

Building Better, Building Beautiful?

With “beauty” back on the agenda, will design quality be the lynchpin that makes new housing popular? The Government certainly hopes so, as evidenced by its “Building Better, Building Beautiful” commission¹. Headed up by Roger Scruton as Chair, the commissioners comprise a team of professionals from the built environment, who will be reporting to the Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government, James Brokenshire, who considers the commission will play a crucial role in delivering more homes, which are *beautiful* and therefore *popular*. The Commission’s primary concern is how to deliver “beautiful” housing at the scale of new communities. But is ‘beauty’ the right focus?

Beauty; ‘a combination of qualities, such as shape, colour, or form, that pleases the aesthetic senses, especially the sight’².

The term “beauty” does a disservice to the many benefits that can stem from well-designed new communities; the quality of life, health and wellbeing of individuals is heavily influenced by our built and natural environment. In my view, there are three common strands which encompass this much broader scope of design quality:

- (i) internal space standards.
- (ii) A restrained colour palette and *quality* building materials.
- (iii) the landscape and public realm setting, within which buildings are sited.

The rudiments of good planning and urban design are to deliver better places for people. Good design, as much as people implore it as subjective, is far to the contrary. Take the two images below of two residential developments in the UK at opposite poles of the design quality spectrum. These examples exemplify why we should strive for high-quality and what can result if it’s not afforded enough attention.



Tackling the challenge of poor-quality design from the perspective of the public, architects and planners, the Fundamentals of Beauty debates³ this year focussed on the ways in which the Government’s latest commission, could deliver on its ambitions. A thread which ran through the debates was the importance of space standards – from decent ceiling heights, to preventing the overcrowding of the most vulnerable in our society. This is a key measure which could help to deliver housing which is functional and sustainable in the long-term. The adoption of the ‘optional’ space standards has to-date been limited due to the lack of local authority resources to implement locally.

¹ <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/building-better-building-beautiful-commission-draft-terms-of-reference>

² Oxford Dictionaries definition of “Beauty”

³ <https://www.arts.ac.uk/colleges/central-saint-martins/whats-on-at-csm/fundamentals-beauty>

So, if we deliver well-designed developments, they're sure to be "*accepted and loved by those who live in and near them*"⁴, right? The concept of new development being "popular" with local communities⁵ will be a novel concept to many of us. So rarely does 'design' come to the heart of the debate. The principle of development - in any shape or form – is so often simply not accepted. From my own experience of working alongside award-winning architects, these developments are sadly no more 'popular' to the general public. So, is the commission trying to achieve too much?

Grayson Perry's insights⁶ went to the core of this issue – the only people who take the time to comment on a planning application are those "negs" who are fundamentally opposed to it. So, should the commission also focus on how the wider demographic of society can engage in the planning process? Ask a young child, a "millennial" trying to get on the housing ladder or anybody with the slightest interest in design, what they think new quality housing means to them and you'll likely get a very different perspective.

Planning is inherently a political process, but I can't help but think that the planning system needs to be radically changed to make it less about the views of the vocal minority (or even those seeking to get re-elected) and more about those most impacted by the decisions made about future communities.

Given the intent of the commission, it does seem a little contrived that there appears to be no opportunity for built environment professionals or the public to input their thoughts into the commission – so can the recommendations truly reflect popular consent on *beauty*?

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⁴ Communities Secretary Rt Hon James Brokenshire MP; <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/commissioners-appointed-to-new-home-design-body>

⁵ Paragraph 124 of the National Planning Policy Framework states "*Good design is a key aspect of sustainable development, creates better places in which to live and work and helps make development acceptable to communities*"

⁶ The Fundamentals of Beauty: The Planners, Central Saint Martins, 21 February 2019