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Arrive and retreat: London's ultra-prime apartment blocks as dark urban renaissance

Rowland Atkinson and Martha Mingay

The expansion of an archipelago of residential blocks across London's West End has created an urban renaissance of sorts, but it is a rebirth that has targeted the expanded ranks of the global super-rich, yielding a visibly luxurious, often vacant residential remaking, rather than the aspirations for a diverse, vibrant and open urbanism envisaged some years ago for the city. New luxury apartment blocks offer high levels of privacy, security and the seamless integration of bodies and vehicles into underground or enclosed entry points. These 'ultraland' blocks are less places of conviviality and encounter, offering instead a kind of dark space urbanism that facilitates a partial social engagement with local environs by barely present owners. Combining an analysis of the planning applications for these developments with extensive street observation in London's West End we discuss the social and spatial integration of these developments. We argue that a key effect is one of social 'reduction'—the sense of null spaces that absorb bodies, furnishings and cars in ways that are the antithesis of earlier ambitions for socially vital and democratic urban spaces. We discuss the significance of these changes for contemporary life in the city more broadly.

Keywords **super-rich, segregation, wealth, housing, urban renaissance**
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Introduction

If one of the key architects of the British urban renaissance (Urban Taskforce 1999), Richard Rogers, had wanted an example to underline the need for a more convivial, well-designed and dynamic British urbanism he might have settled on the development of *One Hyde Park*. With its ultra-luxurious apartments, record-breaking prices and advanced security systems this residential block in many ways measures the way that capital and the world's rich are seen as the pathway to a form of urban vitality—albeit one measured in pounds per square foot, the desire to lure global capital, and to bring to the city those who wield it. Many blocks like 'One' now dot the streetscapes of central London. These projects have helped to absorb the loose change burdening global property investors, criminals, launderers and the super-rich (Atkinson 2020), raising significant questions about the kind of city that has emerged and who it is for. Socially exclusive, sterile, and building defensible boundaries with the surrounding streetscape such developments scatter the central 'prime' city. All of this makes it all the more ironic then that the chief architect of *One Hyde Park* was Richard Rogers himself, raising the question of how a city that has seen such intensive rounds of global and national capital investment might ever be capable of pursuing or delivering a more emphatically 'social', inclusive city. While this goal was espoused in the desire for 'mixed communities' by the Urban Taskforce, and the immediately subsequent London Plan of 2000, the general direction of a city under intense speculative scrutiny by the rich and investors has helped to redirect these objectives as big money moved in Minton (2017).

Perhaps we may begin by offering a rationale for critiquing the elite, development sector that operates largely within the most prestigious zone of a global city. One justification for the analysis that follows is to see elite, or so-called 'prime', development activity as an important metric of the way that core city resources of housing and land continue to be gifted to capital with little social contribution (on site or elsewhere) and the broader takeover of property as a form of economic activity that does little to home the many in real need. Yet the symbolic function of key developments is important, showing that the logic and ideological substrate of the city can be discerned in the value, form and functions of iconic and exclusive buildings. The urban renaissance was a blueprint for social vitality, encounter, diversity and the diffusion of related benefits across social groups (Punter 2011). Yet this was also a vision that heralded the privatisation of public space, security through design measures and spatial-legal modes of control (Macleod and Johnstone 2012) that presage the kind of changes we identify in this article. Since that policy 'moment' British urbanism has in many ways been rechannelled, through design and planning strategies that have enabled a shearing of privately owned residential and street spaces from a social 'outside'. In this sense the ultraland of elite apartment blocks (a term taken from the taxonomy of different super-rich 'alphahoods' and super-prime property markets by Atkinson (2020) and described in more detail below) and much of the prime investment in cities like London, Manchester and many others has generated a much bigger imprint on urban life than either their number or the number of their residents, might suggest. Thus, there is good reason to discuss the character of today's urbanism via a reconnaissance of London's iconic neighbourhoods and new buildings, gleaning from them something of the shifting relationship between capital, city and urban society.

The ultraland archipelago has emerged within the city's traditional, and historically affluent, West End—the residential areas largely concentrated in the London boroughs of Kensington and Chelsea and Westminster that formed the historical elite districts from the 18th century onwards. These developments form an archipelago formation of 'black box' luxury residential apartment blocks that offer strongly delimited residential territories in symbolic and practical terms. The super-prime real estate sector, its developers, estate agents and lawyers, often promote these developments for their ability to bring footloose global capital to the city and wealthy buyers who might then trickle economic benefits into the city through luxury consumption and spending on personal services, renovations and business activities (McKenzie, Bourne, and Rozena 2022).

Despite the value of these new blocks and spending on and within them, these developments are emblematic of many of the concerns around contemporary urban life stemming from the increasing financialisation of city life today (Goulding, Leaver, and Silver 2022). Speculatively built, socially antiseptic and rising from towering wealth inequalities generated by inequitable national tax systems these enclosed, highly secure and private spaces are often barely occupied (Wegmann 2020) and form island-like spaces, even when seen in relation to the plush neighbourhoods around them. It is the relationship of these sites as (non) social spaces in relation to their environs, their design and what they say of the changes in the wider city that form the focus of our analysis here. We begin with an analysis of luxury development, urban change and elites in the city before moving to our case study of ultraland, super-luxury developments in the West End and what these developments say about ideas of exclusion. We then offer a short discussion of these changes in relation to questions of policy and planning, before concluding.

Super-luxury urban living

The background to many of the physical changes we document in this article can be lined to global processes of value extraction by a quickly expanding global wealth elite. The extent of personally held wealth has grown globally and the number of the global super-rich has increased significantly. Each year wealth reports by commercial banks and NGOs like Oxfam (2023) have shown a massive expansion in these fortunes and the number of people commanding them. The number of Ultra High Net Worth Individuals (UHNWIs are now defined as those with $50 m in disposable assets) has grown and their wealth, as a share of global wealth, has expanded dramatically with Credit Suisse (2022) recording 218,200 people in this segment. This population showed an increase in number of 50% over the two years of the pandemic. At the more 'ordinary' level of millionaires they estimated a global population of 62.5 million, a group mostly concentrated in North America, followed by Europe and then China.

The broad expansion in number and the fortunes of the rich mesh with the key 'prime' property markets of major, global cities alongside the push by government to privilege property and finance in these pro-market regimes (Raco and Brill 2022). London's prime property market is defined either by price (usually properties costing £5 m, and super-prime those at more than £10 m) or by geography—the central London boroughs, usually Westminster, Kensington and Chelsea, Hammersmith and Fulham, and Camden and inner suburban areas marked by the significant presence of the wealthy. This market, in terms of volume and prices, sits somewhat below the boom period of the mid-2010s but has proved to be resilient because it is international and therefore does not have city boundaries in terms of the supply of buyers, and because this group have massive, cash wealth to make purchases. This can be seen, for example, in Coutts' bank report in mid-2023 which showed that prices had risen by around 8% when indexed to 2013 prices.

In general both the number of prime sales and their value remain buoyant when compared to the wider city and the kinds of 'ultra' block developments we profile here are a key strategy in capturing the interest of wealthy, cash buyers who seek low maintenance spaces that can be used as temporary entry points into the city and as investments. The key point to note about this market is its strong internationalisation of buyers and their cash-rich approach to purchases which has made these consumers generally immune to concerns about price (or more recently, high interest rates which have driven the cost of mortgage borrowing to very high levels). Since asset prices in this market historically have seen persistent increases the market is seen to be very low risk, even when spending particularly large sums of money. For the very rich and billionaires, purchases of city homes consume only a small fraction of total personal wealth. However, another important factor driving this market has been the role of illicit wealth which has been laundered through thousands of prime properties. For example, the most recent estimate of the volume of homes purchased using offshore companies to shield the identification of owners (taken as an implicit guide to criminality) stands at 15% in the prime market for homes at £5m + (Johannesen, Miethe, and Weishaar 2023).

Many among the wealth elite look to make trophy purchases or investments to attach their economic position in social terms amid the UK's relative stability (Ho and Atkinson 2018). Here the West End plays a major role in translating new economic wealth into social capital, through the purchasing of residences in 'prime' neighbourhoods. Speculative builders today, in many ways like those of the 18th and 19th century, continue to use the land market and development as a means of making significant profits from projects that in nearly all cases exclude 'lower' use orders, classifications and social classes. Affordable housing contributions are constructed elsewhere, or not built at all.

Elites in London have historically been positioned in relation to, rather than fully separate from, the city. Servants quarters, a range of local services and relative physical porosity have marked the traditional stamping grounds of the affluent, and in many cases those of today as well (Pulini 2019). Yet we can only partially maintain the impression of democratic encounter given that large districts were created for the richest clients, owners and tenants. These zones were constructed with the express purpose of highlighting social distinction from an urban mass by creating resplendent zones using shining white exteriors and imposing scale. If there was contact with the city's respectable workers and servants this tended to be within domestic spaces, with the street not generally a space of interaction with the destitute (Atkins 1990).

Longstanding ambitions for local social diversity, vitality and density have been a driver of policies seeking to create more cohesive and inclusive neighbourhood units, not least as a core plank of the Urban Renaissance policy agenda itself (Lees 2008). However, it has long been recognised that, even within this blueprint, an ambition for diversity paved the way for 'mixed community' policies that were seen as a kind of cover for the promotion of programmes targeted at breaking-up areas of concentrated public housing, rather than a broader construction programme diversifying tenure mix in already wealthy areas. The renaissance agenda was criticised most in investment intensive, 'hot' property markets in which the idea of creating mix in social housing estates provided an opportunity to open-up new rounds of construction and value extraction (Lees 2008). Commitment to 'mixed communities' has justified estate demolition, with replacement taking the form of construction of mixed tenure blocks with much higher levels of private housing (Watt 2021). Conversely, the ambition to retain a sense of social exclusivity, in areas of prevailing high land prices, has helped to determine the low densities, tenure (owner occupied) and design of ultraland-style development. These developments have been used to reinscribe the elite nature of the West End through redevelopment on small sites with no on-site provision of social or affordable housing.

One possible policy ambition that might have been pursued would have been to help such spaces evolve over time, absorbing more examples of low-cost housing, becoming less overtly 'market hostile' to low-income residents and taking on a more heterogeneous sociality that contributed to the housing pressures of the city. Instead, aspirations to produce even a modest level of tenure or cost mix is seen as an impingement on the potential to further maximise the capital yield of land, rent and property in the prime neighbourhoods of the elite city. Despite these ambitions the longer history of London's West End has always been a space that contained relative diversity, with servants living with or beside their masters (Reynolds 2022), a cosmopolitanism generated by international visitors and tourists and even the removal of historic efforts to enclose and gate estates in the area in the 19th century (Atkins 1993). Despite this variegated social history the push by capital, land owners and development has been to reinforce a process of class-space solidarity that is built around monoform construction styles, rejecting proposals for inclusionary planning and tenure diversity and solidifying the 'brand' or prestige of the space through active land management strategies designed to exclude lower social uses and users.

The elite geography of London today resembles in many ways that of an earlier phase in the life of the city, with new extensions and zones built to accommodate burgeoning flows of global capital and increases in the numbers of the wealthy (notably along the riverside) and significant infill or new-build in intermediate areas adjacent to the established wealthy areas. Many commentators have noted the turning-over of increasing amounts of central, high value land space to elite uses and users and the generally poor integration of these new sites with the everyday social functions of the city (see, for example, Moore 2016).

While much of the frenzied construction of the 2010s has passed, compressed by rising interest rates, 2022 saw dozens of high-rise developments of more than 20 storeys under construction across the city (New London Architecture 2023). While many of these developments lie outside the super-prime property territories they have also been associated with offshore ownership and homes left vacant for long periods of time each year with residential space acting simply as a safe haven for return-hunting offshore capital (DeVerteuil and Manley 2017; Chung and Carpenter 2022). While these developments are, in most cases, still incredibly expensive relative to middle or even high-incomes they are significantly cheaper than ultraland development in the super-prime market.

Many resident action groups, even in the 'alpha territory' areas of West London (Burrows and Knowles 2019), have expressed anger at the extent of international capital purchasing with so-called ghost neighbourhoods becoming a rising feature of certain areas. These shifts connect with a deeper cultural and physical embedding of capital, a kind of normative dominance of investment motives in which residences are denied the sense of being homes but instead become dead, or necrotectural, spaces and buildings (Atkinson 2019). What we see with ultraland developments is a built form, amenities and price points that can be differentiated from the larger blocks and higher-rising developments seen across the wider city.

Vacant property, held by long-term absent owners or simply by offshore companies with British and overseas nominees, is thus at the centre of debates about the injustice and exclusionary nature of the city's housing system and the inability of markets or planning regimes to corral sufficient new units to lower-income residents (Action on Empty Homes 2021). Certainly changes in London's built form and social profile have raised challenging questions about who or what the city is for and whether new development is worth having if it does not address the intensifying housing crisis experienced across much of the city. As we will discuss shortly, there is also the question of architectural forms that truncate social contact—new apartment blocks in which residences are often accessed from underground car parks or highly secure front entries, creating discrete points of absentia or retreat for their residents. Such built environments help to put into place a kind of dark space urbanism. This is a form of urban life and culture that combines high levels of emptiness alongside low levels of street-based interaction, fuelled by design forms and high levels of capital intensity as it bears down on investment locales that are insufficiently protected by planning rules. One way into a deeper understanding of the drivers and nature of this new elite landscape is to consider dark space urbanism as the architectural expression of increasingly financialised urban conditions in which 'safe deposit box' functions (buying solely to store capital) and diminished street sociality become more heightened elements (Fernandez, Hofman, and Aalbers 2016). As Soules (2021) has observed, new buildings and districts in many cities represent a distinct moment in capitalist expansion in which social expression is cut down and value extension is more strongly embedded:

> Use of walls, barriers, landscaping, and setbacks isolate assets from the nuisances and dangers of noise, pollution, and strangers. Perhaps even more significantly, certain building types and morphologies inherently provide this disengagement. Forms that limit public access and separate real estate assets from the public ground have flourished in the era of finance capitalism. (Soules 2021, 136)

In many ways the urban renaissance ambition for density and interaction has been overshadowed by the waning interest of central government in these issues. In addition, the embedding of new, regional institutions, as established large-scale development co-ordinators, and deepening linkage of cities to finance capital has helped to drive the capture of core city land markets used to create spaces of investment and para-sociality for the wealth elite. In cities where finance capitalism has been most strongly present the effect has been to produce spectacular yet socially divided cores, with rising private capital investment mirrored only by the increasing social divestment of the central state in assets and services. Thus the social geography of the wealthy, the production of assets for residential consumption and a wider politics of affordable housing collide and become evident in displays of opulent units that speak of the gains made by the already rich and the lack of resources by others in the same city.

Black box urbanism: the ultralands, urban design and spatial defence

The ultraland (Atkinson 2020) forms a patchwork of elite residential 'box' developments that sit within London's established patrician areas, enclosed island developments on the sea of the historically elite Western neighbourhoods of the city. They form an archipelago formation of new residential blocks and discrete complexes now operated by a handful of five star hotels in this district. In one sense they are island spaces, like urban cruise liners (Revell 2021) or residential vessels designed to temporarily hold their super-rich passengers within strongly territorially demarcated boundaries that signal taste, prestige and security. Buyers and super-rich tenants seek out safe, centrally located and amenity-rich spaces for the times that they are in the city (Atkinson 2020).

Ultraland blocks represent a kind of evolution of the recognisable West End apartment mansion developments that were constructed by speculative builders looking to capture the market of rising numbers of affluent pre- and post-war single and dual households (Hamnett and Randolph 1984). The new ultraland apartment blocks continue a longer transition from the building of individual palaces and large townhouses by the super-rich of the 18th and 19th centuries (Mordaunt Crook 1999) to their later subdivision into smaller apartments as these large dwellings became too costly to live in by a single household. The general form of both is a series of large, comfortable residences contained within a large, sometimes detached, block. It is also important to note that, alongside this economic change has been a social change in which heightened ambitions for privacy and security have been responded to by

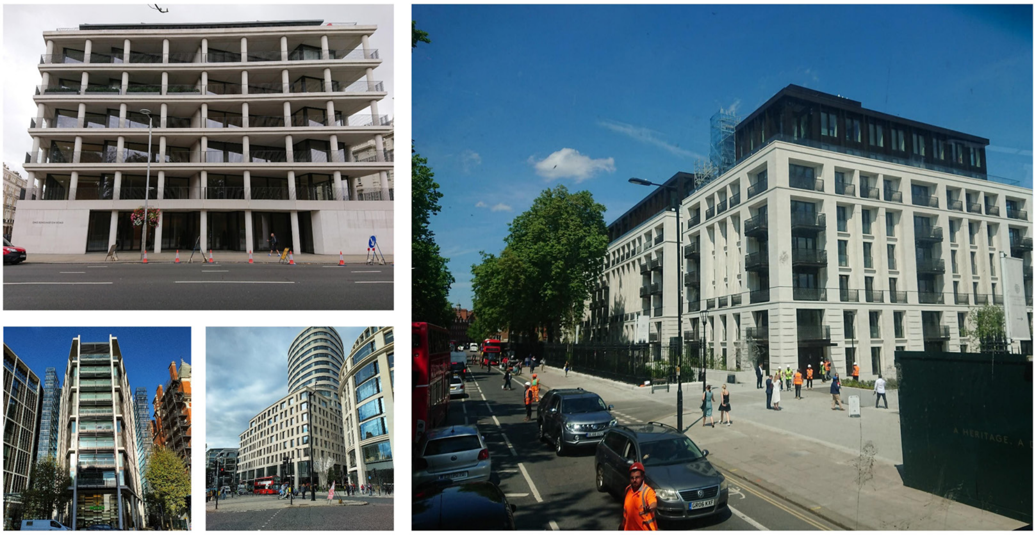

Figure 1: Street context of key ultraland apartment blocks.

ultraland developments in which concierge entry, subdivided internal access (using lift and partitioned floor access arrangements) and underground parking have become features (see Figure 1).

To identify the design and amenity features of new development in London's ultralands, we examined planning archives across the London boroughs containing ultra-high land value areas for the past ten years. Within this search, 29 applications to Westminster City Council, and 11 to Kensington and Chelsea, either at planning, construction or marketing stages revealed a consistent picture of often discretely packaged box-style developments in the central city super-prime neighbourhoods. We can see that these London boroughs are the key spaces in which empty homes are most prominent, with Westminster City containing 4,183 empty homes and Kensington with 9,599 (Action on Empty Homes data 2023), representing 1 in every 31 homes empty in Westminster and 1 in every 9 in Kensington. Figures for all inner London boroughs are given in Table 1 below with the 'prime' property markets identified.

Our focus in this project was on the centre of the city as it relates to the 'alphahood' areas of greatest interest by the British and international super-rich living in the city (Atkinson 2020). The alphahoods are five broad types of neighbourhood, defined in social and architectural terms, as identifiable sub-areas in which the city's rich are primarily concentrated. The five alphahood types are: (i) Patrician heartlands (the wider historical elite districts of the city's west); (ii) Prime London (the broader, inner suburban areas of the 19th century elite city, such as Hampstead); (iii) Riverlands (the new elite landscape or largely high-rise development along sections of the inner city's Thames waterfront); (iv) Suburban exclaves (the semi-rural gated and mega-home developments immediately outside the city proper, which also form their enclaves), and (v) Ultraland (black box style elite development in new 'mansion house' styles in an archipelago formation within the patrician heartlands geography). The developments we examine here are not the sole examples of ultraland development in London, with examples in the outer city's suburbs and beyond,

Table 1: All empty homes, and as proportion of stock (Source: Action on Empty Homes 2023).

Inner London boroughs	Number of long term empty and second homes	1 in every 'x' homes out of use
Boroughs with 'prime' key property markets		
Camden	8800	13
City of London	2044	4
Kensington and Chelsea	9599	9
Westminster	4183	31
All other inner boroughs		
Greenwich	1771	70
Hackney	2163	55
Hammersmith and Fulham	3523	27
Islington	906	123
Lambeth	2398	62
Lewisham	1287	103
Newham	2302	56
Southwark	5801	26
Tower Hamlets	9399	16
Wandsworth	733	210

but the West End is the key area for ultraland development activity and hence our focus on Westminster and Kensington.

It should be noted these projects are developed by luxury developers who form a group more or less separate from London's larger private housebuilding ecology. Within the West End, most developments are 'boutique' in the sense that they deliver only small numbers of units in order to raise the impression of exclusivity, desirability and, as a result, premium pricing structures. Thus in contrast to much of London's lower land value development, ultraland development seeks profit through the maximisation of quality and amenities, rather than the typical development rationale of driving profit through sheer quantity of units with few bedrooms. As a result, ultraland development usually falls below the threshold of 150 units set by the planning guidelines of the Mayor and GLA, so that applications are solely determined by boroughs. This has an important consequence in that central boroughs have been content to accept the negotiation of the affordable housing contribution that is demanded of all developers to sites away from the development itself, to be spent in the lower land value areas of these boroughs, particularly their North.

Many of the ultraland blocks are upgrades of former residential sites. In some cases original facades are retained while, behind them, high-specification construction of new, high-tech apartments takes place (The Gentle Author 2019). Elsewhere, particularly in Westminster, new residential projects are focused on the conversion of use of property, often commercial offices or formerly Council owned parking garages. As a result, new development tends to be relatively discrete, although where these take a more vertical form they are compelled to follow planning policy guidance designed to encourage more active street frontages, often providing new commercial facilities on the ground floor. Despite these contributions the more general tendency is to create blocks whose over-riding impression is one of privacy and relative anonymity—the sense of luxury is inscribed primarily in subtle features and designs requiring description in brochure advertising—gold leaf inlaid stone carving, hardwood window frames, handmade steelwork and gating, craft production of interior lobby features, mechanised entry systems or the bespoke scenting of interiors. In most ultraland blocks their absolute streetfront is characterised by relatively featureless and undistracting frontages that deploy reflective glass and curtaining over non-residential internal spaces.

The ultraland blocks offer a wide range of private, internal amenity. Here the offer is as much the provision of social facilities *within* residential space as much as it is the capacity to access the shops, services, luxury brands and cultural offer of the city more widely. All of these blocks offer leisure and gym facilities, usually in newly excavated mega 'basements' that often accommodate large pools. Beyond the leisure facilities of body conditioning, cinema, media rooms and bookable larger social spaces, such as dining rooms, it is possible to find ever increasing attempts at innovating new forms of luxury leisure facilities—cigar humidors, golfing ranges, infinity and ozone pools. One impact of COVID-19 appears to have been an increased marketing emphasis and even design 'remodelling' (such as that found at '82 Mount Street') on work-from-home facilities, both within apartments and shared between residents, including ultra-fast connections and shared office or meeting spaces. Twenty-four hour concierge services are also ubiquitous and critical to the management and security of spaces in which residents are often absent (Rozena 2023).

One of the notable trends in the ultraland blocks has been the linking of developments to hotel brands. A series of such branded partnerships have resulted in cases where new ultra developments can be physically connected to adjacent hotels offering lifestyle brands (Rigby 2023). In many cases these are temporary spaces for rich travellers though apartments can also be bought. The result is the sense of a hermetic sealing of these residences, provision being made for occasional or fleeting visitors, in ways that echo the emphatically enclosed nature of a resort urbanism model of development. Numerous examples of branded residences can be found, initiated at One Hyde Park (with portals through to the Mandarin Oriental Hotel). Other notable examples are the OWO (Old War Office) adjacent to the new Raffles Hotel and the Dorchester Collection of residences in Mayfair. In most such cases concierge services are extended from the hotel to offer enhanced higher levels of discretion and privacy compared with a hotel stay. Here One Hyde Park pairing (through lifts, tunnels and corridor access for private catering) with the Mandarin Oriental is notable, so too is the Twenty Four Grosvenor Square development (site of the former the US embassy) where suites are attached to a Four Seasons hotel. These developments emphasise enclosed, internal and tailored service packages that enable 'retreat'. The branded residence completes the emergence of an elite form of resort urbanism (Revell 2021) in central London, the discreet private, metropolitan, enclosed para-residential space for the global ebb and flow, arrival and retreat, of a hyper-mobile global wealth elite (see Figure 2).

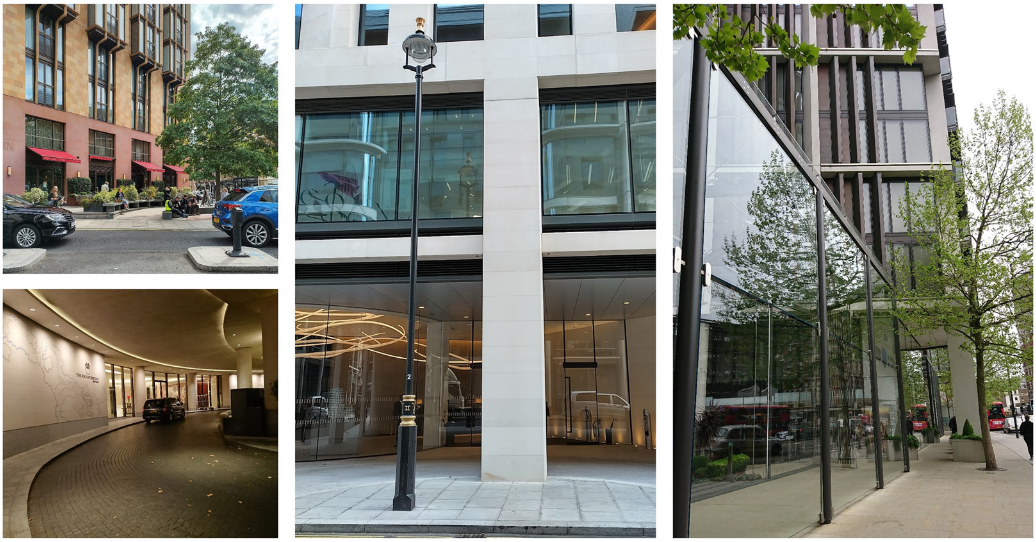

Figure 2: Retreat—Examples of ultraland entrances.

The London plans that followed the Urban Renaissance were relatively light on the contribution of urban residential design to street-life, emphasising the importance of what was described as 'Arrival and Retreat' as set out in London's 2014 plan. Yet within policy, an emphasis on the threshold between private and domestic, and the public and street, elements that might have enhanced a stronger sense of sociality, or a greater degree of physical integration, at street level have been minimised. Through signature design features (notably sweep drives and underground parking) and the presence of personnel (concierge, maids, cleaners, security staff), the black box ultra-mansions offer proximity to the urban-social spaces that surround them while enabling the co-ordinated distancing of connections where it suits residents and their desire for privacy. Vehicular arrival is assumed and hardwired into many of London's black box residential developments. This mode of entry or exit occurs through the integration of physically or remotely closed entrances to underground garages. These are often relatively hidden from street view while residents may, in some cases arrive at ground level followed by the use of car lifts to access underground parking. Increasingly, where scale allows, the lobby is often reached by a small-scale imitation 'sweeping' drive, often recessed into the footprint of the building, or a private mews (such as that at 'Clarges Mayfair') that appears to offer a contribution to public space in the form of a small avenue to the rear of the block. However, this can be closed off by electric gates if the concierge chooses to do so.

These various arrangements enable secure transfer from vehicle to reception with little interaction with public pavements and their potential risks, while the management of the last steps between public and private space can be effectively controlled by staff. Subtle entrances offer portals that allow a form of arrival akin almost to a process of absorption by the building, facilitated by infrared and biometric access key systems, alert door staff and the methods of access for cars described above. Privacy is further enhanced by strategically manicured topiary, or heavy planters often used to disguise anti-vehicle barriers. It is in

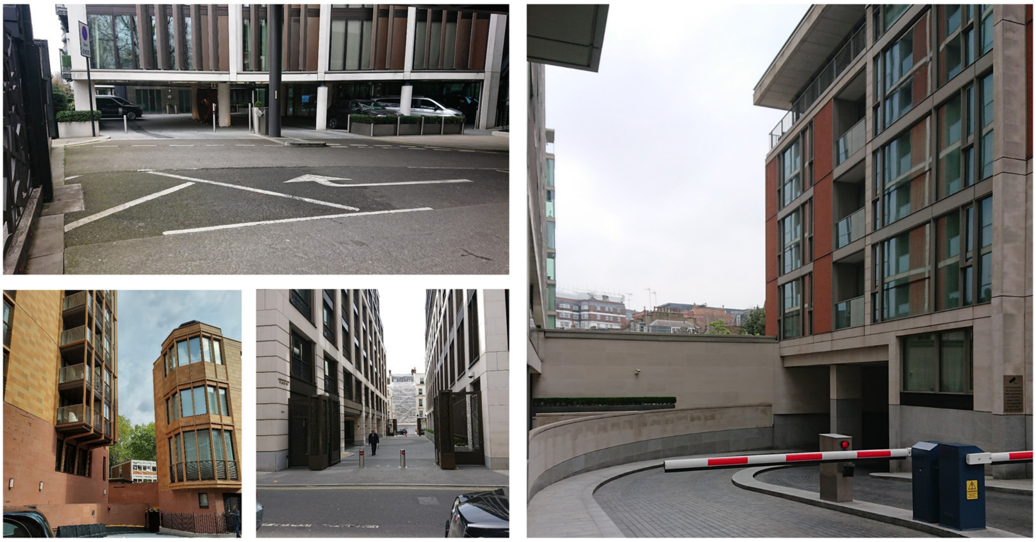

Figure 3: Arrival—Driveway mobilities.

the secure management of vehicles where technology is particularly valuable in overcoming the constraints of space or rules of conservation areas that define many central London development opportunities. Basement space for secure parking is common, affording discretion and the kind of security that street parking in London does not provide, also allowing residents discretion over returning purchases back to the home base, or allowing more evident forms of conspicuous consumption, such as super-cars, to be hidden away when not being safely flaunted as they are driven. In the most expensive examples car lifts from street to underground have been installed to offer a level of amenity that is rarely available elsewhere in London's central districts and certainly not in the less luxury developments that scatter the wider city (see Figure 3).

Through the various elements of design and provision that we have so far described we can identify a strong sense that alongside 'arrival' there is also a strong emphasis on the facilitation of bodily retreat. These features chime with Soules' (2021) analysis of 'financialised architectures' that have arisen in many cities around the world where property investment has become an emphatic driver of the urban economy. As he notes, internal facilities often replace external spaces of urban leisure, both within the unit and in the offer of bookable private 'common' areas, including gyms, spas and dining facilities. What is interesting about such developments is the way that they offer club goods in the same way as gated communities (Atkinson and Blandy 2005). Paradoxically such withdrawn forms of living, enabled by digital security and technological comforts, appears to underwrite the creation of a kind of resort residential form that nevertheless is frequently described in sales brochures as being at the cutting-edge of 'urban' living. Here provisioning of services (concierge, pools, cinemas, chauffeur driven cars tied to particular developments) is enabled by service charges and legal contracts to enable the offer of private goods that rival or exceed that provided in the public domain (Kohn 2020). These internally provided goods replicate public services and potentially substitute for the use of social spaces in the wider city in a private realm that enables retreat from collective life and unplanned encounters, not only with street publics, but even in relation to other residents who are restricted to their own floors by delimited key card access, or even only to their own residences if lift access is so arranged. The general impression is of an enclosed and expansive luxury space that enables social and physical distance at the heart of strategies for personal safety.

Discussion: dark renaissance?

It is possible to see the micro-level changes of London's West, exemplified by the production of ultraland residential boxes for the rich, as symbolic of a broader direction in the life of the city. Alongside processes of financialisation, government deregulation and reductions in the capacity of public planning the city has moved emphatically toward an embrace of changes and innovations that help to bring foreign and investment capital. This rationale has helped to underwrite the maintenance of wealthy districts as places that should not be addressed by policy goals for social diversity. Conversely, areas of public housing and less well-off zones have been made available to capital through the pursuit of ostensibly 'mixed' communities in which the pursuit of tenurial 'diversification' strongly privileges owner occupation. Meanwhile public housing is destroyed and high-cost units are produced, to be sold on a market often entered by cash-rich middle and upper income buyers. The story for London's West is one that speaks of the need to protect capital and established areas so that small sites are used as a means of deepening the exclusive character and, in some cases, social sterility of these areas. A logic of markets, wealth and capital in these districts underwrites the move toward forms of renewal or rebuilding, albeit in the form of a kind of 'dark' renaissance. Here the changes we observe are generative of only very limited forms of inclusion and, to the limited extent that they have occurred, are applied only to the remote parts of these boroughs.

The ultraland apartment blocks are particularly well-equipped to help absorb capital investment and wealthy bodies into the city. They offer relatively anonymous and even unremarkable architectures that blend into streetscapes that are often characterised by high rates of vacancy and low footfall in public spaces. We can think of the result of this entrenching of existing patters as a kind of black box urbanism in which a kind of antisociality is strongly embedded through physical changes that valorise the presence of capital or of its holders. What is interesting about these directions of social and physical use is that they represent a relatively marked set of changes from the character of the district of perhaps two and more decades ago before the global ascendency of global asset capital and wealthy individuals focused on these areas as places to live and invest.

There are important aspects to the changes we have observed in this article which are likely to be further cemented in place in future years that will further push against some of the more positive elements of the renaissance agenda. First, the density of the ultraland style of development is *not* characterised by a maximisation of density, despite the very high land values of the spaces they occupy. Instead, strategies of profit maximisation follow a rationale dictated by focusing on the quality rather than quantity of units. The second key element of note here is the way that the ultraland archipelago is antithetical to the potential production of more socially mixed communities. In this respect we can see how arguments are persistently made by developers not to socially ‘mix’ districts of the city that have had a historical place as the most exclusive parts of the city. Finally, the archipelago of elite box mansions exists within a broader set of environs in which a history of offering ‘pied a terre’ territories for England’s gentry has enabled developer’s arguments and planner’s receptivity to the installation of new blocks that speak to or continue the character of these spaces as having a distinct elite heritage. Whether arguments or policies can be found to more firmly produce a universal aspiration to diversity through on-site contributions can be found seems unlikely in a national, city and more generalised consensus on the value of trophy spaces to signifying the global position of the capital on the world stage and as a kind of cognitive attractor for a global wealth elite that the city remains keen to court as part of its economic strategy.

Conclusion

In this article we have juxtaposed the plans for more convivial cities that were set-out in the Urban Renaissance policy programme, with trends in elite city living that have pushed districts in a more anti-social and socially restricted direction. We have shown how the kinds of enclosed mobilities, enabling of privacy and under-occupancy of ultraland residential blocks in London’s West End can be seen as part of a wider trend in many cities in which more stratified social-spatial configurations have become recognisable features of contemporary urbanism. Such formations militate against stated objectives to create socially diverse, engaging and democratic streetscapes. Meanwhile the invitation to capital investment and partial residency means that many of the spaces *around* these developments tend to be lifeless or characterised solely by elite users and uses.

London is of course not alone in possessing elite districts but the ultraland model of enclosed ‘black’ apartment blocks offers a new-found ability through which investment capital and development processes can be enhanced. Ultraland developments raise profitability by offering highly desirable and, in design terms, socially private spaces that rest on increasingly financialised models of land value uplift, the expansion of inequalities under neoliberalism and a more general challenging of public planning in favour of private capital and diminished social provision. These conditions underwrite the emergence of the ultralands specifically, and a less socially-oriented urbanism more generally. We have suggested that these trends find form in architectures of enclosure, bespoke apartment provision and designs that facilitate social separation, but also a form that is resort-like in its assumptions of the hyper-mobility of its buyers/residents and their increasing investment orientation to these ‘homes’. These shifts are akin to what Soules (2021) has described as a kind of avatar urbanism in which wealthier groups use the protective carapace of shell homes to ‘pop-up’ in whichever city context appears most interesting or favourable.

Such metaphors thus also speak to an increasingly spectral presence of wealthy bodies, and yet the more tangible presence of capital that takes the form of the new kinds of built environments being developed in key locales that we have outlined here.

It seems remarkable how resistant to the resentment and anger of civic institutions, housing protesters and public planning offices this singularly elite vision of city life has been. Few and often no concessions to affordability or public housing form a part of developments in the city's core, often eschewed in favour of cash contributions that have partially addressed housing need but left in-situ developments as elite enclaves. In this contribution we consider the kind of new-build, super-luxury housing blocks as emblems of wider processes of dispossession of the city by the poor sought by capital and its enablers (Atkinson 2020), planning dispositions that appear to favour new rounds of gentrification, and the widening of disparities in fortunes built around real estate more broadly (Stein 2019).

Our analysis of the ultraland districts and the plans for their development has profiled the kind of residential facilities alongside a consideration of their public presence and social impact. We have argued that the extent of these interior facilities generates sites of emphatic retreat and antisociality, producing enveloping and socially silent spaces. While many of the districts around these developments are convivial (albeit within high tariffs on entry) there appears to be little interaction or co-presence by residents with their environs. In this sense we see these ultra-prime market offers as connecting more with dark enlightenment libertarian thinking than the bright lights of an earlier planned urban renaissance. Ultimately our analysis raises the question of whether the urban conviviality of Rogers' vision for London's citizens has been undermined by such overt and concentrated provisioning for the wealthiest. We also suggest that the terms on which a more emphatically social contract might be envisioned for the planning and housing of the city in future is still very much needed.

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