

TOO POOR TO PLAY: CHILDREN IN SOCIAL HOUSING BLOCKED FROM COMMUNAL PLAYGROUND

IN A MOVE REMINISCENT OF THE 'POOR DOORS' SCANDAL, A LONDON DEVELOPER HAS
SEGREGATED PLAY AREAS FOR RICHER AND POORER RESIDENTS

By Harriet Grant

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Segregated playground developer now says all children are welcome: <https://www.theguardian.com/cities/2019/mar/27/segregated-playground-developer-now-says-all-children-are-welcome>

At least one multimillion-pound housing development in London is segregating the children of less well-off tenants from those of wealthier homebuyers by blocking them from some communal play areas.

Guardian Cities has discovered that developer Henley Homes has blocked social housing residents from using shared play spaces at its Baylis Old School complex on Lollard Street, south London. The development was required to include a mix of "affordable" and social rental units in order to gain planning permission.

Henley marketed the award-winning 149-home development, which was built in 2016 on the site of a former secondary school, as inclusive and family-friendly. It said the "common areas are there for the use of all the residents".

But the designs were altered after planning permission was granted to block the social housing tenants from accessing the communal play areas.

Salvatore Rea, who lives in a rented affordable flat with his wife, Daniella,



Salvatore Rea looks out at the communal play area and garden his children are not allowed to use. Photograph: Graeme Robertson/The Guardian

and their three children, says the residents of the complex are very aware of the disparity. "My children are friends with all the other children on this development – but when it is summer they can't join them.

"Children shouldn't know who owns and who is renting."

The situation is reminiscent of the ongoing "poor doors" controversy, where social housing residents are forced to use side doors to apartment blocks that also contain private flats.

The Rea family lives in Wren Mews, the social housing building of the complex, which forms one side of a playground square. The other three sides of the square are buildings dedicated to private owners, renters and shared ownership accommodation.

Those from the three private forms of housing can access the playground, but children from Wren Mews cannot.



The play area that residents of Wren Mews are allowed to use. The sports pitches next to them are not part of the development. Photograph: Graeme Robertson/The Guardian

The original planning documents, which were approved by Lambeth Council and went through public consultation, showed gates from all the flats giving access to the main play area. But before residents moved in, the designs were altered – despite Lambeth refusing permission – to transform the gates from Wren Mews into impassable hedges.

“As soon as we moved in, the caretaker said to us, “That’s private: those people bought their houses, so they get to play there,” Daniella Rea said.

Henley Homes and Lambeth Council say the duty to provide play space for under-fives has been discharged, because there is a small strip of toddler play equipment specifically for the social housing children.

Ironically, the site is a former state school, where Rea was herself a pupil. In the main courtyard, the developers preserved the original school signs, which exhort residents and passersby to ‘Put learning first’. Beneath the signs, two wrought-iron statues of children strike playful poses.

“As soon as we moved in, the caretaker said to us, ‘That’s private: those people bought their houses, so they get to play there,’” Daniella Rea said.

Rea claims the Guinness Partnership, the management company now running Wren Mews, originally said her children would be able to use the play spaces.

“We were told we could use all the play areas. This was important to me because my son is in a wheelchair and he has a special bike that I wanted to let him use.” She says the bike and wheelchair are too heavy to carry to the nearest park. The original planning application does not mention separate access for residents of different tenure.

The play strategy for the development says: “There is a network of courtyards and open spaces ... which will provide attractive areas for informal play. This will emphasise the sense of community within the scheme stressing that the common areas are there for the use of all the residents.”

It adds: “It is important to encourage children to cycle, use roller skates and skateboard.” No space is available to the residents of Wren Mews for these activities.

Dinah Bornat, an architect and expert on child-friendly design who advises planners, local authorities and the mayor of London, called the development “segregation” and said she has raised it with senior planners at the Greater London Authority.

“Everyone I have told, at the highest level, has been absolutely horrified to hear that our planning system is not robust enough to stop this happening,” she said.

The play area that residents of Wren Mews are allowed to use. The sports pitches

next to them are not part of the development. Photograph: Graeme Robertson/The Guardian

“To see hedges where plans showed gates, to see a segregated small play area for the social housing residents, while their children directly overlook a much nicer play area is appalling.”

She says it is an abuse of the planning process if developers make such fundamental alterations after the plans have been through a public consultation.

“They are allowed to make minor changes,” she noted. “But what they have done here is altered the layout to block access to social housing residents. We have to ask: was this a cynical move?”

Lambeth Council insisted the situation was unavoidable, and said it bears no responsibility for the site now that it has been built. The council said the small gated strip of play equipment near the back of the social housing unit discharges the duty of providing play space for children under five years old.

In a statement, a spokesperson for the council said: “The plans or conditions do not control which residents have access to specific areas.”

Henley Homes, the developer, said it was only responsible for the private and shared ownership buildings, and that it had handed the freehold of the Wren Mews social housing block to the Guinness Partnership, a social housing company. It said this is a standard practice when there are different tenures on one development.

“This deal structure was agreed with Guinness right at the start, as a method for them to best manage their freehold for the benefit of residents. Wren Mews is a separate, albeit closely neighbouring block with its own access,” said Suze Jones, a spokesperson for Henley Homes.

The Guinness Partnership said it has no control over anything but the social housing block, and could not control access to the private areas of the development.

COMPANY DEFENDS ITS DECISION

Warwick Estates, the company that manages the private part of the development, strongly defended its decision to keep the social housing residents out of the shared spaces.

“Although, as you state, the block overlooks the swing area, the residents have no access to it. This is for [a] very good reason – being that [they] do not contribute towards the service charges,” said Emma Blaney of Warwick Estates. “This is in no way discriminatory but fair and reasonable.”

The Green party leader and GLA member Sian Berry said plans for another site in development in Camden, north London, also feature segregated play areas.

“The worst thing was they were both rooftop play areas and the better-off kids were looking down on the poorer children with no way to reach them,” she said of the plans.

Berry said she has asked the mayor to ban segregated play areas in new developments.

Louise Whitely, a private owner from the Lilian Baylis development, says she wants the gates put back in so her children can play with their friends.

“We bought a flat here because it was marketed as family-friendly and there were photos of children playing all over the site,” she said. “But now our children’s friends look down from their windows and can’t come and join us. We want them to be given back the access that was shown in the original plans.”

The existence of “poor doors”, where less wealthy residents of developments are required to use separate entrances, caused widespread controversy when it was uncovered five years ago. The practice continues.

Meanwhile last year affordable housing residents in Royal Wharf, a development in east London, complained about segregation after being told they could not share the use of a swimming pool and gym on the site because they did not pay the relevant service charge.

This article was amended on 26 March 2019 to clarify that the Guinness Partnership manages Wren Mews, whereas Guinness Homes is the marketing and sales team for the Guinness Partnership; and on 27 March 2019 to correct a reference to Lambeth council. The council did not give permission for the altered design, as initially reported. It refused permission for a planning amendment which proposed restricted access to the communal play area, and the revised plan which the council approved did not include the restricted access.

Courtesy of Guardian News & Media Ltd