

## Summary of Session: 18 June 2015 'Building for Life'

### 1. Introduction by David Birkbeck of Design for Homes

David Birkbeck set up Design for Homes as a social enterprise in 2000 with the aim of providing research into what residents want that developers can afford to provide, essentially all those little bits that add or destroy value like storage, daylight, noise transfer and the cost and layout of shared areas.

To address these he wrote the Building for Life set of design prompts which John Prescott adopted in 2003 as the measure of good housing for his Sustainable Communities Plan. He later prompted Prescott to set up the famous £60k housing competition and in recent years has been advising Government on providing for senior housing - he coined the term HAPPI (housing an Ageing Population: Panel for Innovation - which has been virtually the only housing policy of the 2009 Labour Government to survive to now).

He has been director for the Government's 67-year-old Housing Design Awards since 2005, the most seriously assessed and researched 'awards' ([www.hdawards.org](http://www.hdawards.org)) whose judges include David Lunts of the GLA and Louise Brooke Smith of the RICS. He sits on an HCA advisory board for design and sustainability.

David has recently rewritten the Building for Life matrix for the era of the NPPF – Building for Life 12. It has been formally adopted by both the last Coalition Government in its Housing Strategy and the current Conservative one as a proxy for design quality for large-scale development, such as Ebbsfleet. It is also core to the guidance for delivering homes under the imminent Starter Homes Initiative. It has the support of several leading plc house builders - Barratt has formally committed to build every one of its 400 developments a year to its tests - and about 50 LPAs use it in their plan policy.

### 2. Key points in Presentation

- The importance of Street definition (through boundary treatment and obvious demise of property); Pedestrians; cars being overlooked; Bin storage.
- There are too many developers using cheap materials and creating ant-social places; service boxes are slapped on as an afterthought and not designed in beforehand; bus stops are often located in isolated spots, which discourage the use of public transport.
- David's Big 4 are: 1. Parking; 2. Storage of bins and bikes; 3. Landscaping; 4. Threshold to Homes.

- There is a real need for adequate, appropriate parking. In the “Space to Park” survey conducted in February 2014 – a huge sample in Kent of 408 schemes, it was found that 80% of people were happy with their home, but 75% were very unhappy with parking. Poundbury worked so well because the parallel parking at the front worked well for residents.
- One of the damaging impacts of localism has been the increase in the number of recycling bins required by individual councils (parts of Newcastle have 9) and how one designs for it. And why are bike stores so frequently located on the wrong site, where nobody would actually leave an expensive bike to be stolen?
- However, there are those that are upping their game: Joseph Rowntree Foundation have designed a discreet holding pen for wheelie bins; Barratt have their modular bin store; Grosvenor Estate have designed alley ways into their Chatham development with an attractive door that closes on the hidden bins until collection days; Berkeley Homes Greenwich scheme include stores and landscaped areas. Design for Homes ran “Avoiding Rubbish Design”, which took place in February 2015 for NHBC Foundation to help address these problems.
- Landscaping is important and needs to be respected as a basis of character, along with a process in place for managing; and the fronts and communal areas to flats need safe areas for parents with prams and children’s paraphernalia, etc.
- The threshold to homes is very often ignored by developers even though it is the interface to the public realm. When you think that a house costs perhaps £110,000 to build, very often the HCA or similar will budget £10 for the threshold with the expectation that the resident will add their own finish.
- A system for accrediting schemes and testing against design prompts is in place; applicants pay £630 accreditation fee to a local design network office and that puts the qualifying scheme on the website for marketing and consumer choice.
- Government adopted it for 200,000 Starter Homes, and the Welsh government has adopted it. The campaign has started to get further traction; the design prompts are in the London Plan; 50 local planning authorities have them in their plan policy; developers such as Redrow, Barratt, Crest, Taylor Wimpey, Lovell’s and Blue Print have come on board, with ‘large-scale’ sites such as Ebbsfleet, and other types of body, notably Swindon Forward getting involved.

### 3. Key points in discussion

- An example was given of the Liverpool rope works streets, where the local kids 'took possession of the streets' – their playground – and that these were 'spaces with meaning'; you can't just 'create' space.
- Designers are bad at services, parking, public realm; and there has in fact been an 'abandonment of the public realm'.
- The consumer must be at the heart of development – build what people want and they will maintain it. In the same way, we are seeing that by linking business aims to property it is increasing commercial space productivity.
- Housing associations are notoriously obsessed with costs and not with value.
- Most developers really don't care and are cost driven, leaving the public realm to be done off the architects own bat. There is a necessity for these issues to be taken up by the local authorities, but do they have the skills – it's complex?
- Quality standards are up against vested interests: Local authorities want to increase the number of homes and the land owner wants to fit in as many as they can. The design and access statements come down to money in the end.
- How do you sell the idea of further development to the public and help councils sell the idea to those residents that are already living in areas? Is it a change of planning committee or parking scheme to get through planning – there are blockages to overcome. There should be a 'great mistakes' document that comes out of a 'dish the dirt' session – a 10 minute interlude as part of the assessment.
- 'Building for Life' will work as a guarantee and adds value for the re-sale in the private sector, and should be applied nationally in order to give certainty – no race to the bottom – and attach it to the NPPF as a baseline for quality.
- There is a framework for quality in place, but the system fundamentally fails. How can one establish this as something planners could use? The focus can go when one is trying to deal with too many things.
- Cultural issues, as well as land constraints and density, along with space for everything – more land for provision, or bad design.
- There are developers that have dedicated large teams of urban designers that do exemplary work on layouts and plot definition, and others that just do land deals.
- Inchoate anti car group think – people do need cars. There is a squeeze on car ownership versus car use, which is a function of prosperity.
- Cars are just one dynamic – there are schemes that are suburban in character, or with high density, where the public realm is appalling.
- Islington and other inner London boroughs are activating their ground floors (old garages) by using a bit of innovation.
- The campaign has begun to get more councils on board, and a dedicated minister. We need a 'Nigella' to lead the campaign.