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**City Living and the Future of Housing – for the Sunday Times  
Q&A Session with Conran&Partners director Paul Zara**

**What was design like before you started moving into warehouses and converting them into lofts?**

When loft living started in earnest as a movement, it was a great reaction to the Thatcherite period of non-architecture. The selling-off of council houses and the desperate desire to make all of the UK population a home owner saw the countryside covered in banal boxes, cheap style-less houses. The loft-living movement was a complete antidote to all that, large open plan spaces, flexible shells to fit out as you wished, idealistic and fun. That enthusiasm carried through to Tony Blair's 'Cool Britannia' - now a thing of the past!

**How important was Conran & Partners in terms of the city centre living movement?**

Conran & Partners was right at the heart of the city-centre living movement - possibly a bit ahead of the game. Much of our early work was in docklands, and Butlers Wharf, in the Pool of London, took a decade to develop, from the early 1980s. It is now used as a model for urban regeneration worldwide.

**Why is there a resurgence of high-rise living across the UK ?**

Legislation forced developers to use brown-field land for residential development and this coincided with a re-emergence of the UK's city centres as more attractive places to be. Not just for work, but for living as well. Manchester is perhaps the most successful example of this trend, where we built our first big city centre apartment blocks outside London. And we are still there, building a landmark 20-storey glass and steel tower in the city's bohemian Northern Quarter on the edge of the retail district. Creating desirable homes, which people want to inhabit and, crucially, own, has been fundamental to the success of high-rise living in the city today.

**Can we all live in city centres?**

Realistically, developers will not build large family-sized apartments in cities where demand – and the most profit – is for one and two bedroom apartments in high density and a minimum of both private and communal outdoor space. Smaller urban apartments – suitable for singles or young couples without kids for whom proximity to work and city pleasures are more important than a private garden – are also used as week-night crash-pads, in combination with a larger family home in the country. This is not going to change unless someone intervenes in the market.

Unfortunately, the creativity and innovation that has gone into the regeneration of Britain's city centres over the last fifty years has not yet been matched in suburban development by the national house-builders – despite the exhortations of Local Planning Authorities and central government.

**Where will we be living in 20 years time and what will we be living in?**

Conran & Partners has been doing in-house research into sustainable suburbs, led by director Matthew Wood. In the past (notably the Georgian era, at the end of the nineteenth century and between the wars) British suburban design was the best in the world. Since then the ability to craft attractive and desirable residential neighbourhoods has been largely lost. Today, and in the future, suburbs will still be where most of us live and raise families.

Our research tells us that our new designs for suburbs (we've already developed a fully workable model in East Anglia) are deliverable on a commercial basis, although not, perhaps, within the

margins that the large volume house-builders have established as the norm. It may well be that a step-change in quality can only come from new developers entering the market, particularly those used to the idea of mixed-use development.

New ideas for suburbia should involve live-work units, offices, communal centres, leisure facilities, renewable energy and 'green' building materials. For a small service charge, a management company would look after the estate. This was a fundamental aspect of property development in the Georgian era and is being re-discovered today by the more enlightened house-builders. Superior landscaping and excellent, innovative housing design would also lead to desirability and high resale values.

For more information contact Paul Zara or Matthew Wood