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Balfron residents: 'Privatising the tower will segregate the community'

3 November, 2015 | By Vanessa Crawford

Housing campaigner Vanessa Crawford says why residents think plans by Studio Egret West and Ab Rogers for the east London tower betray its legacy



The recent *AJ* articles on Ernő Goldfinger's Balfron Tower have focused on the architectural integrity of the building's refurbishment. As a group of current Balfron leaseholders, former residents and housing campaigners, our interest lies more in the integrity of the building's tenure. However, the two perspectives and concerns must be considered together if Goldfinger's ethos and legacy are to be truly respected.

We have already raised the following objections to the planning application, as outlined in full in [our petition](#) and [fully-referenced report](#): failure to meet statutory affordable housing targets, best practice guidelines on inclusive consultation, adopted standards defining heritage significance, and best practice guidelines on accountable regeneration.

We would also like to respond directly to some of the comments about the proposals made by others in the *AJ*.

[Last month Ab Rogers](#) said: 'The flats in the tower are more valuable as aspirational upmarket housing than as social housing, so the responsible thing to do is upgrade them and use the profits to plough into affordable homes elsewhere.'

This is a contemptible justification, given that any flat is more valuable as an 'aspirational upmarket' house than as a social home.

As [James Dunnett](#), a former Goldfinger employee, recently commented, the solution in satisfying both interests lies in neighbouring Carradale House [also designed by Goldfinger] where the Grade II-listed building has been sympathetically refurbished while maintaining the social housing tenure. Why not do the same for Balfron?

The proposed open-plan layouts are clearly aimed at aspirational private buyers, otherwise Carradale would have experienced the same. Yet we are not aware of any tenant who has ever criticised the layout of the flats and maisonettes.

[Rogers](#) continued: 'Towers are often cheap to build but costly to renovate; this is why it is now in private hands.'

The evidence suggests that privatising Balfron is a choice, rather than a necessity. If finances were so tight, why did Poplar Housing and Regeneration Community Association (HARCA) replace rent-paying tenants with property guardians paying a peppercorn rent, void numerous flats and continue to pay leaseholders to keep their homes empty, losing millions in the process?

And what of the millions HARCA was given by central government during stock transfer specifically to refurbish Balfron?

The idea that the £20 million (approximately £140,000 per unit) refurbishment cost is outside the 'limits of social housing' is clearly not accepted at Barking and Dagenham Council, which recently spent £45 million on a building of identical size to rent out as affordable housing. That makes keeping Balfron social, at less than half the price, a bargain.

Architect [Christophe Egret](#) said: 'The injection of some private homes within the traditional social housing estate is no bad thing.'

But sealing off and privatising the tower will segregate and stratify the community. Decades of academic studies have provided evidence that this is very much a bad thing.

It is not too late for the development partners to reconsider their approach and deliver truly exemplary regeneration. This could set the benchmark by embracing affordable housing, inclusive consultation, sensitive heritage and an accountable process. We propose a maximum 50 per cent privatisation of Balfron, which would more than pay for the rest to be refurbished, have their layouts maintained and remain a beacon for social housing.

Vanessa Crawford, Balfron Social Club and Tower Hamlets Renters

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