

NOTE OF OPEN MEETING ON 28th NOVEMBER ON BETTER URBAN DESIGN:

Avoiding Harm in Densification; how can design policies and codes be used to create places and homes people want?

Introduction:

Mr Bach opened the meeting, which was very timely in view of the launching by the Government of a Building Better Building Beautiful Commission and the imminence of the Examination-in-Public of the London Plan, a key issue in it being “what kind of London do Londoners want?”. Londoners mainly know what they don’t want – high rise and/or significantly higher densities, but are they able to say what they do want or at least how much change they are prepared to accept in their neighbourhood? It is not just about better urban design, but about creating or maintaining the types of places that people want to live in.

Tall buildings - 20 storeys or higher - were the feature of the last ten years. But Londoners never voted for them. Densities have increased. The first London Plan had a density matrix – linking density to, among other things, public transport accessibility, setting an appropriate density range, and guiding the highest densities to locations with high transport accessibility and to Opportunity Areas. The London Forum strongly supported the matrix, but developers and the GLA planners extensively abused the density limits – and promoted tall buildings with inappropriate designs in inappropriate places. The public has developed a severe distrust of developers and planners. With increasing resort to pre-application advice, developers and planners come to agreement in private often well before the public get to hear about the proposals, by which time the deal will have been done.

The new London Plan proposes “Good Growth”. But only if schemes have come through a local plan as a site allocation, or there is a planning brief for the site, will the public get any opportunity to influence what happens. With increasing emphasis on a ‘design-led approach’ in the London Plan in order to get as much development as possible on sites, especially small sites, the community may get left out of the process and have less and less influence on shaping their neighbourhood; their distrust will increase.

Londoners want to have a say in the future of their communities, to understand what decisions are being made and have real engagement in the process.

Presentations

Four speakers then gave presentations.

Ben Derbyshire, President of the Royal Institute of British Architects (RIBA), opened. He spoke about the RIBA’s Future Place project, backed up with real research and intended to illuminate best practice (‘the ten characteristics of places where people wanted to live’); not just ‘development control’ but positive, collaborative, planning by local authorities, for which more resources would be needed. Local authorities would have to provide leadership, and facilitate land assembly. There would have to be post-occupancy evaluation of housing developments. Mr Derbyshire spoke highly of Oliver Letwin’s review of build out, which had identified the problem and the need for more market diversity. He was doubtful about the Scruton ‘Building Better Building Beautiful Commission’, which appeared to be a triumph of style over substance and a retreat to the past. Design was not the same as style.

The second speaker was **Yolande Barnes, Chair of the UCL Bartlett Real Estate Institute** and until recently at Savills. She ranged across the globe to

demonstrate that high density need not be harmful. Madrid was the European city with the highest density, with buildings rarely above five or six storeys; there were few parks, but many small gardens with seats at street corners. Other examples were Narbonne, where the Roman street pattern was still recognisable, and Mumbai, which showed how people preferred to live, in dense, multi-purpose neighbourhoods. The Corbusian concept, of massive buildings surrounded by open space - advocated as providing 'light and air' and prevalent in the late twentieth century - was wrong and damaging. The digital economy, which did not constrain working to particular locations, would facilitate anthropocentric bottom-up planning of cities.

The third speaker was **Sue Vincent, Head of Learning at Urban Design London** (UDL) (and a Camden Councillor); UDL was a member of the Design Network of not-for-profit organisations across England. She emphasised the need for councillors on planning committees to have training in matters including the reading of plans - a Councillor's Companion had just been published. Culture must change and the public must be involved more. There should be community review groups. There was great value in having Design Awards.

The final speaker was **Nicholas Boys-Smith of Create Streets**. He advocated co-design (e.g with charettes) rather than consultation. There were merits in high density living - for instance more interaction with neighbours. Greenery was not necessarily good for you - it might be threatening by providing opportunities for undesirables to lurk. Properties ought where possible to have clear backs and fronts. Calling a part of a conurbation a village did not make it a village in any real sense. Although it was understandable why disabled access led to the elimination of steps, climbing steps was of itself good exercise. Choice of where a person wanted to live was not necessarily rational, and could be influenced by memories and the like. Mr Boys-Smith favoured neighbourhood planning, properly focussed and not over-complicated, with fine-grain density.

Discussion:

There was then a session of questions to the panel.

The **Bromley Civic Society** said that Bromley was being inundated by applications for 10-15 storey blocks in the Town Centre redevelopment; the Council seemed target-driven. What had been said in the presentations was totally unrealistic. How could a civic society have any influence? Ms Vincent said it was important to get in quickly, before pre-application discussions had crystallised. Mr Derbyshire said that a problem was that there must be subsidies to enable people to live when they could not otherwise afford to live; if these subsidies had to come from the private sector there would have to be sufficient profit on the market housing to enable the provision of a proportion of genuinely affordable housing. Mr Boys-Smith stressed the value of having a neighbourhood plan in place with clear limits on high density.

The **Charlton Society** said that they too were beginning to see applications for large blocks of flats; the council seemed to favour developers over people; how could this be resisted. Ms Barnes advocated charettes; good developers see the value for them in involving people from the outset; it was too late when large sums had already been invested.

The **Kingston-on-Thames Society** said that they had been involved in consultations with developers where it was clear that there had been pre-application discussions, and there was therefore no intention of making changes; all the society could do was to be reactive. Mr Boys-Smith said that it would help to have in place a clearly focussed neighbourhood plan; that required a lot of work.

The **Stratford Neighbourhood Forum** raised the need to get plans changed. Mr Derbyshire said that when the implications of the Grenfell Tower disaster had been fully digested there would be major changes. The requirements for high-rise buildings would become such as to be difficult and very expensive to achieve, therefore virtually unsustainable in financial terms. Mr Boys-Smith concurred - tall buildings were very expensive to run - witness the service charge for the Barbican. Ms Barnes said that it was therefore likely that many existing permissions would not be implemented. The result could be empty sites and failure to achieve London Plan targets; there would have to be some incentive to landowners beyond existing use value.

The **Clapham Society** asked how best to check local authorities who believed that becoming big developers themselves was the way to make lots of money? Ms Vincent said that many authorities believed that this was the way to pay for social housing. The Clapham Society said that this belief would, in the long run, prove misguided.

Ms Burrige mentioned the need to involve children in decisions that would affect them particularly. Ms Vincent said that there were examples of good practice in this. Mr Boys-Smith observed that some planning decisions had twice as much impact on children as on the rest of the community; small green spaces close to where they lived were better for them than large more distant parks. Mr Derbyshire said that the rules regarding amenity space were quite good; however, dwellings provided through conversions to residential as permitted development never had adequate play spaces (or insulation, for that matter).

The **Barnet Residents Association** said that the destruction of traditional suburban houses with gardens by densification and the onward march of flats was driving away people in the 25-35 age group who were starting families; they were moving out of London altogether to the home counties. Ms Barnes said that many suburbs were currently degentrifying; the demand was for a more urban, less car-reliant lifestyle. The Residents Association demurred. Mr Derbyshire said that there was currently more deprivation in suburban areas, what was needed was 'supurbia', and the transportation revolution would help bring this about.

Mr Bach asked how a design-led approach could be squared with a community-inclusive one. Ms Barnes did not see a conflict, if there was full consultation and engagement before pre-application discussions. Mr Boys-Smith regretted the small part taken by neighbourhood planning in the London Plan, which had too much central control.