

# parker morris – holy grail or wholly misguided?

**If we are to build functional, adaptable homes with a long lifespan, we need internal space standards for housing based on an up-to-date, robust evidence base about how people use space in the home, says Andrew Drury**

Unlike the rest of Europe, England has no national minimum dwelling space standards. England also has – and builds – some of the smallest dwellings in Europe, according to a report from the Policy Exchange,<sup>1</sup> published before the rise of the micro-flat in the recent housing bubble.

Boris Johnson, the new London Mayor, apparently wants to put a stop to this. He has said that his administration will re-introduce the housing space standards recommended by Sir Parker Morris in the report *Homes for Today and Tomorrow*.<sup>2</sup> The newly appointed Deputy Mayor for Policy and Planning Simon Milton subsequently suggested that the standards should apply only to the capital's social housing. Should Boris stick to his guns and insist on space standards for the private sector, or is this inappropriate?

*Homes for Today and Tomorrow* was published in 1961. Its main point was that the space needed by households is driven by usability factors. Specifically, it considers what furniture people might want to have in each room, and of what size, how much space is needed to use each item (for example space to stand back from a wardrobe and open the door) and how much room is required to move around the furniture.

The answers of course depend upon a number of design decisions, such as layout and door and window positioning, meaning that a single bedroom of 8 square metres might work well, while one of 9 square metres might be inadequate. Adopting a functional approach addresses the nub of the issue – usability – but does not lend itself to convenient rules of thumb such as minimum room areas or minimum dwelling areas.

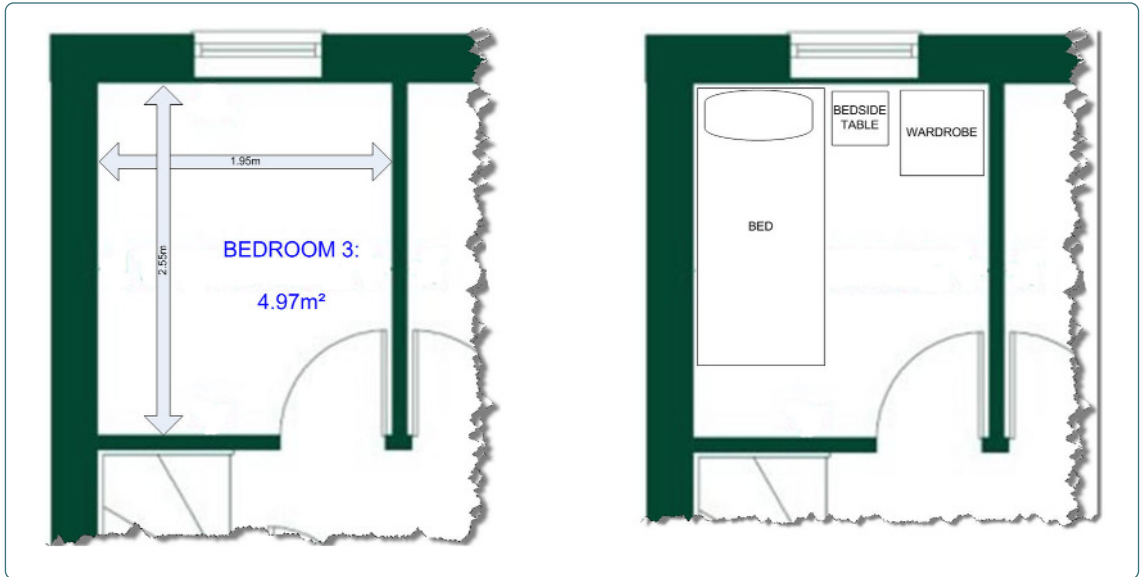
Notwithstanding this approach the Parker Morris Report did conclude with some minimum dwelling

sizes – these are the frequently cited 'Parker Morris standards'. It is worth noting in passing that the usability approach that was the main characteristic of the report is usually overlooked.<sup>3</sup>

But why do so many people hark back to a report that is nearly 50 years old? There are a number of reasons. First, it was the last policy paper for this topic that was firmly based on evidence of how people live their lives and use their homes. We have updated standards – notably HATC's two reports, *Housing Space Standards*, prepared for the Greater London Authority, and *Standards and Quality in Development*, for the National Housing Federation.<sup>4</sup> But they are not based on same degree of research as the Parker Morris Report.

The second reason is the antipathy to space standards among most housebuilders. Oddly, homebuyers in the UK assess value primarily in terms of the number of bedrooms. Nowhere else does this occur. UK buyers of office, retail and industrial space pay per square foot. Homebuyers in other countries invariably assess their prospective home in terms of cost per square metre. Even UK housebuilders and their sales agent discuss likely sales income in terms of pounds sterling per square metre. Only the UK purchaser is expected to think in terms of numbers of bedrooms. It is worth pausing to reflect on just how odd this is.

Bedroom numbers, of course, can be increased without enlarging the overall property size – just reduce the space taken up by living areas, dining areas, kitchens, bathrooms, storage and internal partitions. The resulting small and open-plan dwellings can then be heavily marketed as desirable contemporary living, and bingo! More bedrooms for the same floor area. More income for the same



**Above**

Taken from a volume housebuilder's sales details: enough space for a bed, a bedside table and a wardrobe, but what about the desk for homework, the chest of drawers, the computer or laptop, and the visiting friend?

costs. Higher profit for the housebuilder, and/or a higher bid to the landowner to secure the site for the housebuilder. Good news all round. But the resident has a less functional or adaptable property; this probably means a property with a much shorter life – maybe 50 years instead of 100 years or more.

This is why having adequate space is so important. It isn't just about the mental health and stress effects of cramped and overcrowded living – although many would say that was justification enough. It is an issue of environmental sustainability. The carbon cost of early demolition and redevelopment is huge; one we can ill afford.

The two main arguments against space standards are that they will result in fewer dwellings being built on a given amount of land (the density argument); and that landowners' price expectations will not met, resulting in less willingness to sell land for development (the land supply argument). These are actually two manifestations of just one asserted effect – that minimum space standards will reduce site capacity.

But the assertion that space standards necessarily reduce site capacity is a canard. Many things constrain site capacity – such as overlooking distances, parking requirements, height limitations, and planning density calculations (which can be bizarre). A designer must optimise the site capacity within the various policy requirements. Without internal space being *one* of the policy requirements, it is always the loser. Why not have more space in the home, and a 20 metre and not 21 metre separation distance? There may be good reasons

why not, but in some cases it might be a better solution. But unless internal space is a policy requirement, the question is never even asked.

Don't many local planning authorities already have policies on space standards? They do – several London boroughs have them. The rise of the miniscule flat over the last few years therefore makes me wonder if they are operating them. However, many local planning authorities do not have policies on internal space.

But why worry about space standards? Do residents care? Doesn't the market provide what people want, as the housebuilders keep assuring us? In fact, no. In a recent survey undertaken by Ipsos MORI on behalf of HATC under commission from English Partnerships and CABE, approximately half of residents in new housing built in London and the South East were dissatisfied with the space in their home. Given that most of the respondents will have struggled long and hard to afford their new purchase and invested considerable emotion in it, it seems a telling indictment that so many are dissatisfied with the product.

But isn't this an obvious response? If asked, wouldn't we all say that we would like more space? Of course – but then the survey questions were a little more sophisticated than that. The final analysis will not be available until September, but initial indications are that nearly half of those *who are under-occupying* are dissatisfied with the space in their home. For those at full occupancy (but not over-occupying) the levels of dissatisfaction are higher, unsurprisingly.

This suggests that purchasers are not getting what they want – they are putting up with what they get. The market is not functioning effectively – for a very long time it has been a producer’s market, not a consumer’s market. In addition, such customer demand as there is has been encouraged to express itself in terms of numbers of bedrooms rather than amount of space.

## **‘Adequate space isn’t just about the mental health and stress effects of cramped and overcrowded living – although many would say that was justification enough. It is an issue of environmental sustainability. The carbon cost of early demolition and redevelopment is huge; one we can ill afford’**

This is why the ‘Swing A Cat’ website was launched in 2007.<sup>5</sup> Sponsored by Gentoo Homes, and produced by Design for Homes and HATC, it provides consumer guidance on internal space, including the likely suitability of dwelling size. It is aimed at encouraging the market to work more effectively by encouraging purchasers to think in terms of usable space rather than number of bedrooms.

However, changing consumer buying habits will take time. Meanwhile, what about the London Mayor’s approach of intervention? Should this be restricted to subsidised housing only, or be applied to all housing?

Other canards now raise their heads. Social housing is different – fully occupied, whereas private housing isn’t. This is true. What is not true is that dwellings built initially for private households or ‘public’ households will always be occupied by such households. Experience shows this to be patently incorrect. ‘Public’ households exercise the right to buy their home, and so the dwelling ‘moves’ into the private sector. ‘Private’ homes are bought by councils (in the 1960s and 1970s) and housing associations (from the 1970s onwards). Indeed, housebuilders are crying out for more of their ‘private’ stock to be purchased by housing associations right now! Ironically, they are being spurned in many cases – because the dwellings are too small.

Accepting the notion that dwelling space standards can be different if they are ‘private’ or ‘public’ is to adopt the housebuilders’ view of housing – that of the initial sale/letting, ignoring the future use of the

dwelling. This is fair enough for a housebuilder – whose interest goes no further than the point of initial sale. But it is entirely inappropriate in a body with a responsibility to encourage sustainable development. This requires a long-term view. This is the job of all planning authorities, and that is why Boris should apply space standards to all housing.

All housing? Really? What about dwellings only occupied for short periods of time – holiday or company lets, or student accommodation? Yes, there are legitimate exceptions, and these could be dealt with by minor amendments to the Use Class Order. But where we are referring to housing developed for single-household occupancy, occupied for more than 90 consecutive days, then the standards should apply.

But what about the question of timing? Is a housing slump the right moment to introduce standards? Yes it is, in so far as it is never the ‘right’ time. There will always be objections. However, we do now have one clear advantage – it makes sense to introduce policy changes at a time of lower levels of activity of landbanking.

But should the standards used be the Parker Morris standards? No, they shouldn’t – at least, not for long. They will do as a stop-gap, but are vulnerable to attack. The Parker Morris standards are based on research on how people used space in the home in the 1960s. It is easy to criticise these standards – simply by pointing out that they reflect life in the 1950s. I suspect that less has changed than we might think – but that’s the point; I suspect it and don’t *know* it. We need a more up-to-date, robust evidence base about how people use space in the home now and over future decades. We need to celebrate the 50th anniversary of the Parker Morris Report in 2011 by publishing Parker Morris for the 21st century. This is a chunky piece of work and needs support from central government as well as the London Mayor. It’s time to lobby; time for the Campaign for Real Homes. Join now.

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### Notes

- 1 A.W. Evans and O.M. Hartwich: *Unaffordable Housing. Fables and Myths*. Policy Exchange, 2005
- 2 *Homes for Today and Tomorrow*. Parker Morris Committee. HMSO, 1961
- 3 The usability approach was further developed by the Ministry of Housing, who published Design Bulletin 6, *Space in the Home*, which formed the basis for the National Housing Federation’s internal requirements in its *Standards and Quality in Development guide*
- 4 *Housing Space Standards*. HATC, for the Greater London Authority, 2006 ([www.london.gov.uk/mayor/planning/docs/space-standards.pdf](http://www.london.gov.uk/mayor/planning/docs/space-standards.pdf)), and *Standards and Quality in Development: A Good Practice Guide*. HATC, for the National Housing Federation, Second Edition, 2008 (ISBN 978 0 86297 539 5)
- 5 [www.swingacat.info/](http://www.swingacat.info/)