

Friday 15 February 2013

Should the Heygate Estate be torn down?

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South London's brutalist behemoth: ready for the wrecking ball, or just in need of some TLC?



The Heygate Estate, now emptied of its council residents and awaiting destruction.

‘Yes’

Councillor Fiona Colley

Cabinet member for regeneration and corporate strategy at Southwark Council

In this age of austerity, many cash-strapped councils have no choice but to tackle problems with a “make do and mend” approach. Southwark is no exception, and through our huge housing improvement programme we’re trying to make every existing council home warm, dry and safe.

We are not in the business of getting rid of good, sustainable homes. The Heygate, however, had a range of issues that

could not be designed out with a lick of paint here or some insulation there.

As with many estates built in the mid-20th century, Heygate is no longer suitable for modern living. Even if we had spent vast quantities of public money trying to improve the buildings, we could not have reduced the negative impact of the huge, fortress-like blocks. The estate closed off residents from their neighbours and turned its back on the outside world.

There were other issues. The estate was designed in an era when the car dominated — now any new development prioritises pedestrians and cyclists. The old Heygate buildings pushed pedestrians onto raised walkways and were difficult to secure. They were also energy-inefficient.

The new homes will be “green” by design. There will be cycle paths, pedestrian areas and plenty to do at street level. Heygate will be transformed into an area with shops, open spaces and new homes for people from all walks of life.

The grey buildings of the Heygate Estate are a blight on the landscape, used by film-makers to illustrate despair and decay. I challenge anyone who has seen the artist’s impressions of the regeneration not to agree that they are a vast improvement.

‘No’

Tim Tinker

Southwark Council architect who worked on the Heygate

At the recent five-day public inquiry it emerged that, early on in the Elephant & Castle regeneration saga, Southwark had an appraisal made of all its major housing estates and Heygate got the thumbs-up. However, this thumbs-up was trumped by the Core Vision of the Regeneration Strategy. Regeneration means breathing new life into something.

So Heygate had to go. A vibrant community of over 3,000 was scattered to the four winds and the place, which had nurtured that community, must now be wiped off the map. For good measure, Make plans to cut down two thirds of the mature trees (replacing each tree with four new ones, but mostly offsite). On the positive side, the Make scheme will increase the number of dwellings, but the tenure mix will be turned on its head.

The Make scheme will be municipal gentrification on a grand scale, with a minute number of affordable units which, even on the maximum 50% rent subsidy, not many SE17 residents (average income £16,000) will be able to afford. Make will provide a new park, but rather smaller than the existing landscaped areas within Heygate. This park will be surrounded by roads.

The park and roads will not actually be public. They will be owned by Lend Lease and the public will be allowed in on Section 106 licence. Heygate provides tranquillity by shielding all dwellings from surrounding roads. Make intends to make the New Kent Road frontage permeable, and puts a large percentage of the new accommodation hard up against that road, including no doubt the few affordable units.

It is still not too late for Southwark to regenerate Heygate (I use “regenerate” in its correct meaning). So I say no to the proposed demolition.



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