



'What's Social About Housing?'

RIBA, London on 7th July 2008

Chaired by Kieran Long, Editor of the Architects' Journal

Panel: Sunand Prasad, President RIBA

Matthew Lloyd, Matthew Lloyd Architects

Mandar Puranik, Urban Designer London Borough of Tower Hamlets

Alex Ely, mæ Architects

Transcript of presentation by Alex Ely:

(Type)

In selecting the projects for our catalogue essay and for inclusion in the exhibition we were interested in finding homes that are culturally recognisable and socially legible types. Essentially: homes with private front doors, defensible space to the street and private gardens, suitable for repetition but also flexible and capable of change as social patterns become apparent.

It is the house, Violette-le-Duc says, that characterises the customs, tastes, usages of a people. Typological clarity creates a collective urban identity and communal order if intelligently designed. I hope our essay illustrates, however, that these houses are designed to be loose enough to accommodate variation and adapt to place, and respond to peoples desire to assert their individuality.

(Place)

Contrary to much current planning guidance (I am thinking in particular of the Essex Design Guide) standard house types can create a place with identity. Many cities, especially London, are made with its standard housing. The Bloomsbury terrace still in my view stands, as Siegfried Gideon asserted, as the high point of urban development.

The creation of a place is based on our need to dwell amongst others. A sense of place is achieved when we can relate a place to human life and activity. There is a scale, at least in an English context, perhaps around 250 dwellings per hectare, above which the ability of a place to relate to human scale and enable community breaks down.

(Density)

The demise of the welfare state and local government-housing programme, replaced by a reliance on the private sector to fund social housing through s106, has resulted in a seemingly relentless drive for densification. Estate regeneration has to pay for itself. Developments appear and areas rebuilt at a scale that is alien to the low density of the cities original fabric. We seem to forget that buildings have a lifespan and rather than paying to rebuild we have to cross-subsidy. You can only get a new house if we can build three in its place. This jars uncomfortably with the type of house we generally want and will only be exacerbated further when we come to regenerate our estates in another 40 years time.

I am interested in a scale and density that is humane and legible and culturally appropriate, the English are not comfortable with Hong Kong's idea of proximity.

(Growth)

89% of the UK is undeveloped, much of it protected as greenbelt or agricultural set-aside. The densities we promote today make it very hard to achieve cultural and socially legible typologies. Defensible space, security, private amenity and the ability to customise and extend become that much more expensive in high-rise.

My proposition is that we relax our control over the greenbelt so our current hernia model of urban growth can be replaced by one of polycentric growth. I'd argue that it's more social and gregarious to build low to medium density than accommodate families at super density. At a time of greater stress on family life there is something we like about the notion of an Englishman's castle being a house, not an apartment.

(Planning)

Rather than trying to change people's preferences for low-density living- an aspiration of the Urban Task Force report- we could focus on making our suburbs sustainable; finding solutions for environmental, social and cultural development. Develop place specific planning guidance with planning departments that plan rather than just control development. Generate masterplans for every town that anticipates growth with strict guidelines for typologies. Good quality types make the ground of the city, with civic buildings, schools, surgeries and employment space being the figure ground around which we orientate.

I believe this would fit well with the role of Chief Architect that Mandar is calling for or perhaps Mr President you could call for the setting up of a Suburban Task Force?

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