

# 19 Can good design survive the planning process?

by Professor Robert Adam

When I design a new group of houses or a large master plan, I want to work to a design vision and to maintain that vision throughout the process of design, planning and construction. I believe that the right design vision, its consistency and its expression through all aspects of a development, is one of the key factors in making a good design. As with most complex design projects, there are some formidable hurdles to overcome.

Firstly, there are the familiar and essential issues common to all such schemes: the right product for the market, the budget, control of construction and so on. These constitute the brief around which any good design should be based but, depending on the client and in particular with large housing developers, maintaining the original vision can be very hard work indeed. For developers, who have a primary interest in profit quite reasonably, sometimes the design vision takes second place to cost plans, interest rates, labour availability and many other practical issues. In the end, however, a balance will always be managed through the relationship between the designer and the client.

Secondly, and the focus of this essay, an unavoidable part of bringing a design and its vision into reality is that it has to pass through the planning system. Most planning policies have admirable intent, usually expressed in rather vague terms: “highest standards of design”, “distinctive character”, for example. And most planning officers want to see a good result, often as seen according to their own measure. Planning is, however, primarily a process, a procedure with a large number of actors and a series of administrative steps that have to be taken.

Unfortunately, this process has become so burdensome that it not only acts as a severe brake on the delivery of housing but is so arbitrary and fragmented that the chances of a design vision surviving become very slim indeed.

To illustrate my point, I will cite the typical path a 4,000 housing unit, mixed use urban extension will take through the planning process. This starts at a point where the land has already been allocated for development. This allocation is, in itself, a long process but once done, everyone agrees or accepts that a development will take place at a density, mix of uses, quantum of open space, schools and other requirements, all set down in a policy.

From the time of the first meeting with the local authority to the grant of an outline planning consent – that is just the masterplan, not the actual design of any buildings – the minimum time would be two years. Once a

consent has been agreed, not actually granted, there will then be a series of legal agreements that will have to be entered into with the local authority and possibly others. Many of these will entail significant expenditure for the developer and are subject to negotiation. The normal time span for reaching such agreements, the local authority's legal department having an interest only in reaching the agreement in their own timescale, is one year. Once the last of these has been finalised there will be a planning consent granted. If the developer is forward thinking and is prepared to enter into significant extra expenditure when the outcome and certainly the timetable are not certain, the outline application or masterplan will be a 'hybrid application', that is it will include a full design of the first one or two phases. This will allow the first building work to commence quite soon after the permission is granted. The technical drawings, infrastructure and other preparations for the first phase will take a minimum of six months.



*A place created by highway regulations. Credit: Robert Adam.*

Now, three and a half years later, if things have gone well, the first turf can be cut. If this is a high value, high demand area, two sites could proceed at once and these are usually about 200 residential units each. The build rate will try to match the likely sales rate and, generally, one house a week is a very good sales rate. So, the maximum number of houses coming onto the market from the whole development will be 100 houses a year, hardly a number that will satisfy the housing shortage anytime soon. The recent Letwin Report, quite rightly, believes that if the housing type and tenure range were to be more diverse the disposal rate could be more – but I have given an atypically fast-build-and-sale rate. Taking this sample, to some extent theoretical and to some extent taken from a real development, in seven years and six months ten percent of the original allocation will have been provided. This is one complete economic cycle, nearly two parliaments, personnel will have moved on, the market will have changed, policies could have been revised. No small builder could afford to go through this process, let alone the up-front infrastructure costs necessary

to bring the site forward.

So what has happened in the two years from the first meeting and the agreement to grant consent? The design will be scrutinised in detail, quite rightly. The scrutiny will, however, be based on an interpretation and often several not-fully-aligned interpretations of “how the detailed design responds positively to the local context” or “how it creates a place with a distinctive character”. These fine-sounding policies really say very little and their meaning is completely in the hands of the controller and can vary quite radically from that of the designer. For example, one set of guidelines says new development “should establish a new high quality 21st century contemporary architecture” and that “pastiche is not acceptable”. This is a specification of a particular style in very thinly disguised coded architectural language and was written by a planner. This could be radically different from the developer’s understanding of his market or the designer’s vision. No matter, there will be a discussion around this point and the planning officers are the gatekeepers of the higher-up democratic process and will be the ones who make a recommendation to a very busy committee of elected councillors (in some smaller developments the permission process will not even get that far and be totally bureaucratic). Given the normal timescale, the pressure will be on the designer to fall in with whatever the officer or officers like or believe, extra time can cost very substantial sums in interest. At this stage the designer’s vision could collapse – not necessarily and this is an extreme case but almost always there is some compromise based on little more than a planner’s personal opinion or their interpretation of vaguely worded policies.



*The size of refuse vehicles is more important than the places they serve. Credit: Harry Pope, Flickr (Creative Commons).*

And this is before we have got to the other actors in the process: the ecologists, the tree officers, the hydrologists, the leisure department, the employment officer, the archaeologists, and the education department and – most powerful of all and often quite independent – the highway department, amongst others. Each of these has a single-interest contribution: the trees,

the leisure provision, the wildlife, their interpretation of road safety and so on. They often care little or nothing about the housing provision or the urgency of the process. In one development in which I played a part, this input was managed very efficiently (said without irony): on two occasions a representative of each interest and a number of different planning officers were put around a large table and each was asked to comment on the emerging scheme. The head of planning then drew a list of what each one of them had to say. Unless the comment was quite out of order (in which case it was for the designer to argue it out) each comment had to be incorporated in the scheme or it had to be demonstrated that there was a positive response. The only way to maintain anything of the vision in such a procedure is to be a very vigorous exponent of the vision and have the full support of the developer (not everyone who is a good designer has these presentation skills) when dealing with sometimes arbitrary opinions. Before the application is submitted, a report has to be prepared that satisfies the requirements of all these interests. For smaller developments these reports can be onerous and demonstrably pointless: for anything over 1 hectare, even if it is on top of a mountain, a flood risk report is required; if you have unprotected trees on your site which you can fell any time you like, you still have to produce a report on the impact on the trees; if you have a site of 0.4 hectares or more – a very small site – even if there is no identified archaeological interest, you must have a professionally prepared archaeological report; to cite only a few.

On top of all this, but entirely reasonably, you have to consult the local community. While there are often objections to the fact of development, these occasions are enlightening and usually sensible but at times the designer is steering a difficult line between the popularity of their design and the views of the various controlling interests. Finally, there might be a design review panel, often meeting twice in the process. These can be very good and positive but they can also just be one group of designers trying to impose their personal prejudices on the designer, who comes as a supplicant and is expected to ‘respond positively’, even in the case of profound disagreement on matters such as style.

These examples are based on a real case but it is quite typical and it is not the complete tale –this would take much longer. Many more applications are much smaller but many of the processes and reporting requirements are much the same.



*Open space required by planners. Credit: Robert Adam.*

The growth of this process by the addition of new reporting and consultation requirements, each with their own regulations (for example an ecological report has to be researched according the life-cycle of the species, has to be submitted and cannot be conditioned on the consent) has put a huge burden on the applicant in terms of time, expense and risk. This has driven out large numbers of the small local builders, who had local reputations and local interest, and has put housing supply and design increasingly in the hands a very few very large development companies with centralised budgets, the requirement for regional and national profit levels, high staff turnover, complex command chains, uniform products and overbearing relationships with designers.

And to return to where I began, what happens to the design vision in all this? In some cases, with visionary officers, strong designers and committed developers, there can be excellent results. But far too often, any design vision has been shredded in the process and any attempt to kick back will only prolong the process, generate ‘position-taking’ from the controllers, and most likely at some stage be overridden by the developers who are seeing some of their profit disappear. Such an architect will be unlikely to re-employed and there is a breed of non-architects and architects in the wings who treat design as only the geometric disposal of the maximum number of standard units on a site, while satisfying all controlling impositions – in effect filling in the spaces between the constraints. Any design vision is then presented as a series of vague and untestable statements that are a match for the vague policies they are supposed to satisfy.

If we are to improve delivery of housing and if we are to create places with real character and vision, this process has to be streamlined and reformed. Every threshold and need for reporting should be examined critically.

Time limits and formats should be set for all consultation responses and failure to comply will render the consultation null and void. Each interest should be directed to work positively to achieve a planning consent and recognise that the provision of well-designed new housing and mixed-use schemes might just trump a mature tree, a standard overlooking distance or a perfect road junction. Then we might just create space for design vision and for smaller developers to re-enter the market and provide the personal interest and local sensitivity absent in the large firms. We also need a transparent and direct link between local consultation and control – but that’s another story.