

NPPF could hit initiative to turn offices into homes

Mark Wilding

Plans to boost housing supply by converting empty offices into homes suffered a setback when the policy was watered down in last week's planning reforms, architects have warned.

Ministers consulted last year on plans to allow the conversion of office buildings without planning permission — a move supported by a number of ex RIBA presidents, spearheaded by Marco Goldschmied, but opposed by the City of London.

The National Planning Policy Framework says only that councils should "normally approve" applications to change from commercial to residential — from classes B1, B2 and B8 (business, general industrial and storage) to class C3 (residential).

Goldschmied said: "The rigidity of use classes is a very serious hidden brake on the economy. This is better than nothing but by devolving the decision to different councils, we know that they bring in extraneous factors."

"All we can do is hope local authorities who have historically been opposed will recognise the

winds have changed," he added.

Speaking at a Planning in London conference last week, Design Council Cbe chair Paul Finch said: "Use classes have encouraged a notion of permanence that is quite at odds with reality. You design mono-use buildings which, if you're not using them for that purpose, you might as well demolish and start again."

Other speakers calling for a further relaxation of change-of-use rules included chair of the National Planning Forum, Brian Waters, and Philip Turner, associate director at AHMM.

Those opposed to loosening the use class system have warned that lack of restrictions could be exploited by developers to avoid planning obligations such as providing affordable housing.

But architect and developer Roger Zogolovitch said other benefits had been overlooked. "There's a lot of discussion in our industry about retrofitting," he said. "What's not been understood about the proposal to change use-class orders is that any work would trigger the requirement to upgrade the property under building regulations."

CENTRE POINT AIMS TO BE A FASHIONABLE RESIDENCE

Richard Seifert's 1966 Centre Point tower on Tottenham Court Road is one of the most recent examples of offices being adapted for new uses.

Conran & Partners has been appointed to convert the 34-storey grade II landmark into flats. Meanwhile Rick Mather is



working on plans for its low-rise sister, Centre Point House, and a glazed connecting bridge, to fill both with retail.

Commentators are already predicting the conversion could make Centre Point as

fashionable an address as the Barbican.

Shapps to offer Portas-Plus high street scheme

The government has pledged £10 million to bring empty shops back into use as part of its response to the Portas High Street Review.

Mary "Queen of Shops" Portas's report, published last December, contained 28 recommendations including the introduction of a National Market Day, which would take place on June 23.

As part of last week's official response, local authorities will be able to discount business rates.

Housing minister Grant Shapps said he was committed to reforming the rules to allow the conversion of spaces above shops to include two flats, rather than the current limit of one.

Portas: sees many plusses.

The government has also given 100 local authorities £100,000 of funding as part of the High Street Innovation Fund grant. But it has ignored Portas's recommendation that out-of-town shopping centres should require ministerial approval.

Shapps said: "I'm accepting virtually all of the recommendations from Mary Portas's review. I'm also going one step further, offering a Portas-Plus deal, with a range of measures designed to help local people turn their high streets into the beating hearts of their communities once again."

The Portas-Plus initiative will also allow a further round of Portas Pilots, of which 12 launched last month, to trial the recommendations.

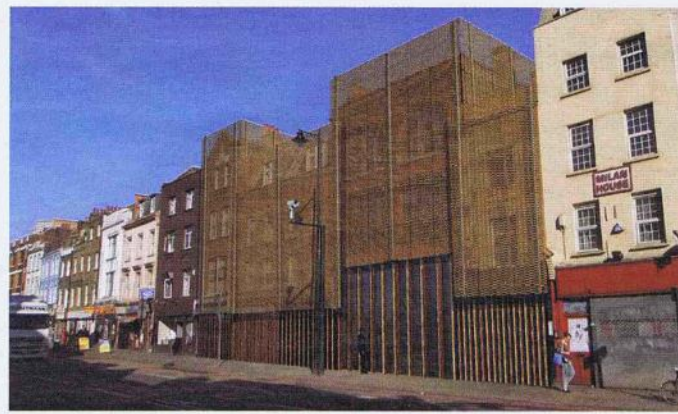
DEVELOPMENT

Olympic body starts work

Responsibility for development in the Olympic Park has transferred to a body overseen by the London mayor.

Staff at the Olympic Park Legacy Company (OPLC) have moved to the London Legacy Development Corporation, along with staff and projects from the London Thames Gateway Development Corporation.

Seventeen board members were appointed last week, including OPLC chair Margaret Ford, who will chair the body until after the games. The mayors of Hackney, Tower Hamlets and Newham are also on the board.



LEISURE

Hackney hotel breaks mould

Paul McAnear Architects has designed a Backpacker Hotel on Kingsland Road in Hoxton, east London, to replace a nightclub.

The plans include a double-height extension and an expanded corten-mesh screen in front of the facade to afford privacy.

The hotel is the first design of a new concept that aims to combine luxury boutique hotels with the spirit of backpacking.

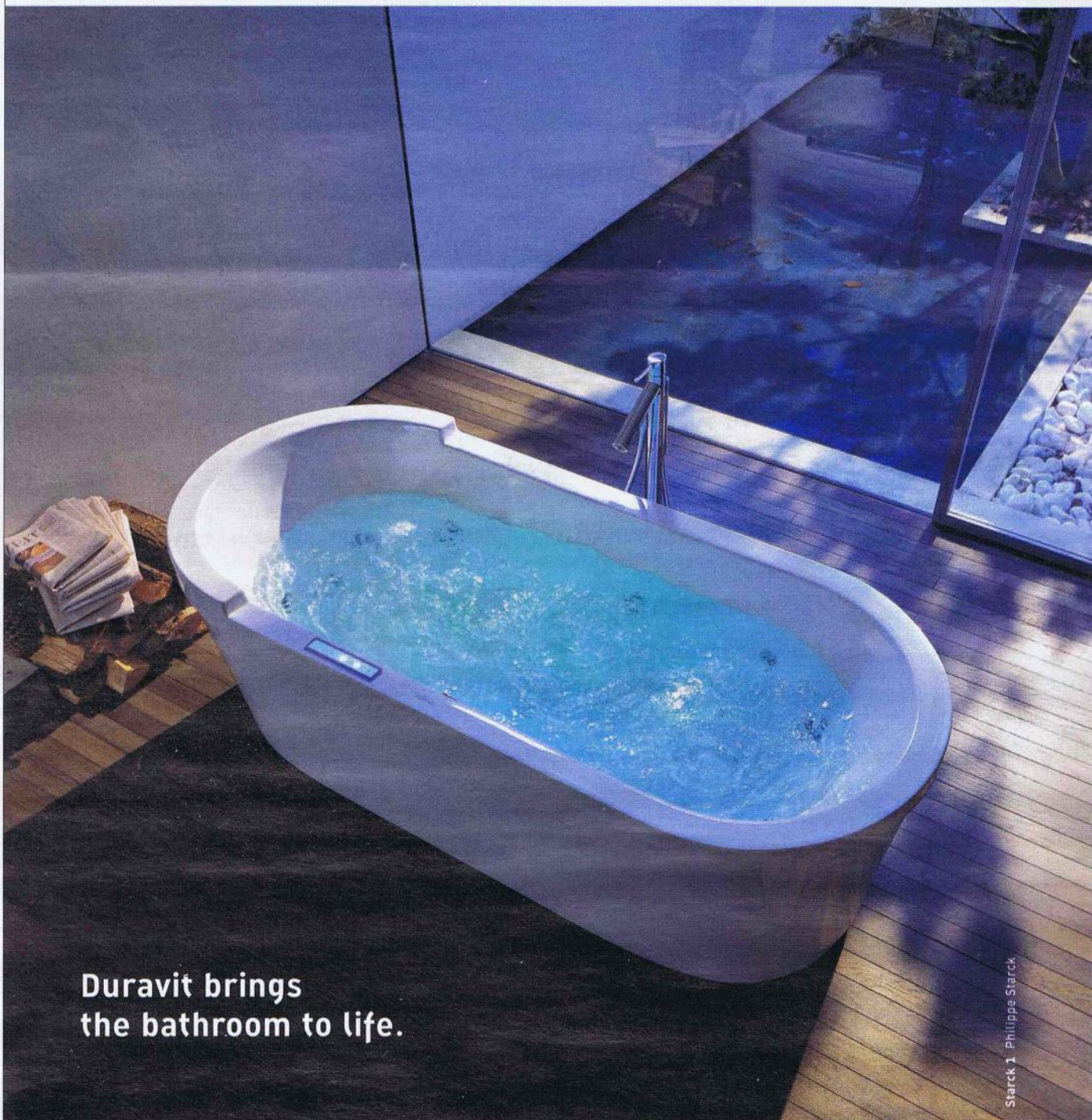
HOUSING

Firms await Brent decision

Brent Council is expected to decide this month whether to knock down two tower blocks and replace them with homes designed by Alison Brooks Architects and Lifschutz Davidson Sandilands.

The north London local authority wants to tear down the 18-storey blocks, known as Bronte House and Fielding House, and replace them with 229 flats and maisonettes. The buildings will be up to seven storeys high, and are part of a masterplan for south Kilburn.

Around 100 of the new homes have been earmarked for tenants of the two tower blocks.



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