

## **Stratford upon Avon Society**

Workshop on Housing Design  
29<sup>th</sup> October 2009

A Workshop on Housing Design was held by the Society at the Shakespeare Centre on October 29. Its aim was to examine ways of achieving better design and quality in future neighbourhood developments round Stratford.

The 70 delegates included leading local councillors, planners, developers, architects, engineers, contract managers, planning inspectors and urban designers, with visitors from neighbouring councils and civic societies.

The subject is particularly relevant in planning for the future when Stratford is expected to have to accommodate a large increase in housing. It may not be feasible to fight the numbers, but it is possible to ensure that the design and quality of the buildings is such that people will be proud to live in them.

### **Introduction**

Sir Brian Follett, the Society's president, opened the workshop by pointing out that despite the recession, it was important to plan now for the time when the current moratorium is lifted. Many of the 10,000 new houses scheduled for the district were likely to be built round Stratford and while environmental and energy efficiency requirements might affect design, new development should enhance the town and be planned to create good places to live.

He suggested that in order to ensure good design and high quality developments, a Design Champion should be appointed by the District Council to help steer a reconsideration of the district's design guidelines and encourage cooperation between planners, designers and developers.

District Council leader, Councillor Les Topham, supported the concept of a Design Champion and said that he would ensure that the Council did everything possible to see that future designs were compatible with Stratford's special environment. Councillor George Atkinson, Portfolio Holder for Planning, also promised to take the proposal of a designated Design Champion further.

### **Delivering Sustainable Urban Extensions**

The first presentation was made by James Hulme, Director of Policy and Research at The Prince's Foundation. He told the meeting that sustainable communities of the future needed to be accessible without dependence on the motor car and future developments should ensure that schools, shops and workplaces were reachable within no more than a ten-minute walk.

Architects and developers needed to take account of the changes that are occurring in the environment by adopting new technology in buildings and the surrounding environment and the best way of achieving consensus was Enquiry by Design. This was a collaborative planning approach which brought together

planners, architects, developers and, most importantly, the local community. The housing industry needed to counter the effects of the recession by adjusting its attitudes and avoiding the “us and them” adversarial attitude to planning.

In future, he went on, design of individual houses would have to take account of their entire energy consumption in order to address the question of low carbon emission and the way we generate power in this country. However, we need to focus on the core points that are currently left out of the Government’s Code for Sustainable Homes. These included:

- The Prince’s Trust own core principles of the natural house
- Low Impact/Long Life
- Reducing community footprint
- Deliverable/Desirable houses
- Simple and replicable design - The Prince’s Trust is currently building a home for the future on The British Research Establishment Innovation Park at Watford. This paired dwelling demonstrates that a simple approach to building, employing natural materials and ‘passive’ energy solutions, can meaningfully reduce the carbon load of future housing

### **Housing, Communities and Place – joining up the practice.**

In the next presentation, Julia Ellis, Chief Executive of Midlands Architecture and the Designed Environment (MADE), continued the theme that there was an extraordinary amount of evidence that good design was crucial to a better quality of life. She pointed to successful examples of working with young people who, through a creative and positive agenda, had replaced areas where the prevailing ethos had been anti social behaviour with environments which reflected their identity in a positive and enjoyable way.

Good design, she said, was right even in a recession when people have more time to be selective, more opportunity to choose and time to put design at the forefront of what they desire.

However, a Regional Housing Audit of housing development set against Building for Life criteria by the Commission for Architecture and the Built Environment (CABE) over the previous three years showed that in the West Midlands only 15% were good and half of schemes were rated as poor.

Describing the function of CABE Design Review Panels (national and regional) she said they were made up of interdisciplinary groups giving local planning authorities and developers impartial independent advice. This advisory role contributed to built design in the region and in 2008 55% of proposals to the Panel were residential and 66% came from local authorities.

The Panels carry out site visits or see a video of the proposals and bear the following points in mind:

- In looking at the whole built environment you have to look beyond the “red line”. Buildings can be too large for their surrounds and too much can be crammed into an inappropriately small space.
- There is a failure by local authorities to give design guidance which can be ignored even when it is there.
- The power of the road is above everything else.
- Landscape architects often not included in the design process.
- Build for Life is part of the West Midlands Spatial Strategy which means it has to be incorporated into planning policies.

### **The Developer’s Perspective**

James Stevens, Strategic Planner for the Home Builders’ Federation, putting the case for the developer, said that a choice had to be made between superlative design or something more modest where people could afford to live. Design had to compete with price, location, number of bedrooms, access to good schools and services. Good design came well down the list of a purchaser’s priorities. A survey in 2007/08 had shown that 70% of new house buyers said they would buy from the same builder again.

He pointed out that the cumulative effect of regulatory requirement, plus those to come over the next seven years, including revisions to building regulations, meant that few residential sites would be viable without large amounts of public subsidy. It would be a long while before recovery was sufficient to meet all regulatory demands.

Total development costs, he said, now exceed sales revenue which has to include sufficient enticement to landowners to sell their land. It was also important to bear in mind the following points:

- High density had become politically acceptable as it was then not necessary to use greenfield sites.
- Housing recovery may rely either on improvement to the supply and affordability for residents or new sources of funding to pay for the Government’s policy demands. In some instances - the provision of social housing, for example - Councils see particular policies as non negotiable.
- The demands made by Government and local authorities were introduced during a period of prosperity. They seemed acceptable at the time but are not possible now if housing supply is to be addressed.

- External appearance should be in keeping with the area but further demands other than those set out in the Building Regulations should not be made.
- Difficult choices have to be faced if developers are to continue making contributions to capital funding of schools and hospitals, affordable housing, public art and meeting zero carbon homes by 2016.

### **Upton Case Study – Enquiry by Design**

Erica Davies, Project Manager, Homes and Communities Agency, described the mechanics used in an urban extension at Upton, which promoted best practice in sustainable urban growth. This had been undertaken in partnership with Northampton Borough Council and the Prince's Foundation, as well as English Partnerships (now Housing and Communities Agency) as landowner.

It was a successful example of Enquiry by Design (EbD), referred to above by James Hulme, and was a week-long event attended by all relevant parties, including residents. A truly collaborative approach

The Upton Working Group was then set up to develop the principles set out at the EbD and a variation was agreed to move the local centre from the centre of the development to its edge, thus providing an active focus not only for Upton but for future developments

A separate Upton Steering Committee oversaw the development and together with the Working Group maintained a high degree of ongoing commitment to fulfill the original aspirations of the EbD.

The Section 106 commitments required, among other things, 22% affordable housing (no more than three affordable homes grouped together) and a Sustainable Urban Drainage System.

Local individuality was included in the brief and the colours of the Northampton Shoe Factory buildings were reflected in the final design of the project. A further important factor was an aim to reduce speed without road signage and following the principles of Secured by Design. Buses are well used and have been running at 20 minute intervals since the first 10 homes were completed

### **Accordia Case Study – The Recognition of Excellence**

Simon Payne, Director of Environment and Planning, Cambridge City Council, presented a case study of an award winning development by Accordia.

In Cambridge, he said, a strong commitment to high quality urban design was at the forefront of all planning. The City Council gave an annual award for higher quality design to recognise excellence, had a review panel on design and conservation and a joint urban design team to promote inspirational design.

A Design Brief was put together for the Accordia scheme which gave guidance on local character, not only of the site itself but of the centre of Cambridge and surrounding area as well. The result was a fairly restricted approach to the number of parking spaces (28% of people in Cambridge travel by bike to work), and a quality living environment with internal layouts that could easily be changed. The brief also included copper clad roofing and an emphasis on mature trees and sustainable drainage.

There were specific reasons why the project was successful:

- The character and quality of the site – defining what needed to be protected.
- The Design Brief – an important role for the Local Authority and an opportunity for community groups to be involved.
- Total commitment to high quality design from the architects, their clients, the local councillors and the officers.
- Defining the build quality and maintenance regime

In order to achieve these aims a Quality Charter was produced based on

- Community - where people live out of choice
- Connectivity - well connected places for people to get to work, school and services using sustainable modes of transport.
- Climate – anticipating climate change and minimizing the impact of such disasters as flooding.
- Character – distinctive neighbourhoods where people create pride of place

Anticipating the arguments that developers might put to local planning authorities, Simon Payne gave an example of how strong leadership had succeeded in Cambridge. Faced with unacceptable proposals, the Portfolio holder for Planning had said, “This is the biggest residential site in the city – and the best. If the developers think they can get away with mediocre quality or pastiche they must think again. What the planning committee wants is something new and bold and worthy of the great city Cambridge is and if we don’t get it we will keep referring the proposals back until we do get it.”

The interesting outcome, said Mr Payne, was that instead of tweaking the plans in house, the developers then went to outside architects to head the re-design of the scheme. They analysed the character of the surrounding area, incorporated green spaces to create a ‘living in a garden’ landscape, achieved a density of 40 dwellings per hectare, including rented social housing, increased the market value of the houses and eventually became the first housing scheme in the UK to win the prestigious RIBA Sterling Prize.

## Group Sessions

After the Presentations the delegates were divided into five discussion groups to exchange views on

- (1) Density of dwellings, open space and landscaping.
- (2) The settings of houses in relationship to other buildings and focal points.
- (3) The movement of cars, pedestrians, access to amenities and connection to town centres.
- (4) Planning obligations and their effect on unfavourable market conditions; the scope of planning authorities.
- (5) The effect of energy saving measure on the appearance of developments – roof solar panels and heat exchangers.

The outcome of these discussions was a firm emphasis on the need for pre-planning by the Council in consultation with developers and community groups. This might include:

- Site specific planning guidelines reflecting the topography, ecology and existing transport connections
- Seizing the initiative from developers so that they have to justify their plans in the light of broad proposals from the Council rather than the Council having to comment on and tweak developers' plans
- The preparation by the Council of a framework for the urban growth of the town which might, for example, be on the basis of a largely pedestrianised centre with peripheral parking and plenty of flexible bus links.
- Strong action to provide for community development – for example by using some 106 money to develop community facilities and perhaps setting up residents associations.
- Consideration of achieving sustainable development by using methods such as insulation, which have a long life and scarcely affect the appearance of houses, rather than technological fixes such as heat exchangers which will need replacement and may soon be superseded.
- The retention of existing trees and greenery and the provision of open space must be considered as they are essential for the health and enjoyment of families.

## Summing Up

Pat Reid, Stratford District Council's Head of Planning Services, summed up the event by outlining some lessons for the future.

"The key is community engagement," he said. "We must collaborate with local communities from the beginning and we need bold leadership from officers and

members. The developers, too, need certainty, consistency and transparency.

“Good design doesn’t happen by accident. It is dogged hard work by all those involved in the process. From conception to end it has to be managed and that involves all aspects of the environment from green spaces and cycle routes to health and education.

“We therefore need to work in partnership. One local authority can’t do everything on its own – it must do it in partnership and share expertise and resources and skilled staff.

“One of the ways of involving everyone would be to have a charter which all participants agree to. The suggested Design Champion could be the person to create the framework for the process of engaging all groups and giving them a role.

“Every application that comes forward is an opportunity and we have to ask ourselves what quality does Stratford want and how can we achieve it? We have to make sure we get it right.”

Mr Reid complimented the Society on the considerable success of the Workshop, which was organised by general committee member Peter Burgess. The Society is also indebted to the Rookes Memorial Trust for its contribution of £500 towards the costs of holding the event, and to the District Council for providing the sandwich lunch and refreshments during the day.