

Urban Design—The “New Agenda” in Practice

By Martin Crookston¹

“Design-led”?

The Urban Task Force (UTF) report² *“Towards an Urban Renaissance”* says, at the start of Chapter 2, that “successful urban regeneration is design-led”. This provoked a lot of reaction—from those who felt that it belittled the crucial economic and social responses that have to lie behind urban regeneration; from those who saw it as the predictable outcome of a report by a group of metropolitan designer luvvies; and so on.

What it does reflect, I believe, is the distinction that Richard Rogers made, at one of our Task Force meetings, between the *art* of design—broadly, its aesthetics—and the *science* of design—again broadly, making things work. A traffic junction, for example, can be well or badly designed: it may look lousy, and it may not work well. And those things, though not irrevocably connected, are nonetheless not unconnected either.

So it’s not just about buildings; it’s not just about what things look like; it’s not just about new development, but about repairing past mistakes as well.

And it’s therefore not just for architects: we are all urban designers, if we affect the built environment and the public realm that we all share—whether we’re architects, planners, surveyors, developers or even lawyers. We can do it well, or badly.

In this paper, I look at how the new agenda is affecting day-to-day practice—quoting cases, or at least examples, where I can. To explain the background, I review what urban design is all about, and some of the key design approaches that the Urban Task Force, and subsequently Government guidance, have been pushing us to adopt.

Why does it matter?

The burden of the Rogers/Task Force message is—good design is a necessary, though not of course sufficient, condition for urban renaissance. Without it, we will not create the quality that will endure. We can provide jobs in new schemes, or homes in new developments; but if they are not well designed they will not stand the test of time, and once they are not the newest offer, in the most-recently-opened-up location, they will lose their shine and start the long process of decline into mediocrity that is so familiar from much of our towns, cities and suburbs. And that’s not Renaissance; it’s a temporary holding operation.

Where did it all go wrong? “Deconstructing” design

The curious thing is that this should all seem so difficult and controversial. This is partly because of the mystification that occurs when experts take over. I am not advocating a “return to common sense”—common sense can be greatly over-rated, as a provider of deceptively simple answers to complex interactions (namely the common sense answer to congestion, which is to widen the M25 to 4, then 5, then presumably 6 lanes . . .). But still, we can use our own experience and understanding of

¹ Director of Llewelyn-Davies; and Member, Urban Task Force 1998–2000.

² Urban Task Force, *Towards an Urban Renaissance*, (DETR, E & F Spon, 1999).

places to help us work out what it is that “works” about a place, what it is that we like, what it is that we define as high quality and good design. As lay people, we can go to a place and rapidly judge whether or not it has that quality and enjoyability that makes it successful (probably more when we’re on holiday, and not sussing it out for a client, one might hazard).

Even today, we know what works, what is “liveable”, “high quality”, “well-designed”. We recognise it all over the country:

- in Canonbury (Georgian and early Victorian) and Ealing (comfortable Edwardiana);
- in Jesmond (stylish inner suburb of Newcastle);
- in the town centres of industrial Halifax or mediaeval St. Albans.

And although some of the elements of the successful mix will of course be purely social, some of them will be to do with its physical organisation, its form, its layout, its functioning, its appearance: in a word, its design.

From that relatively non-expert, “as-experienced”, starting point, one can then use the technical skills of urban design to deconstruct some of the elements. We can analyse a place in terms of its:

- *Site and Setting*: a town that we like will have a sense of place. It draws on where and what it is, and on the way in which the forms of the buildings, and the spaces between them, play off their setting. Britain’s best example is probably Edinburgh. It has a unique natural setting; and the Middle Ages, the seventeenth, eighteenth and the nineteenth centuries each added elements. The result is a popular, multi-purpose city of beauty and style, with a robust and long-enduring form and fabric; a location for many different activities, and with a wide mixture of housing tenures. Not everywhere can be an Edinburgh; but everywhere has the potential to be itself, and for designers to respect its site and its setting.
- *Context and Character*: the successful places also have a distinct character. 200 miles to the south of Edinburgh, for example, we might consider Halifax: a middle-sized textile town which has changed its livelihood, and many of its town centre’s roles. Yet it has maintained a continuity of layout, scale, and respect for its Yorkshire Pennine feel. No doubt mistakes were made; but compared with many similar places, and several of its neighbours, its choices over the last 30 years have been the right ones; and this is reflected in its popularity as a location.
- A third element is *The Architecture Itself*. This is more difficult, in some ways, because of the danger of arguments about style and appearance. Yet it is an essential part of the British urban tradition, at its most fluent in Georgian times: the use of a simple modular and flexible system, varying from two to five storeys along streets, squares, crescents, circuses: Bloomsbury in Central London, Dublin’s south side, Edinburgh’s New Town, all show how this created harmony, and it also gave adaptability. Georgian London shows how varied and subtle the choices are, within the apparently restricted range of forms. We don’t have to copy this, but we can learn from it, and from good modern practice in for example Holland, which contains some of the same thinking without aping the forms.
- *The Public Realm*: at their best, English towns have excellent public spaces of all kinds. The best of our town parks—and it can be Golders Hill Park in North London, or Mesnes Park in Wigan—are of a quality admired all over the world. But the public realm is much more than the green space. Where we are perhaps less comfortable is in creating and maintaining the smaller pieces of the public domain. We have no real equivalent of the series of tiny public spaces (small squares or “placettes”) which make it a series of successive delights to walk through Aix-en-Provence or Prague. We handle clumsily the bits of pavement space that are

not quite a street, not quite a square. Our towns and cities are filled with the clutter that results from a failure of design: our trademark is the “cattle-pen”, corralling pedestrians into inconvenient manoeuvres, filling the space we all share, with obtrusive and badly-thought-out junk in the name of “safety”. Here again, this is not just about the “art” or aesthetics of design: the science of the design is wrong too, because the functions are not in balance. Specifically, the needs of movement on foot and by car are not being handled in a way which reflects what towns and cities are *for*, and how they actually work best.

- *Fineness of Grain*: often, a key to a town’s feeling liveable, friendly and fun, is its “grain” or block size. Small building plots and short blocks allow frequent linkages. They give a flexible grid: so pedestrians can choose varied and interesting routes; they go somewhere not into dead-ends; they provide multiple frontages for sales, views and access. This grid does not have to be rectangular. Far from it: look at the mediaeval street patterns—small like Wareham in Dorset or bigger like Salisbury: twisty and apparently irregular, but still a grid. It is particularly interesting, too, that the American writer Jane Jacobs made small and varied blocks one of the key elements of what was successful about New York—and especially Manhattan—when she was analysing “*The Death & Life of Great American Cities*”.³
- *Transport Systems*: linkage is of course about more than movement on foot. It is about transport systems too. For towns and cities to work well, they have to provide good connections of all kinds, not just on foot. Here, the Task Force concluded—not too controversially, I suspect—that we have not done well in Britain. Since the 1940s, we have seen a long, and ultimately fruitless, struggle to cope with unlimited car use. Yet better practice exists, all over continental Europe: for example, the French city of Montpellier has intelligently and successfully balanced pedestrians’ priority with limited car access, high-quality paving, lively shopping environment with direct tram penetration, and a frequent integrated public transport grid to provide cross-city links between key locations such as the University, city centre, and SNCF station. The Task Force report illustrates Strasbourg and Nantes as well. The problem isn’t not knowing the answer. The problem is our own institutional decisions: the wrong organisations, doing the wrong job, with the wrong remit: from Railtrack and the SRA, through the TOCs, to the bus companies, to the Railway Inspectorate. We have made life more difficult for ourselves than we need have done: and the effect it will have on turning our cities round is that the credibility of the non-car, non-dispersal option will be that much less.⁴
- *Intensity of Use*: a seventh element in the successful place, and a very important one, is intensity. I use the word in a probably-doomed attempt to get away from “density”. The irrelevance of density *per se* is familiar to anyone who’s done a planning course. Nonetheless, it is a concept and a label which is loaded, for the English, with the emotional overtones of high-rise, overcrowding and poverty. In making the case for relaxation of density standards to the Commons Environment, Transport and Regional Affairs Committee, I had a briefly-celebrated run-in with the Chair, Gwyneth Dunwoody MP, which illustrated the strength of these associations: her: “*medical evidence that if you keep putting rats into a smaller and smaller space in the end they start killing one another*” versus my remark that “*the rats analogy does not help you very much with humans actually*”.⁵

But *Intensity* is a serious point. The towns that we like, the ones we think “work”, are quite

³ Jane Jacobs, *The Death & Life of Great American Cities*, (Penguin reissue 1994).

⁴ See commentary by Professor Philip Goodwin: “The Transport White Paper one year on”, *Local Transport Today*, (July 29, 1999).

⁵ House of Commons Select Committee on Environment Transport & The Regions: *report*.

intensive in the way they use land—the close succession of activities one after another—the compactness and convenience that they offer. Many of our cities are now too strung out, too loose in form, to be of much interest to anyone—they are simply too hard work to use. This is not just an issue for the city centres. Even a mainly residential area—Holloway in Inner London, for example—shows the benefits of higher housing densities than we customarily now build to: convenient transport (bus, tube, rail nearby), variety and accessibility of shops and services, private and public spaces interwoven; it is a place of choice.

- *Mixing Activities* is another key ingredient. Liveable towns and cities are not a series of single-use zones. Leeds has recognised the power of an attractive new mixed quarter, growing The Calls & Riverside district organically as a lively mixed-use extension of the city centre, from the Corn Exchange through railway arches to the Aire & Calder Navigation and beyond. Crammed with entertainment, media and creative businesses, hotels, housing, shops and visitor attractions, it has given the centre of Leeds the room to expand in an interesting, flexible way.
- And finally, *Mixing Tenures*: It also seemed to the Urban Task Force that a successful town is one which includes everyone. This should mean interweaving housing for all sorts of people; not breaking them down into one-class ghettos, whether upper-class or lower-class. The best recent examples of such mixture that we saw were in The Netherlands, where in recent housing schemes in Amsterdam, The Hague and Rotterdam, who was buying, who renting privately, who a municipal tenant, was impossible to tell; the urban quality was good for everyone.

Reconstructing as principles

We can, then, analyse and “deconstruct” the good characteristics that people instinctively recognise. There are certain basic rules of composition and urban form, which lend themselves to civilised urban living. We can identify them. We can use them to think about what works and doesn’t work. We can draw principles from them, for better future practice. To provide a set of ground-rules, the UTF drew out a set of basic principles for urban design. They were based on the sort of thinking that I have outlined—on saying “we did it before, we can do it again”; not on saying “all our towns are terrible, let’s copy Barcelona, or Prague, or Boston”. The Urban Task Force’s 10 principles for Urban Design were⁶:

- *Respecting the Site and Setting*: design from a basis of understanding, don’t import standard solutions.
- *Respecting Context & Character*: not slavish reproduction, but understanding the vernacular and local.
- *Priority to the Public Realm*: this is vital: There must be a hierarchy of spaces; buildings must relate to them; otherwise we just get SLOAP—the “Space Left Over After Planning”.
- *Ensuring Linkage and “Fine Grain”*: make walking easy—by design in new development; by making easier routes in existing places, which rebalance as between pedestrian and car.
- *Using Land Efficiently*: look for intensity; relate it logically to transport and services; stop panicking about density.
- *Mixing Activities*: accept co-existence of most modern activities; design out problems; but look for genuine interactions, not tokenistic “mix”.

⁶ Urban Task Force, *op. cit.*

- *Mixing Tenures*: avoid single tenure, build in flexibility at block, street, neighbourhood levels.
- *Building Durably*: adaptable flexible models—learn for example from our Georgian past, the Dutch present.
- *Building to High Quality*: durable in a second sense—built to last, not a one-shot 30-year life.
- *Respect the Environmental Stock*: all development has some impact: minimise it, maximise sustainability.

The Task Force report explains these principles, and explains why we believed that this approach is a vital part of re-establishing healthy, lively cities at the core of our society and economy. It brought forward a whole slate of related recommendations: many now finding their way into policy.

Emergence and promotion of the “new agenda”

The Task Force report was I believe very important in the emergence of the new planning agenda, and was in many ways a “hinge” between the previous era and the approach we now have, but it did not come out of the blue. As Tory Secretary of State, John Gummer was extremely interested in design issues, with publications such as *Design in Town & Country*,⁷ and he also pushed environmental concerns, sustainability and protection of local services up the agenda. English Partnerships,⁸ some of the forward-thinking local authorities, the Urban Villages Forum and perceptive developers were already picking up on a more design-conscious approach. And the very important DETR Guide *Places Streets & Movement*⁹ set out a more civilised way of thinking about highways interventions than in the Design Bulletin 32 note¹⁰ to which it is allegedly a “companion guide”.

But the Task Force report and its profile did put down a marker, and can be seen as the important hinge point. Since then the White Paper *Our Towns & Cities: the Future*¹¹ said “we want good planning and design in new development and renovation to be second nature for everyone, in both the public and private sectors” (p. 49). They want you to pay attention.

But the context also now includes the *Urban Design Compendium*,¹² *By Design*,¹³ the forthcoming DETR housing design guidance that we are working on at Llewelyn-Davies, PPG 13 “Transport”,¹⁴ the setting-up of CABE, the growing market response to the opportunities, etc. . . . And of course PPG 3 “Housing”,¹⁵ in some ways the most important of the lot, so far.

Content—some of the issues

This paper has so far dealt in general and aspirational terms with some of the key variables, and how they are being promoted. It may be useful to look at what is actually being sought on some of the big issues.

Density: we can identify a simple continuum of the mass of suburban housing that we have been producing. The typical estates of the postwar era have been averaging around 22–25 dwellings per hectare (8–10 dwellings per acre).¹⁶ This is, perhaps surprisingly, less dense than much-maligned prewar

⁷ DoE, “Quality in Town & Country” design campaign 1995.

⁸ English Partnerships, *Time for Design—Good Practice in Building Landscape and Urban Design*, (1996).

⁹ Alan Baxter Associates, for DETR, *Places Streets & Movement: a companion guide to DB32*, (1998).

¹⁰ DoE, *DB32 Residential roads and footpaths: layout considerations* (1992).

¹¹ DETR, *Our Towns & Cities: the Future: delivering an urban renaissance*, (2000).

¹² Llewelyn-Davies, for EP, Housing Corporation & DETR, *Urban Design Compendium*, (London, 2000).

¹³ Rob Cowan & Urban Initiatives, for DETR/CABE: *By Design—urban design in the planning system: towards better practice*, (2000).

¹⁴ DETR: PPG 13 “Transport” (2001).

¹⁵ DETR: PPG 3 “Housing” (2001).

¹⁶ DETR 9 *Dwellings and Density Information*; and Exhibit 44 *The Density Gradient—notes for Urban Task Force*, (1998).

suburbia, which was typically at 30dph/12–13dpa. Victorian “inner” suburbia (Jesmond, Forest Hill) shows up at 30–42dph/15–18dpa (as built; often there are more actual dwellings now, because of conversions); the Georgian terraces (Canning Street in Liverpool 8) are in the 40–45dph/90–110dpa range. The chart in our first Residential Quality study¹⁷ for LPAC summarises and illustrates the range in London—up to a horrifying 834 habitable rooms per hectare (say 125 dpa) in the slums of W.8. UDPs in London and elsewhere still tend to set out ranges which stop well short of this—to no clear purpose, as we pointed out in our density study¹⁸ for DoE in 1998. The Urban White Paper (p. 43) quotes comparative densities and says that “in the past we have squandered land”. It seeks “efficient use of the available land . . .”; this “does not mean cramming people closer and closer together. It means development at reasonable densities . . .”. PPG 3 (p. 19) says that authorities must avoid developments at less than 30dph; encourage housing in the 30–50dph range; and look for greater intensity at places with good services and public transport. So we are moving right away from maxima, to a policy of “more in general” and “a lot more in particular places”. What this can mean, for private developers, is that Government policy may be behind them, rather than behind the local authority. In our most recent “SRQ” report for the London planners,¹⁹ we produced a matrix which can be used to demonstrate, in a carefully argued way, why a higher density than the initial indication would be acceptable. And it is not just the actual density figures themselves. If a Council’s plan has a minimum window-to-window distance laid down (as Reading’s does, for example²⁰), and Guidance is saying that good design rather than rigid standards can be used to avoid problems, then we have a situation where more housing can be created by skilled designers, in an acceptable way, if the system will let it happen.

Urban Capacity: this was a major push of the Urban Task Force, and has moved to the centre of policy and implementation. Thanks to the interest and support of the Joseph Rowntree Foundation and the U.K. Round Table on Sustainable Development, Llewelyn-Davies did a lot of the pioneering work on urban capacity methodologies²¹; indeed, I think it was primarily because of the practice’s expertise in the field that I was asked to join the Task Force. PPG 3 and the recent guide “Tapping the Potential”²² now set out clear expectations as to what LPAs should be doing in this area. The danger to watch out for is that it just becomes another mechanism—like the ritualised Housing Land Availability (HLA) assessments whose passing we all no doubt mourn. It is “potential” we are looking for, in a creative way; not just “capacity” as a numbers game; and not just a laborious and mechanistic churn through every one of the “sources” listed in guidance. Our mantra, expressed in one of the early studies, is “capacity is a matter of choice, not of fact”. A local authority that wants to find it will find a lot more than one that doesn’t; and developers, who are good at this, can and should push them all the way. We have some good examples from work with the Carvill Group, in Northern Ireland, where an enlightened developer is setting the agenda and forcing the pace. The planners’ role is to get and enforce quality, and that is what they should concentrate on.

Mixed Use: this is of course a “Good Thing”. The UTF report (p. 64) said “whether we are talking about mixing uses in the same neighbourhood, a mix within a street or urban block, or the mixing of uses within a building, good urban design should encourage more people to live near to those services which they require on a regular basis”. The White Paper (p. 44) refers to the section of PPG 3 which

¹⁷ Llewelyn-Davies with ETA and South Bank, for LPAC, *The Quality of London’s Residential Environment*, (1994).

¹⁸ Llewelyn-Davies for DETR, *The Use of Density as a Planning Tool*, (1998–2000).

¹⁹ Llewelyn-Davies: *Sustainable Residential Quality—exploring the housing potential of large sites*; for LPAC /DETR/ Housing Corporation/LT (2000).

²⁰ Reading Borough Council local plan.

²¹ See for example: *Providing More Homes in Urban Areas* (JRF, 1994), *Exploring Urban Potential for Housing—the Manual* (NWRRA, 1997), and *Housing and Urban Capacity* (U.K. Round Table, 1997).

²² URBED for DETR: *Tapping the Potential*, (2001).

“promotes mixed development, so homes are closer to jobs and services”. Local authorities, too, are keen to encourage mix. Three points: first, this is a topic with a fairly high hot air quotient. A site with a McDonalds, a B&Q, a budget hotel and 1500 parking spaces is not quite what Lord Rogers has in mind—but developers all over the country present schemes like this with a straight face, and may even *believe* it to be “mixed-use”. LPAs should be using the tests in the recent DETR report²³ to resist this nonsense, and to encourage genuine mixing of activity, use and facilities. Second, simple juxtaposition of uses with conflicting interests (for example, the gentrification of warehouse blocks in Bermondsey Street SE1) is not actually “mixed use” either, if it doesn’t involve any resolution, by good design, of the conflicts—and it may very soon result in the pre-existing commercial operators’ lives becoming impossible. And third, the blockages are more at the practical level now—of some institutional nervousness about funding (though that is relaxing), complexities of tenure especially where a residential freehold is involved, and the nitty-gritty of actually designing a building or scheme that works in a more complex rather than simple way.

High Buildings and “Pyramids of Intensity”: also back on the agenda, after decades of being out of favour, is building high. This is an interesting example of the “art of design/science of design” point. The Urban Task Force report (p. 64) urges an approach which relates intensive, and potentially high, development to “nodes” of high (public-transport) accessibility. The thinking is familiar from the California work of Peter Calthorpe,²⁴ and also the recent RICS study of Transport Development Areas.²⁵ So these are functional arguments—though not so much about height, as about mass or volume. At the same time we have architects wishing to build high, and to show their skills in more than just the fitting-into the surrounding fabric, with the building as Art-object: a reality of what architecture is, alongside its functional roles. This combines readily with their clients’ machismo, and sometimes too with municipal symbolism. So high buildings are back: and the “new urban agenda” seems to say two conflicting things about them: favourable in principle, for functional reasons; cautious, if we are trying to respect context and character. My view is that the only way to handle these choices is by good and comprehensive urban design studies of the whole context: to identify where high buildings could be located, be grouped, be landmarks; whilst respecting their surroundings, integrating at the street scale, and meeting logical functional tests of access and location. Just reacting ad-hoc to individual proposals is a recipe for messy solutions and long costly public inquiries (which of course *none* of us want, do we).

Parking: and then we have parking—the issue the English really, really care about. PPG 13 in its new form does move the approach in the direction sought by the Task Force, though notoriously its requirements in relation to retailing, which were already very undemanding, have been loosened even further. The PPG 13 “maxima” are inevitably very often being treated as the basic requirement. In theory at least, they are not; and it will be interesting to see if cases develop where evidence has been required to explain what the special reasoning is as to why the maximum should be provided, rather than somewhere within the indicated range. This is now not simply a matter of developers wanting more and councils trying to get less: the arguments vary from use to use, and from area to area, in an increasingly complicated way. From a broad design perspective, the three key targets are: not wasting scarce urban land on this ancillary use; providing the parking that is necessary in a well-integrated way; and remembering that the aim is to move people, not cars—so parking is a part of the solution, not the objective.

²³ Llewelyn-Davies & University of Westminster, for DETR: *Mixed Use Development* (forthcoming).

²⁴ Peter Calthorpe (1994): *The Next American Metropolis and Pedestrian Pockets—new strategies for suburban growth*, quoted in Bressi, “Planning the American Dream”; in Katz *The New Urbanism: towards an architecture of community*, (McGraw-Hill, 1994).

²⁵ RICS: *Transport Development Areas: a study into achieving higher density development around public transport nodes*, (2000).

Process—meanwhile, at the coalface . . .

Status of the Advice: I have quoted a deluge of documents so far, and not many of them have very specific formal status. The one that does, of course, is PPG 3. It is recent, clear, top-level government guidance. It tells you a lot, and promises more (on housing need assessments; on phasing; on the Greenfield Housing Direction). The White Paper is odd—it is “Government policy” all right—the first comprehensive urban policy statement for 25 years—but it doesn’t bear on anything specific, so it’s difficult to see how it helps in relation to cases. “By Design” and our “Urban Design Compendium” have some legitimacy (they are mentioned approvingly in the White Paper (p. 45) as good practice/benchmarks), but they are not really material considerations until and unless case-law evolves where they have been successfully used around the issues of design quality. PPG 1 “General Policy & Principles”,²⁶ which predates the Urban Task Force, was last revised in 1997, under Gummer, and reflects his interest in design (the “Background” section notes that it contains “fresh emphasis on mixed-use development and design”). It says four interesting, and perhaps contradictory things, about design:

- applicants should demonstrate “how they have taken account of urban design”—and paragraph 14 contains a definition of what is meant by the term urban design;
- authorities should “reject poor designs”; but
- they shouldn’t “concern themselves with matters of detailed design” (except where they would have a “significant effect” on the character or quality of an area); and
- they aren’t to refuse permission “on design grounds” unless there are exceptional circumstances, provided the design is consistent with relevant policies and/or SPG.

I return below to some of the problems that seem to arise in connection with this rather mixed set of messages.

The White Paper (p. 45) says that the Government “now intends to revise PPG 1”; it remains to be seen whether it will bear any resemblance to the “national urban design framework” urged by the Task Force² (p. 80).

Application of the Advice: I touched on the new urban capacity policy earlier. Its application in practice is already raising some interesting issues. My own experience from a recent Housing Round Table Session on a south-eastern UDP makes it apparent that, despite the very clear thrust of guidance, some Inspectors are still applying a very demanding test of “deliverability”, in terms of sites actually being ready for immediate development, before they will count them towards the housing supply: that is, they are still tending to act as though they were dealing with a HLA. But the whole point of the policy change is to accept the Task Force’s logic that, if you keep releasing more greenfield land because brownfield land is more difficult to develop, you will just make the difficult sites ever LESS deliverable. In a recent decision in Gravesham,²⁷ the Inspector’s critique of a Llewelyn-Davies capacity assessment, on this kind of grounds, was in fact overturned by the Government Office, and the appellant’s greenfield site refused permission (despite an earlier allocation for housing). I have also had an appeal for a high-density, high-rise housing scheme for the Peabody Trust, turned down, directly opposite an

²⁶ DoE: PPG 1 *General Policy and Principles*, (1997).

²⁷ GOSE (January 10, 2001): Appeal by the Sir James Colyer Fergusson Charitable Trust; site at Coldharbour Road/Wrotham Road, Gravesend; ref. APP/K2230/A/98/292697.

inner London tube station and on a busy bus route; where the feeling was rather that the Inspector used concerns over quite detailed (and probably resolvable) matters to mask a decision that he had arrived at intuitively, because he simply thought the density was “too high” (for what?). So there is a hearts and minds job to be done with many members of the planning profession, including some in the Inspectorate.

Detailed Design Control and Enforceability: in discussing PPG 1, I touched on the matter of control of detailed design. Some authorities are now seriously concerned about the inability to ensure that schemes are actually built as approved. This is not just about high-profile blocks where “name” architects have been replaced, once consent has been obtained, by cut-price jobbing practices who are being used to cut corners, costs and quality: though there is some evidence of that, rightly deplored in the trade press. It is also reported in, for example, Conservation Areas, where a design which was felt to have sufficient potential merit to justify demolition or substantial alteration turns out, as built, to have no such attributes. It is a Central London issue, but also noted in the West Midlands, Liverpool and Sheffield. There are a variety of hammers around to crack this nut, from sledge down to tack:

- some commentators have suggested that it needs a change in planning law, so that the practice which obtains the original permission has at least to sign off the detailed application (not inconceivable in a profession which is relatively highly regulated and registered, though with some danger of enshrining monopoly power);
- alternatively, better and more consistent use of conditions, Section 106 and even the Environmental Assessment Regulations could be sufficient—perhaps with a DETR practice guide to support it;
- or it may be argued that the powers are actually there, and that it is really a matter of local use of them: tough officer response, backed by political will, to ensure that developers and architects know the score;
- but of course this depends (*pace* PPG 1) on the Local Plan and SPG being strong and clear enough on this front to carry the message;
- and, again in the light of PPG 1, when the only changes before the Committee are actually design ones, the guidance does not appear to offer unequivocal support for a tough line. It should and that, in my opinion, is a minimum change to PPG 1’s next draft.

My personal feeling is that some of the problem—if it is one, and a lot of this could be argued to be anecdotal, not exhaustively researched—has its roots in loose handling of design at the outline stage: our experience, working closely with L.B. Greenwich on the Royal Arsenal master plan, has been that a lot of design-related information early on—setting standards, explaining concepts and establishing principles—helped them to allow a fairly flexible outline consent (in use terms) needed by the nature of the regeneration process, whilst being reassured that a quality benchmark was being set from the outset.

At the other end of the spectrum, though, and probably a familiar sort of tale to many, is the case which provoked the exchange between Minister and Chief Planning Officer quoted in “Planning”.²⁸ Out there in middle England (Wednesfield, a district of Wolverhampton), a developer proposed to pull down a large Edwardian bungalow and clear its setting of specimen trees, hedgerows and vegetation, in order to put up 11 standard-type detached two-storey houses around a cul-de-sac. The Council argued that the proposal failed to achieve good quality urban design, and would not retain enhance or create a sense of place or local distinctiveness. The Inspector concluded that it “would not cause harm to the character and appearance of the surrounding area and that it accords with the relevant provisions of the development plan. Whilst the Council’s general aims for better quality urban design are to be

²⁸ See, *Planning* February 2, 2001 “Raynsford slams Councils for using policy as a brake”.

welcomed, and are supported by current planning advice, I do not consider that they outweigh the relevant provisions of the development plan.”²⁹ In the Chief Planning Officer’s commentary, sent to the Minister after their conference exchange, he comments acidly that the Inspector “misread the policy as requiring new development to be of mediocre design and character if located within a mediocre area”. It is impossible to judge all the merits of any design-related case from a distance. But to me this case does have a lot of resonance: in particular, the underlying feeling, correctly identified by Wolverhampton, that there is a sort of “two-tier” set of standards being applied in daily decisions out there, despite the Government’s principle that good design matters everywhere.

CABE are, I believe, undertaking some research on the issue of design quality and how to sustain it through the successive stages of the development control process. This is very much to be welcomed, and is a good example of the sort of issue where this important and fairly new national body can help practitioners share experience and influence policy and guidance.

In Conclusion

In “Towards An Urban Renaissance”, pp. 50–51 look at “Regaining Our Urban Tradition”, and say *inter alia*:

“In England, we seem to have lost the art of designing cities which was once part of our rich urban tradition” . . . “For most of this century, English towns and cities have become more fragmented”

—*we’ve rather lost the plot*

“Our analysis of successful urban case studies emphasises how deeply quality of urban life is affected by good design”.

—*yes, it does matter*

“Many of the current problems in English towns and cities lie with the development professions and businesses, alongside those who regulate them”

—*we can all make a difference; all be urban designers*

“Improving the quality of design in English towns and cities is within our grasp”.

—*the task is not beyond us.*

Maybe this is all too much like “motherhood and apple-pie” for some people. Perhaps it is: but the problem is that too much of our development practice is still the opposite—whatever that is: mistresses and caviar, maybe?

We are still building the road-based shed-format developments which don’t relate to any street context and which deflect crucial demand from our central cities and towns; still putting up embarrassingly-poor short-life developments; still not insisting on the quality which, as I noted at the outset, we can recognise and do expect in other aspects of our life, when we are not at our desks or doing deals.

As a result, we continue to trundle down the road that Richard Rogers, early in the Task Force’s life, defined as one that we had seen down and could not afford to follow in the long term: and so we still need focus and effort from Government (strengthening PPG 1, forcing the pace with the Inspectorate and councils), the local authorities (insisting on quality and giving themselves the policy backing to do

²⁹ Planning Inspectorate (February 1, 2001): Appeal by Heathley Homes; site at The Garlands, Lower Prestwood Road, Wolverhampton; ref. APP/D4635/A/00/1051335.

so), and the industry (making choices as if they affected our own lives, not just the never-met “end users”).

The “new agenda” needs much more than just reports and advice: it needs daily and detailed application by all the players.