been rather nice if you had lower buildings and taller buildings, with a variety of scale? Sometimes you wouldn’t be able to see the chimneys, but in between you could see them much better.”



“There should be an absolute right to build an extra floor on every unlisted 20th-century building

**Michael Squire is chairman of the judges at The Sunday Times British Homes Awards**

To avoid “carpeting the countryside with little houses from here to Manchester”, he wants an “intensification” of city development. “There should be an absolute deemed right to build an additional floor, maybe two, on every 20th-century building that is not listed. I don’t care about conservation areas. I don’t care about the man next door. We’ve got to stop making it so complicated to build.”

When Squire designed Brook House, a block of flats overlooking Hyde Park, about 20 years ago, he didn’t have a planning consultant. “Now we’d have 20 – a bat consultant, a great crested newt consultant. You would require a forklift truck to deliver that application.”

Over his 50-year career, he has seen the planning system grow increasingly complex. Yet competitions such as the British Homes Awards have helped make good design

pivotal in gaining consent, he says. “The one thing that can ease the path when you go into the planning authority with your forklift truck – quite rightly – is if you draw images of something people rather love.”

Modern architecture, however, often shouts too loudly. It should be more “polite”, says Squire, whose firm’s design salvaged the £3bn Chelsea Barracks after Prince Charles wrote to its developers, the Qatari royal family, saying that the original modernist design by Lord Rogers “made my heart sink”.

Impeccably diplomatic, Squire is “cautious about discussing Chelsea Barracks, because it raises a lot of hackles... I didn’t have the problem that a lot of people had with Rogers’s design, but we do approach things slightly differently. We try to find something that connects the building to where it is.”

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Whether it’s the prestige of living next to a royal palace or boasting a house name with a royal connection, there is no doubt that the British monarchy has had a huge impact on our architecture, lifestyle and housing market. The Queen has influenced the names of more addresses than any monarch in history. The Royal Mail revealed earlier this month that there are 6,000 houses, streets and buildings honouring Queen Elizabeth II’s reign. Our rich historical heritage means the country is sprinkled with palaces and castles, some of which are still used for their original purpose of housing royalty – none more synonymous than Royal Windsor, where the castle commands a central position in the town. Tourists are drawn here, restaurants and shops are continuously busy, and house prices are, naturally, very high. Many buyers are willing to pay a premium for a prime address in the heart of the town, but this can also mean a steady long-term investment for a buyer, with little sign of depreciation.

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Windsor Castle

After a “considerable argument” over the former army site near Sloane Square, Squire persuaded the Qataris to keep a Victorian garrison chapel “for a bit of history”, and build a row of shops, a restaurant and a vegetable garden. “I said to them, ‘This little bit of your development is what would make it part of your neighbourhood. People would come to it, and save it from just being a dormitory for rich people.’”

He claims garden cities “started the rot”, criticising the 20th-century movement that now sits at the heart of government policy for new towns. “The industrials are over there and the offices are here,” he explains, while drawing separate circles on a piece of paper, “and the shopping centre is there, and this is the dormitory. You have to travel between these.”

At Chelsea Barracks, Squire used garden squares – a hallmark of Belgravia – and contemporary proportions that echo the nearby Georgian streets with their structure of six storeys, with a further two set back from the parapet.

“There is a problem for architects – everybody wants to build that iconic building. We’re trained to try to be

original, to do something new every year. But it’s not fashion. It stays here.” Public buildings can be landmarks, but “the background to the city – where people live – should not try to be too clever”.

What is lovely about Georgian architecture – be it in Bath, Edinburgh, Glasgow or Belgravia – is its consistency, Squire says. He ascribes Britain’s love for period design to a “yearning for the past”, unlike in countries such as Germany and Japan. “We did



**The right angles**  
Squire’s contemporary design for Chelsea Barracks, above, echoes the surrounding Georgian streets. Left, One Tower Bridge

kind of run the world. We snuck out of two world wars on the right side.”

Yet we shouldn’t just copy Georgian proportions. When you scale it up to be a block of flats, or down to a “little house on an estate”, it stretches the style “beyond its capacity to please”, Squire says, quoting a 1930 architecture review from The Times. Georgian homes were designed for a small, wealthy minority of “Downton Abbey people” who had a basement kitchen, servants in the attic and the grandest rooms on the first floor. “This is a mirror of its age. Now we have to find something that is a mirror of our age.”

As part of this year’s British Homes Awards, architects are invited to design a terrace for our time that will be as loved as the Georgian classic. “It’s an interesting challenge,” Squire says. But then he warns against crazy shapes: “It doesn’t need to be a strawberry.”

*The Sunday Times British Homes Awards spans 23 prizes, from large schemes to the Manser Medal for one-off houses. It includes new categories for interiors, landscaping and housing crisis solutions. Enter by May 31 at [britishhomesawards.co.uk](http://britishhomesawards.co.uk)*



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