

The place of design in planning

The main topic for December's forum at Design for London was 'The Place of Design in London Planning'. The introducers of the topic were Inspector Manager Ben Linscott from the Planning Inspectorate, Mark Brearly from Design for London, Ben Derbyshire of HTA Architects on 'Living at Superdensity'.

Ben Linscott was welcomed as an expression of the seriousness with which Design is taken within the Inspectorate, particularly as many in the Design professions were concerned that Design was not taken sufficiently seriously and that the Inspectorate appeared unwilling to back schemes on design grounds. Ben Linscott responded to this by reinforcing that though not a policy maker, design policies were there in PPS1 and 3 and the Inspectorate were therefore applying the policies to make them work. CABE had acted as a conduit to The Chief Inspector Katrine Sporle who was keen to "raise the bar" of design standards. PINS had worked with CABE on case studies aimed at understanding the nature of evidence and schemes.

There were two areas of concern: 1 that Inspectors were not competent in assessing design and 2 that only the high profile cases were considered by the Inspectors with the proper competence to consider them. There is also some scepticism

that some planners are not demonstrating appropriate competence in providing proper design evidence, or the manner in which the evidence is presented.

In design casework the Inspectorate has run some workshops. Often it is clear that local authorities possess little or no design expertise, but are reliant on policy aspirations. The problem is the missing ability to interpret the policy convincingly. There is now some evidence that local authorities are beginning to improve, with design experts becoming embedded in Planning Departments.

Another ingredient is that designs are often poorly thought through and/or poorly presented. Also architects are often unable to sell their schemes at inquiry, which may result from these causes. [It was however acknowledged in subsequent discussion that, as in many art forms, the artist – here architect – is not necessarily the best advocate for a given scheme: knowing how to do it but

not how to express what has been done clearly, with the result that the Inspector does not receive the expressed evidence he or she needs to justify the approach taken.]

Ben Linscott said that Inspectors were used to bringing things together and so although they may not have design training they may have the tools to assess the appraisal qualities of a scheme's design: design awareness as opposed to design competence. He acknowledged that this was not universally the case but pointed out that often it was the case that Design and Access Statements did not address the matters that needed to be addressed in a particular case. Some 20 or so specialist had received training to consider large and high profile schemes, such as tall buildings in London, working again with CABE. It was hoped to provide more of these in the Spring. He added that it was not simply the large scale schemes to which design applied but for example there is regular liaison with the National Park Authorities arising from their lack of confidence about how the Inspectorate approach design.

BL added that it would be wrong to say that because the Inspector is not an expert s/he is not competent to assess a scheme. They are appointed to arbitrate between opposing points of view and this they do. [However the problem is far more frequently that a scheme could be altered, often in fairly minor ways, to turn it from being unacceptable to being acceptable, but the planning application and appeal system does not currently allow for this form of mediation rather than arbitration:

Drummond Robson]

The Chairman opened the discussion by saying that appellants read about higher densities and novel solutions but are met with excessive protectiveness towards the surrounding neighbourhood or building context. It was important to set out the context for a scheme and show why a particular solution has been chosen, show the scheme is competent, set out the rationale for what has been rejected.

Tom Ball commented that we should be careful in our choice of terms and the envelope within which they are used. Engineers mean something quite different by the word design. For them it means fit for purpose. Substitute words which may apply include appearance, higher design or urban design.

Andy Rogers said that only 1 in 9 local authorities had someone qualified to deal with questions of Design.

Paul Archer said that in Epping Forest it was very difficult to get members to talk about design - what it looks like comes later in the discussion. The inference of his remarks is that there is little appreciation of the key matters of size, mass and bulk and how they will fit successfully into a given site. Ron Heath argued the need for panels of "Design Champions". Reference was also made to Conservation Area Advisory Committees who also perform this role, sometimes well, sometimes with excessive protectionist zeal.

Esther Kurland said that Design for London found the Inspectorate's work really useful. She added that design is about how it works as well as what it looks like. In terms of skills she thought some 500 local authori-

MEETING HELD ON Monday 10th December at Design for London

Our host was Esther Kurland, DfL. Attendance:

Brian Waters: Chairman
Alastair Gaskin: Reagh Consulting
Andrew Rogers: Association of Consultant Architects
Ben Linscott: PINS
Ben Derbyshire: managing director, HTA Architects
Brian Salmon: The Berkeley Group PLC
Brian Whiteley: RTP1 and Waltham Forest
Giles Dolphin: GLA Graham

Saunders: English Heritage
Judith Ryser: Isocarp/UDG/Cityscope Europe
Mark Brearly: Design for London
Neil Wilson: RIBA Planning Group
Paul Archer: Epping Forest
Rachel Victor Sampson: North London Strategic Alliance (Haringey)
Ron Heath: RIBA Planning Group
Roger Chapman: GOL
Tom Ball: London Forum
Zoë Cooper: Environment Agency
Apologies were received from Bob Dolata, George Stowell, Kay Powel, Leonora Rozee, Suzy Nelson and Tim Wachter.



table 4B.1 Density location and parking matrix (habitable rooms and dwellings per hectare)

		Car parking provision	High 2 – 1.5 spaces per unit	Moderate 1.5 – 1 space per unit	Low Less than 1 space per unit
		Predominant housing type	Detached and linked houses	Terraced houses & flats	Mostly flats
Location	Accessibility Index	Setting			
Sites within 10 mins walking distance of a town centre	6 to 4	Central	650 – 1100 hr/ha 240 – 435 u/ha Ave. 2.7hr/u		
		Urban	200 – 450 hr/ha 55 – 175 u/ha Ave. 3.1hr/u	450 – 700 hr/h 165 – 275 u/ha Ave. 3.0hr/u	
		Suburban	200 – 300 hr/ha 50 – 110 u/ha Ave. 3.7hr/u	250 – 350 hr/ha 80 – 120 u/ha Ave. 3.0hr/u	
Sites along transport corridors & sites close to a town centre	3 to 2	Urban	200 – 300 hr/ha 50 – 110 u/ha Ave. 3.7hr/u		
		Suburban	150 – 200 hr/ha 30 – 65 u/ha Ave. 4.4hr/u	200 – 250hr/ha 50 – 80 u/ha Ave. 3.8hr/u	
Currently remote sites	2 to 1	Suburban	150 – 200 hr/ha 30 – 50 u/ha Ave. 4.6hr/u		

From the London Plan: GLA

ties would have had some design training by April 2008, having an awareness of PPS, PPS3 and By Design principles.

The Chairman picked up a reference to the Public Realm and referred to Sir Terry Farrell’s case for privately developed public spaces. He asked how these were to be established by public funding to create a better public domain.

Mark Breatly said that DfL worked for the Mayor, especially in the area of public realm. He cited the example of work being undertaken in the

Lower Lee Valley, associated with the Olympics, Boroughs working with the GLA in the fields of “proportional” masterplanning and spatial plan making

A key area is the issue of design steer at the pre application stage of projects, and in particular how to obtain the necessary resources for this – is it with Design Champions or Design Review Panels for example? He thought the latter had a limited role. He saw a growing regional role for City Architects, although others were nervous about this proposition,

and the risk is too infrequent engagement with the result it can merely be “dilettante”.

One model is for local authorities to have the right design skills, another is for them to be brought in as external design advisers. Mark Breatly thought Design for London is developing a strong involvement in and knowledge of this skill.

He accepted as a problem the case of good creative designers who are not advocates for their work. There is also the obvious problem that design terms are frequently just

poorly understood labels which are used without a proper grasp of, and as mere substitutes for, successful design.

Zoe Cooper considered that design was needed at regional, local and area levels.

Judith Ryser thought that the status of design was often given inadequate status in decision making.

Superdensity.

The Chairman invited Ben Derbyshire to outline his recommendations for ‘Living at Superdensity’ – about which Ben has an article in the most recent edition of PiL based on a publication supported by DfL and NHBC and written by 4 leading architectural housing practices and distributed by Bulding. Ben was directing his argument primarily to planning officers, Councils and London Boroughs. He showed illustrations of schemes which had achieved high densities and which he considered successful, beginning with the Odham’s site in Covent garden which he said achieves densities of 150-250 houses/hectare. He referred to the GLA density matrix and said that this had resulted in little consensus from the point of view of practising architects. He thought that with the abandonment of UDPs the “lid could be taken off schemes” and prevent what he called the freezing of hope values. He stressed that design becomes of greater importance as densities increase but asked how this was then achieved, suggesting that usability and sustainability tests should be applied and emphasising the benefit of good accessibility – high PTAL ratings. He wished to raise the profile of practising design in achieving anticipated space standards through building tall buildings at

superdensities. He illustrated super-density principles as follows:

- Neighbourhood context – the social, economic and physical infrastructure with an opportunity for a step change at high PTAL nodes.
- Balanced communities providing high levels of social renting which could achieve 300-400 houses/hectare. He contrasted this with buy to let or "buy to leave empty".

Making flats work for families, with low cost, low maintenance and low service charge extras. Ensuring a dwelling mix with maisonettes at lower levels and providing standards for example of at least 3 hours sunshine a day and avoiding unusable windswept external stair access. Electronics he considered a cheaper and more effective solution than using a concierge.

Physical organisation and access. He proposed double banked corridors east and west facing with vertical core access, wide sunlit access balconies encouraging social interaction. He opined that visual problem is not the problem people think it is but that acoustics were important. Privacy can be "designed out" with blinds, orientation and open space.

Outdoor space and public realm avoiding space being taken over at ground level by the motor car and devoting more to amenity.

Environmental sustainability. This is easier to be made to work at higher densities notably with shared infrastructure advantages. This is difficult to achieve successfully at densities below 400-600/hectare. Energy efficiencies are also achieved in this way.

The role of the local authority in procurement. Development control

is a poor tool and authorities need to be more pro-active as at Milton Keynes.

Giles Dolphin opened the discussion by querying the basic premise of superdensity as measured by houses/homes/dwellings per hectare rather than the GLA matrix which was for habitable rooms/hectare. The difference between the two measures is huge. (For the matrix discussion see London Plan Density Matrix Review of June 2006).

Ben Derbyshire responded by referring to the development of Tabard Square by Berkeley Group – which he said was at 300 houses/hectare - as a good example of the issues he was talking about.

Drummond Robson queried the wider infrastructure impacts of superdensity schemes on an already overcrowded underground network – whether PTAL 6 or not, given the very high capital costs to the state and long lead times of new lines such as Crossrail to alleviate the increased congestion burden the superdevelopment had created.

Ben Derbyshire argued that there were substantial community benefits from superdensity and that what makes cities work do not appear to be the primary concern of policy makers. No evidence was given to support this.

Tom Ball asked about the importance of fresh air at ground level and the severance of effective surveillance of children playing on the ground from the upper parts of tall buildings.

Ben Derbyshire referred to the Llewelyn Davies "Housing for the 21st century proposals".

Giles Dolphin said that the city architect solutions of the 1950s and 60s were not the answer. London is now barely achieving densities equivalent to those of pre war London. What is more important is to provide decent well designed buildings to good space standards.

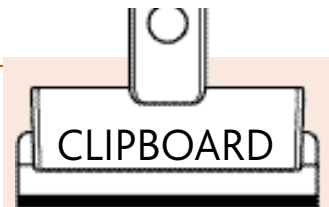
BD suggested that on the whole the higher the density the better the scheme since there is more money to spend as unit costs reduce with scale economies.

The next meeting is at City Hall, 2.30 to 5.30pm on Monday 10th March 2008* hosted by the GLA.

Principal discussion topic: *Validation of Applications, Guidance to Local Planning Authorities* due to be introduced through secondary legislation on 6th April 2008, along with the new application form APP1.

Meetings are open to visitors. Please call Drummond Robson, Forum Secretary, on 020 8449 3113 or robplan@btconnect.com to confirm details of the event and names of those who wish to attend. Please advise if you have a special interest.

*provisional please check www.planninginlondon.com



Boris would reduce affordable housing quotas

Property Week reports Boris Johnson as saying "Where development has been stifled because of mayoral bureaucracy and quota-insistence, then I will be willing to ease those quotas – but only in order to encourage development. Fifty percent of bugger-all is still bugger-all."

Anti 'buy-to-leave' toolkit

In a bid to halt this phenomenon, a toolkit is being considered by the **English Partnerships** board as a response to investors buying up property to leave it empty. It could involve measures to stop purchasers letting flats, reports *Regeneration & Renewal*.

They fail to point out what the Mayor and GLA do appreciate, namely that it is just such investors who underwrite the risk taken by house builders when they build! In any case the market seems to be offering a more effective deterrent.

Conserving English Heritage

"EH is not a good judge of architecture – they do not understand Modern architecture because they recruit conservationists. EH has tried to become a regeneration agency interested in the future. But it is a very bad judge of the future because it prefers the past." – long-serving EH Commissioner **Piers Gough**, following his resignation.

ICOMOS intimidates yet again

Objecting to another modern development by a distinguished architect when it has been recommended for approval, **ICOMOS** suggests that the granting of planning permission will cost a city its World Heritage status, the latest examples being Bath and Leningrad.

"Who are these people?" asks **Alan Dunlop** writing in the AJ. "Its UK members include archaeologists and conservation architects. It has no legal powers but is supported by **English Heritage**."

What is extraordinary is that such self-selected groups are permitted to quality assure our built environment in the face of statutory, democratic and architectural principles... They inhibit the proper functioning of the planning process".