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By PrimeResi Editor

Earth Day 2024: 'Sustainability is more than just reducing environmental impact; it's making fundamental changes to the ways in which we interact with our surroundings'

Marking this year's **Earth Day**, PrimeResi spoke to Matthew Robertson, co-founder of pioneering super-prime developer Valouran, to discuss the real meaning of sustainability – and the practicalities of shaping the modern icons and listed buildings of tomorrow...

How do you personally define sustainability?

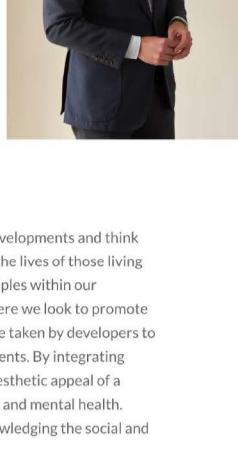
Sustainability is more than just reducing environmental impact; it's making fundamental changes to the ways in which we interact with our surroundings, to ensure a harmonious existence with our environment. From actively pursuing innovative solutions which minimise our carbon footprint, to enhancing the well-being of communities, sustainability sits at the core of our mission.

In property development, to be sustainably conscious, means integrating environmentally aware practices into every facet of a project's lifecycle, from conception to completion. It is about pushing the boundaries and challenging the status quo to create space for positive change, whether that be through reducing embodied carbon, improving urban greening and streetscapes, or enhancing the public realm.

We strive to go beyond the immediate confines of our developments and think more broadly about how each site can positively impact the lives of those living and working nearby. Incorporating biophilic design principles within our residential developments is one of the many avenues where we look to promote sustainability. We see it as an important step that must be taken by developers to allow a reconnection with nature across urban environments. By integrating natural elements throughout, we not only enhance the aesthetic appeal of a development but also contribute to residents' well-being and mental health. Having a sustainable mindset however also means acknowledging the social and economic aspects of property development.

We recognise the importance of fostering local communities, which is why we prioritise hiring local tradesmen and apprentices to ensure that the benefits of our developments are felt directly within the neighbourhoods that they serve.

In a nutshell, sustainability, for us, is about re-addressing the role that property development plays in establishing a more environmentally conscious and vibrant society.



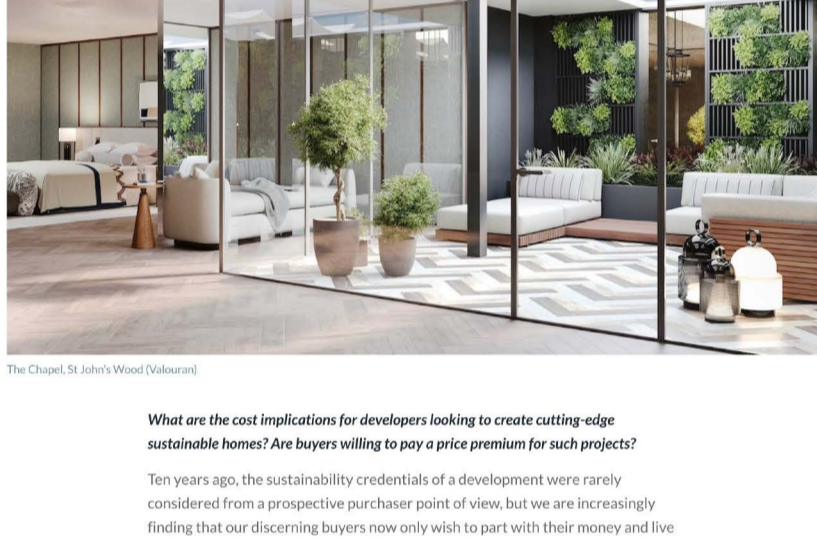
Valouran's forthcoming scheme on The Bishops Avenue

Is sustainability high on the agenda for most HNW property buyers, and are there any particular sustainability features that are proving popular amongst wealthy buyers in 2024?

Sustainability has become increasingly significant for HNW property buyers, whose commitment to environmental responsibility within their investments is ever growing.

These buyers are keen to minimise their carbon footprint with their property purchases, and they are actively seeking out eco-conscious features that resonate with their values and lifestyle preferences. Properties with superior energy efficiency that feature energy saving appliances, and technology that supports renewable energy sources, from air source heat pumps to solar panels, are increasingly favoured by discerning HNW buyers who are looking to reduce their environmental impact.

We are committed to showcasing to our buyers that luxury property and sustainability need not be mutually exclusive, and as such, our developments are at the forefront of pioneering sustainable change in the real estate industry.



The Chapel, St John's Wood (Valouran)

What are the cost implications for developers looking to create cutting-edge sustainable homes? Are buyers willing to pay a price premium for such projects?

Ten years ago, the sustainability credentials of a development were rarely considered from a prospective purchaser point of view, but we are increasingly finding that our discerning buyers now only wish to part with their money and live within a building that has a genuinely environmentally conscious approach and operates with cutting-edge efficiency.

For all developers there is inevitably a cost attached to creating a truly sustainable home that minimises impact on the planet, but at Valouran we only collaborate with teams who share in our approach to protecting the environment and we find that by deploying these methods from the outset that the cost in relation to the positive impact is minimal. We work closely with our architects, engineers, project managers and landscape architects from day one to ensure that sustainability is considered at every stage, and this is reflected in the finished product. Retrofit and heritage revival makes up a large part of our portfolio and expertise.

On several of our live projects the design of the building envelopes an existing heritage structure and by doing this we are able to conserve the embodied carbon attributed to each building. By minimising the need for demolition, we minimise energy usage and landfill, which also reduces cost. The craftsmanship and creativity that comes with restoring a historic building is a fascinating process and this is one of the reasons we feel that Valouran developments all possess an authenticity which makes them so desirable. Buyers recognise the value of buying a home that is future-proofed and that includes maximum efficiencies in all facets of their home.

Across our developments we utilise specialist features which help to conserve and regulate energy, including rendered façade systems, air source heat pumps, optically clear glass to limit solar heat gain, amongst many other methods. We have found that our buyers are excited to be living within a home that has all these specialist components considered. These features make up a key part of our residential offering at Valouran, and ultimately, we want buyers to feel good about their purchase, and their future home/investment.



The Chapel, St John's Wood

Valouran's schemes include preserving the architectural heritage of a chapel in St John's Wood and revitalising an old house on The Bishops Avenue; how do you marry heritage principles with sustainability best practices?

Timeless heritage design exemplifies the benefits of careful craftsmanship and impeccable detailing, but sadly modern buildings often prioritise speed and cost over form, and as a result London and most urban areas are full of homogenous 'boxes' which detract from the existing period cityscape. We believe that in order to fulfil our environmental commitments we should do everything possible to preserve the existing building on a site, where viable, which in turn has many sustainability benefits.

In addition to this, we collaborate with architects who, like us, wish to see these buildings last for the next century and this can only be achieved by building quality, and building something which is aesthetically timeless and fits the vernacular of a location. By looking to the past, we can take inspiration for design of the future, and this combined with cutting-edge technology and systems within the home means that we can create homes that stand the test of time.

“By looking to the past, we can take inspiration for design of the future”

Architectural preservation blended with sustainability best practices is particularly evident at our schemes The Chapel in St John's Wood and 54 Bishops Avenue. Committed to repurposing and sympathetically transforming this historic structure, the 1830s chapel in St. John's Wood will become a collection of five luxurious apartments. We have honoured the historic building's legacy by retaining its listed elements, all whilst minimising embodied carbon. Once complete, The Chapel will feature state-of-the-art energy-efficient services, including renewable electricity options, alongside high-efficiency heat pumps and insulated systems for optimal performance.

By prioritising locally sourced materials and sustainably timber, natural slate roof tiles, and high-quality insulation we have sought to minimise The Chapel's environmental impact at every stage of construction. Landscaping techniques will also be employed to not only enhance the visual appeal of the site but also to promote its ecological health. Introducing drought-resistant plant species will optimise water usage, while seasonal pollination, a rich variety of flora, and green roofing will contribute towards making The Chapel a vibrant ecosystem.

Meanwhile, at The Bishops Avenue we are restoring Oak Lodge into a residential scheme of 30 apartments. The development, which spans a one-hectare site, will retain and restore the existing heritage asset, putting the high-quality Arts and Crafts inspired landscaping at the heart of its design, with a focus on native species of high ecological value.

Through the meticulous use of responsibly sourced materials, Valouran will reduce carbon emissions at the development by 50%, far exceeding the building regulations set by the London Plan. Reuse of materials, limited tree removal and replacement planting will also feature heavily within the development plans, collectively working towards our vision to minimise any lasting environmental impact and achieve biodiversity net gain.



The Bishops Avenue

Successive governments have attempted to promote sustainability in residential property, with policies ranging from EPCs to Biodiversity Net Gain rules. Which policies do you think have been most effective, which have had a net negative effect on housebuilding, and what else should the government be doing in this area?

Successive government policies aimed at promoting sustainability in residential property have had varying degrees of effectiveness to date. While initiatives such as biodiversity net gain rules have shown promise in promoting sustainable development practices, encouraging developers to consider the ecological impact of their projects, the effectiveness of policies such as EPC ratings have been less effective, largely dependent on implementation and enforcement.

Sadly, it is the planning process has emerged as the most significant barrier to sustainable advances. Challenges in obtaining planning consent, coupled with lengthy approval timelines, all work to hinder the development of environmentally forward properties. In the long term, bureaucratic hurdles and insufficient resources in planning departments could pose a substantial obstacle. To address these challenges, there is an apparent need for the greater allocation of resources and power from central government to local planning authorities to streamline the processes and expedite approvals. This would facilitate the timely implementation of sustainable initiatives and support the growth of new development.

Ultimately, while progress has undoubtedly been made in promoting sustainability in residential property development, addressing challenges in the planning process will be paramount for advancing these efforts and achieving meaningful environmental outcomes.

