

Beauty can't be planned

Nor can it be defined, says Paul Finch

The strange death of rational planning is best illustrated by the introduction of the word 'beauty' into government aspiration, faux-technical guidance, and assertions/presumptions based on nothing at all. The give-away is the fact that none of this policy or guidance ever defines what 'beauty' actually is.

Roger Scruton, the philosopher, promoted the notion that if designs were beautiful, they would immediately win planning permission and thus 'solve' the shortage of housing in the UK. He was too sophisticated to believe that he (or anyone else) could provide a definition of beauty that would be susceptible to, say, cross-examination at public inquiry.

His acolytes, and panel members of the clumsily named 'Building Better Building Beautiful Commission', have confidently endorsed the idea that anything requiring planning permission should indeed be beautiful, without troubling themselves in respect of definition.

Resulting policies and guidance are therefore based on an abuse of language, because an absence of agreed meaning is just as bad as using language wrongly or deceptively. The National Planning Policy Framework, the cornerstone of government planning policy, now embraces the notion of beauty as a prerequisite for planning permission courtesy of the following sentence which appears in Chapter 12, 'Achieving well-designed places':

'The creation of high-quality, beautiful and sustainable buildings and places is fundamental to what the planning and development process should achieve.'

It is no longer enough to design high-quality and sustainable buildings and places. They need to be 'beautiful' as well. There is plenty of stuff about what constitutes quality and sustainability, but nothing in the document about how to achieve beauty. Save this:

'Design guides and codes provide a local framework for creating beautiful and distinctive places

with a consistent and high-quality standard of design.'

To which one can only say What guides? What codes? The Essex Design Guide of yesteryear? Where is the evidence that they result in beautiful places? This is assertion and presumption writ large – a fantasy utopia generated by Whitehall apparatchiks swaying in politicians' windy spouting of half-digested notions about aesthetics.

As with all government policies, especially those of an aspirational nature, there is small print which means it is not enough to review the primary document. The NPPF's fundamental aspirations say nothing at all about aesthetics or beauty. But its chapter 12 needs to be considered in light of at least one other document, the National Design Guide, whose motto or subheading reads: 'Planning practice guidance for beautiful, enduring and successful places'.

You will not be surprised to hear that this document does not define beauty either. It is an amalgam of statements of the obvious and photography which supposedly supports the textual clichés. In respect of the text, you scarcely know whether to laugh or cry. Take this: 'Well-designed places can last for many years.'. What about badly designed places? Can't they last a long time too?

Another assertion, as a statement of fact rather than proposition, runs thus: 'This National Design Guide, and the National Model Design Code and Guidance Notes for Design Codes, illustrate how well-designed places that are beautiful, healthy, greener, enduring and successful can be achieved in practice.'

How can a new government design guide guarantee any such outcome? The words 'enduring' and 'successful' suggest an insight into the future worthy of Nostradamus. You will also notice that, once again, reading the core document is not enough: there is another one to which you must refer, that is to say the one covering the preparation of design codes, which have yet to become part and parcel of the planning process, despite the claims about their

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achieved effect outlined above.

The National Design Guide does make a specific reference to how we might think about beauty in relation to places: 'Beauty in a place may range from a long view down to the detail of a building or landscape'. I wish I were making this up, but there it is. Can the detail of a building make a place beautiful? No it can't. No wonder that the guidance rapidly moves on, declaring that: 'Specific, detailed and measurable criteria for good design are most appropriately set out at the local level.' This seems to mean that self-appointed worthies (sorry 'community') will be able to impose their notion of beauty in planning codes, which will bypass any form of democratic scrutiny.

But hang on a moment – according to the National Design Guide section on how to achieve 'identity', proposals must 'cater for a diverse range of residents and other users'. Suppose they can't agree? Incidentally, the same section of the guide asserts that: 'All design approaches and architectural styles are visually attractive when designed well.' Visually attractive seems to mean beautiful, though alas this phrase is not defined either. Is this a defence of Brutalism?

It is a relief to be reminded of John Constable's wise words on these matters: 'There is nothing ugly; I never saw an ugly thing in my life: for let the form of an object be what it may – light, shade, and perspective will always make it beautiful.'

Trying to plan beauty is about as helpful as trying to impose compulsory fun. ■

MALLET

Not tall, but handsome – bring back the mansion block

Tall buildings arouse strenuous opposition. They are attractive, however, to those who can afford to live in 'luxury' towers built by developers. Local authorities no longer build them in the mistaken belief they aren't appropriate for families, and because of historic failures from Ronan Point to Grenfell.

But if you managed to see Grenfell: in the words of survivors, by Gillian Slovo at the National Theatre this summer, you can't have missed receiving the heart-warming impression that the broadest diversity of family set-ups can live happily in them.

One of the play's key messages was how successful Grenfell's diverse community was despite the unforgivable lack of respect and care. It's the bad management not the architectural type that is lethal. A friend went and found himself sitting next to Michael Gove. Let's hope the message gets back to the hive.

The same public mistrust about tower blocks is absent, however, when it comes to the mansion block. If you are an aficionado, you can swot up on 27 of the finest in the Architecture Foundation's latest publication: *At Home in London: The Mansion Block*, edited by architectural and urban designer Karin Templin.

A form originating and flourishing in London in two distinct eras, the late Victorian, and between the wars from 1930 on. The mansion block – a neologism that mixed nomenclature from different eras – was popular when built and remains so to judge by today's prices.

There's something in the name about making what was the preserve of the affluent upper classes – a mansion – becoming available in smaller instalments to other socio-economic groups. People who enthusiastically pursued more individualistic and liberated lifestyles in the apartments they offered. In estate agent-speak, mansion blocks were 'aspirational'.

So why don't we build more of them if we like them so much (and lots of us don't like towers)? The pre-1914 bits of London everyone loves, mostly listed or in conservation areas, contain many mansion blocks and swathes of fairly high density terraced homes, while inter-war mansion blocks,

like those of St John's Wood or Hammersmith, have their fan club. It remains one of London's most successful typologies.

Instead we now have, NLA's survey told us, something like 580 tall buildings in the development pipeline. That's a lot of tall buildings. Those built have stalked out like giants through London's suburbs, glowering over modest town centres and brownfield sites.

One of Mr Gove's many predecessors as housing minister at DHLUC, Robert Jenrick, stated the government's preference for 'gentle density'. A lot of people could live much more happily with that. But it's not easy to deliver. The hunt for viability to pay affordable housing development tax means developers pump up the volume way beyond 'gentle'.

If we wanted to revive mansion blocks we'd have to artificially recreate some of the circumstances that brought them about. Up to the early Victorian era London was low rise. But rapid population growth as industrialisation and profits of empire bloomed, generated demand for rapid central densification. Developers, a new breed, found themselves able to assemble sites of lower rise properties and build speculative mansion blocks, assisted by wealthy investors and a sophisticated financial sector with whom they shared profits.

The process may have had its complexities but the only 'planning' rules were covenants imposed on the land underneath by previous private owners, often in previous centuries. These might be restrictive or positive covenants where owners sought to impose early forms of design codes on purchasers. Restrictive covenants (thou shalt not) run with the land, positive covenants (you must do X) do not, unless a new contract is made between the landowner and the new purchaser. This is to oversimplify, but Victorian and Edwardian developers were able to build much more densely in a relatively planning-free city – which we and the rest of the world now reverse.

The problem with trying to achieve 'gentle density' today in areas where it might be desirable under our planning regime is that to mention increased density in any established two or three storey neighbourhood will immediately cause a

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political conflagration.

London's need for homes has to be crammed onto brownfield sites at alien densities because existing neighbourhoods are sacrosanct. And the squeezed development equation forces out the quality of design and materiality which favoured earlier mansion blocks – but which people want and pay for. There are plenty of depressed low rise areas, poorly planned, poor in quality, condition, appearance and utility, where a defined policy to gently increase density in a limited area might bring about attractive renewal. Not that different from what many local authorities are doing with their post-war council estate renewals.

If existing owners could see profit in selling their low-density homes with underused long gardens, and developers felt confident about the certainty of being able to build, that might attract capital for redevelopment. Mansion blocks might offer sufficient density to pay for that renewal and reintroduce a housing form that offered greater choice and quality and accommodated more people, bringing vibrancy and greater economic activity.

We need to have a conversation about finding opportunities for 'gentle density development areas'. It is also worth noting that Conservative think tank, the Centre for Policy Studies, hosted a fringe event at the Tory party conference which debated the premise that Green Belt policy needs reforming. Another former housing minister, Brandon Lewis MP, felt this was hugely important: 'There are parts of the Green Belt that are not green. There are areas that most of us would think are brownfield....the Green Belt, like everything over the last hundred years roughly, needs to be reviewed and changed.'

Why not see if suburban reinvented mansion blocks might fit the bill? ■