

New Housing – Boon or Blight?

Talk by Leonora Rozee OBE to the Stratford Society, Monday 15th February 2010

In a talk focusing on protecting historic character, achieving high quality development and how both local authorities and civic societies could use the system more effectively, Leonora Rozee emphasised three particular points vital to the future development of Stratford:

1. It is now a statutory duty (rather than a guidance request) that planners consider the quality of design when considering applications or making policy framework.
2. There is therefore no reason for planners to accept badly designed housing developments. Planners have the power to tell developers 'if it's not good enough it will be refused.'
3. Councils should make use of a Design Champion who can ensure that public knowledge of area and landscape is available to the Council and is made use of.

Extracts from her talk are as follows:

A significant change in policy: The Planning Act 2008, Section 183 Good Design no longer 'recommends' but insists that decision makers "must have regard to the desirability of achieving good design." Considering good design is no longer just a desirable thing, it is now a statutory duty. This policy now says that if a design fails to take opportunities to improve the quality and character of an area, it should not be accepted. If a developer goes to appeal as a result of permission being refused, the Inspector will consider whether the planners have taken good design into consideration. If they are found to have failed in this respect, they are likely to lose the appeal.

Not just enough housing, but enough of the right quality: Planning Policy Statement 3 says that "our goal is to ensure that everyone should have the opportunity to live in a decent home which they can afford in a community where they want to live." There is still a serious shortfall in numbers, but there is also an imperative to build houses that people want to live in and that enhance the area. If the quality of housing is not high enough, this has serious social implications when people feel they no longer want to live in an area. Good design is not just about the appearance of the buildings, it is about how they relate to the spaces around them and the activities that take place in them.

Protection for historic areas: Planning Policy Statement 15: Planning and the Historic Environment makes it a statutory duty to provide specific protection for historic areas. Protection is not about putting things in aspic. It is about protecting the quality of the environment. When developing in and around historic areas the essential qualities and character must be retained without resorting to pastiche development. It is not necessary just to reproduce what is there. It is possible to produce modern design that picks up the key characteristics of an area.

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Today's developers are perfectly capable of responding to an historic environment but it has to be done against a real understanding of what the essence of that environment is.

Influencing the Process: Policy CS2 of the draft Core Strategy ensures 'that the views of the local community are fully taken into account in the planning process.' In addition, the Statement of Community Involvement 'sets out how the local authority will involve the community in the preparation of all its local development documents and also in significant development decisions.'

Building an evidence base: Policy CS2 also emphasises the importance of working against a good evidence base such as the production of parish plans in which local people can come together and determine the key characteristics of their area. This helps the local authority, when working with developers, to identify the key characteristics which the local community feels are important and which need to be reflected in future designs. Simply objecting to something is not productive. Drawing attention to why something doesn't work is likely to have much more impact.

How the planning authority might use these powers and local policies: Ms Rozee said that planning authorities now have to have a Statement of Community Involvement. This will state how it will involve local people in both decisions on major planning applications and in policy making. This is a right, but one which has to be exercised responsibly and must show a degree of understanding as to why certain decisions, for instance on numbers of houses, have to be made. The community can then provide knowledge and expertise which can help the local authority to have a greater understanding of how a particular area works and what the impact of decision will be on the wider area.

The planning system is facing enormous challenges and tensions and it is impossible just to go on saying no to things. What we have to do is find ways of making sure that our future is well designed, works well and is properly integrated. It is no longer acceptable to build large housing estates on the edge of towns with no shops and schools and services and inadequate transport. But we can only make improvements if we can work collectively together.

Using a Design Champion: Many successful authorities use a Design Champion to ensure not only that high quality is achieved but that local people are involved in creating the masterplan by identifying the key characteristic of their areas. The Design Champion is sometimes a member, sometimes an officer, who can not only establish principles, but also bring the various interested groups together. CABE, the Commission for Architecture and the Built Environment, can advise on such an appointment and on wider issues.

Ms Rozee concluded, 'The policies exist. It is up to local people and local authorities to use them to make sure developers provide better quality housing in future.'

“Good design is not an optional extra. It is not about ‘if we can afford it we will do it’. Our heritage is a very important part of our future and we need to make sure we look after it for future generations”.

Where to go for Advice: The Commission for Architecture and Built Environment produces design advice and has recently produced “Planning for Place – delivering good design through Core Strategies”: www.cabe.org.uk CABE can also help to support local authorities in design reviews. They have a permanent design expert who can be invited by a local authority to review major schemes. They are a national body set up by government and are highly influential.

The Homes and Communities Agency ATLAS has now been extended nationally and individual regions have groups of experts who can be invited by local authorities who perhaps lack the resources in certain fields of expertise to deal with major developments and will help broker discussions between developers and planners.

The Royal Town Planning Institute has a body called Planning Aid which consists of a large number of planners who give their expertise voluntarily to those who would not normally be able to access professional advice.

Answering questions, Ms Rozee made the following points:

- **What is good design?** Appreciation of good design does not have to be subjective. In determining what is good or bad design we have to recognise our own prejudices. We may personally like or dislike something but that doesn't mean that it is a bad design. There are certain fundamental design principles of good design that are objective standards and these can be found on CABE's website.
- **The effect of the economic downturn:** The challenge for local authorities now is the financial crisis which has impacted on their ability to ensure that the developers' finances are still available to deliver all the promised infrastructure. Where possible it would be desirable to ensure that the infrastructure is established in advance.
- **How to ensure a coherent whole:** Where large developments are sectioned off and involve several builders, design principles need to be established from the beginning through a masterplan to ensure that the ultimate development is a coherent whole and makes the best use of the land, including consideration of parking and public transport.
- **The role of developers:** A lot of emphasis is now being placed on the role of the developers in working with communities to understand what the needs of the area are. Developers, as well as planners, must accept responsibility for exercising the duty of good design and should produce designs in the first place that fulfil the requirements.
- **Local authorities and the public:** In cases where an area has a history of poor design local authorities should make use of civic groups. The Core Strategy should make clear that the local authority is no longer prepared to accept what has gone before and will insist on their policies being carried out. Members, officers, the community and

developers and the planning inspectorate itself have to take these policies seriously.

- **How to comply with the new design requirements: The cost of good design:** There is not a lot of evidence that good design costs more. It may be the case if a particular material, such as Cotswold stone, has to be used in a particular area, but design need not be expensive. Developers can no longer get away with bad design by saying that they sell their houses, therefore they must be what people want. Mostly people have no option but to buy what is there at the price.

There is, however, an issue around what we as a nation want. If we are prepared to accept rotten design because we want the cheapest possible solution that's what we get. These things do not happen overnight. There is an element of culture change. The Commission for Architecture and the Built Environment did a study across the region for 2005/06 and found that only 18% of the developments were of a sufficiently good standard. If we as the public care about our environment we have to put pressure on the decision makers to make sure we get what we want.

Footnotes:

Leonora Rozee worked as a planning inspector for 18 of her 24 years before becoming the Planning Inspectorate's Deputy Chief Executive and Director of Policy. She was seconded to the former office of the Deputy Prime Minister in 2003/4 to work on the new development plan system for England and Wales which is now in place.

National Planning Policy Statement 1: Delivering Sustainable Development
Key principles: "Planning policies should promote high quality inclusive design in the layout of new developments and individual buildings in terms of function and impact, not just for the short term but over the lifetime of the development. Design which fails to take the opportunities available for improving the character and quality of an area should not be accepted."

The Planning Summer School, of which Leonora Rozee is president, is an educational charity and runs a 4-day summer school every year – one for elected members and one for planners – on a range of matters associated with planning.

Ms Rozee also chairs a project on Mediation in Planning, looking at how mediation could be another tool which helps to bring disparate bodies together. I considers how, instead of operating within the current rather confrontational system, a dialogue can be developed by working more collectively to find solutions to delivering major developments in local areas.

Defining good design – Who has got it right? The Royal Town Planning website www.rtpi.org.uk shows its planning awards and examples of good design.

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