

## Construction: The only way is up

*With an increased demand for land due to greenbelt restrictions preventing urban sprawl, residential site sourcing is hot property. However, once a site has been secured, developers are now realising that the sky's the limit when it comes to profitability. But what does this mean for our communities?*



The UK is increasingly becoming an island of high-rise living. Whilst still in the shadow of America, China and Japan's super skyscrapers, more tower-block residential units are [being built](#) than ever before.

These former symbols of post-war poverty are fast becoming emblems of luxury thanks to new stunning facades and ground-breaking architectural designs. However, there is much more to a building's legacy than its aesthetic appeal.

In April, MDA Consulting attended a seminar by [Women in Social Housing](#) that discussed how certain actions can help communities achieve healthier lifestyles. Topics included housing design, social infrastructure and mindfulness. At its core, however, was the positive impact of community spirit.

Anni Hood, founder of [WELL Business Solutions](#), led a powerful presentation about the shared responsibility the construction industry has for community wellbeing.

"The currency of wellness is connection, but humanity is the string that binds," said Anni.

Whilst this statement may seem unrelated to construction management, it is clearly of great importance with the following words interchanged:

**Connection = Infrastructure**

**Humanity = Sense of Community**

As the construction industry currently experiences a high-rise building boom, significant challenges face all those involved in the process to ensure mental and physical wellbeing is provided for residents.

### **From the Blitz to Brutalism**

The world was horrified at the tragic fate of those housed in Grenfell Tower. In addition to the obvious health and safety requirements, questions were raised about the safety and wellbeing of communities residing in the Brutalist blocks that still stand across the UK.

London mayor, Sadiq Khan, wrote in the [Observer](#) that: “It may well be the defining outcome of this tragedy that the worst mistakes of the 1960s and 1970s are systematically torn down.”

Many of these tower blocks were the result of a knee-jerk reaction to clear the slums of post-war Britain. The 20<sup>th</sup> century architect, Le Corbusier, was responsible for bringing these fuss-free designs into the mainstream. This utopian vision of [‘streets in the sky’](#) became a dystopian reality, with many tower blocks plighted by drugs and crime, as local councils struggled with the rising cost of upkeep.

Nevertheless, brutalist architecture continued to become widespread – and often celebrated – throughout the mid-twentieth century, to meet growing demand for new homes amidst the baby boom. What the designs lacked in aesthetics, they made up for in turnaround, as homeless families were no longer living in deprivation.

Whilst the majority of these designs were social housing units, they highlighted a range of issues that could potentially apply to all high-rise developments: breakdown of communities, social isolation (and resulting mental health problems), and lack of social infrastructure.

## Are community areas the answer?

In 2016, psychiatrists Ciaran Abbey and T B S Balamurali examined studies that focused on high-rise, multiple dwelling units, expecting to find that the building height was detrimental to psychological wellbeing.

However, their research paper '[Housing the Mind](#)' found that it is "social isolation, restricted play opportunities for children...and loneliness which cause the difficulties, rather than the form of high-rise blocks themselves."

London's Barbican is a prime example of why one piece of Brutalist architecture worked, whilst many others became hubs for crime and eventual demolition. Despite being voted the "ugliest building in London" in a 2003 [poll](#), apartments are still well-sought after in the 1982 development, with some fetching up to £1m.



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Despite its lack of visual appeal to some, its location is desirable and is flanked by the likes of the Barbican Arts Centre and the Guildhall School of Music and Drama. Architects Chamberlin, Powell and Bon were also able to foster a sense of community with the inclusion of shared gardens, children's play areas and tennis courts.

Many developments are also capitalizing on the downturn in high-street retail footfall by renting out ground level units to the likes of leisure centres and supermarkets. These mixed-use schemes create another layer of social infrastructure by giving residents an opportunity to meet their local community, making high-rises a destination in addition to a housing unit.

**With a modern-day housing crisis currently gripping the country, the construction industry is mindful of new builds avoiding the fates of many Brutalist designs. What advice would you give to developers to ensure streets in the sky don't become slums of the future?**

*MDA Consulting has provided cost consultancy, project management and CDM services on a number of high-rise residential developments, such as Pembury Circus and The Pump House. Click [here](#) for further information about our services or reach our Head Office on 0207 399 0888.*