

## SELECT COMMITTEE ON THE BUILT ENVIRONMENT

### POSSIBLE QUESTIONS – SECOND SESSION, THURSDAY 10<sup>th</sup> DECEMBER

#### Urban design and the professions

#### Witnesses

- Simon Foxell, The Edge
- Barry Sellers, Urban Design Group

- I. Why do design standards in the built environment fall short of objectives? Should there be a stronger unified code for design standards at national level?

I interpret this as the 'standard of design' and there are a range of answers - one of the most cogent is Nikolaus Pevsner's analysis that "The English will spare no expense to get something on the cheap" an approach that makes getting good design so hard that it often only smuggled into projects despite the funder's wishes.

THE EDGE IS INTERESTED IN STANDARDS OF PERFORMANCE OF THE BUILT ENVIRONMENT, both buildings and infrastructure. Design is too loaded a term to be useful in this context and tends to be portrayed only in Manichaeian terms or, worse, solely as an output of creativity and invention.

- The construction industry's task is to find solutions to multi-faceted problems, often by bringing together a team of specialists to develop a collective response. A key part of the challenge is in the definition of the problem, setting the objectives and the outcomes required.
- Design aims to deliver specific outcomes in relation to predefined intent sometimes with added unexpected extras (both good and bad). We have two problems - very poor definition of intent through BRIEFING AND CLIENTING AND A LACK OF FEEDBACK from previous projects.
- The standard of design is often judged in the abstract and in comparison to our relatively scant knowledge of other similar projects
- Quality thresholds are possible and useful but are often specific and measurable such as the space standards in the 2014 Housing standards review or the insulation standards in building regulations.
- Process standards have also been introduced in recent years and these include scrutiny under the planning system, design review etc. – which we may get back to.
- We already have a set of national standards, mainly in the building regulations but also embedded in a range of other regulations and guidance. What has largely stopped is the desire to incrementally step them up in the light of evidence and improvements in skills and technology. This is something we need to recover.
- Standards are there to define a base level of provision and to stop the race to the bottom. Unfortunately they can also encourage widespread adherence to lowest standards and do not encourage many to go above and beyond (CfSH?).
- Guidance is useful to enable a collective understanding and to speed the process

The Edge takes the view that construction professionals need to find ways to enhance and develop higher standards than the legal minimum in both their built output and their working practices. But for this to happen it needs to support and encouragement of government.

2. Is the system of design review panels proving effective, and should more be done to promote them?

The system of design review and the value of 'challenge' in the system is a good one although quality is variable. We cited the example of the Cambridge Quality panel in our evidence. Lesson from the CQP include:

- Panels need to play the role of the independent (and fearless) critical friend to planners and developers etc. alike
- Importance of early reviews of proposals
- They need to focus on place more than on individual buildings
- Important role of masterplans
- Panels need to be cross disciplinary
- It is important to follow up, review and learn five years later
- Panels need to be paid to be valued

But DRPs should not be seen as a patch on a dysfunctional and under resourced planning system. Panels should aim to improve propositions, occasionally head them off at the pass but not act as the gateway to consent.

Where do we need DRPs most? Middlesborough?

DRPs should be accompanied and supported by project enabling.

3. What other measures can be taken to support cross-disciplinary working on design issues among built environment professionals? Is there a case for multi-disciplinary teams at local authority level?

Cross-disciplinary working within teams of professionals on individual projects works well and will be enhanced by the use of shared technical platforms such as BIM. The problems of inter-disciplinarity are at an organisational level, in siloed institutions and particularly in the education system.

If there is a problem it is one of a lack of continuity, as teams from one project will rarely work together on another – with the loss of their combined learning.

The Edge's recent report on the future of the professions, **COLLABORATION FOR CHANGE**, authored by Paul Morrell, strongly recommends that the institutions learn to work together as the norm through focusing on 6 areas that can only be addressed through joint working:

- Develop a joint code of ethics – to enable clarity in a tough market both at home and overseas
- Educating for a future in the design/construction/property industry that will be more flexible and will accommodate many different roles, skills and responsibilities over a working life.
- Jointly developing an evidence and knowledge base for professional expertise in the industry – perhaps sharing a research base – something we call The King's Fund for construction - and getting new research into practice far more quickly.
- Addressing reform of the industry to offer clients and society a much better deal from the industry.
- Closing the performance gap between what is promised and what gets delivered
- Formulating a detailed response to the challenge of climate change

PROFESSIONALISM AND PROFESSIONAL ORGANISATIONS PROVIDE AN EXTRAORDINARY RESOURCE to society in a role that is outside both public and private sectors. But professional bodies need to reform and government needs to develop a new and robust relationship with them that expects and values a significant contribution to the public good.

At present Government's default position is to seek (expensive) advice from one of the big four management consultants (Ernst & Young, KPMG, PWC, Deloitte). The Edge suggests that they would be better renewing the grand bargain with professional bodies.

On local authorities – they have a good track record of multi-disciplinary team working (Croydon) where an individuals skills and abilities are often rated more than their professional job title. Also in large firms. The problem here is far more of under resourcing to allow professional teams to work well and career progression.

*SJ: Information from Liz Kessler, who led the ECI New Deal for Communities: the fact that in her role she could work across the local authority's departments meant that she achieved what she did...no single department could have done it and the NDC was the mechanism for co-operation. Unfortunately they did not do sufficient before and after analysis to confirm the multiple benefits achieved.*

4. How can design aspirations be better coordinated nationally across service areas and departments? Should there be a stronger national duty to secure sustainability?

The need to learn from past experience is key in order to improve in future. That learning needs to be shared across not only the public sector but the private sector as well. We need to have the confidence to be transparent and open with information in the recognition that it will enhance our reputation and help both the commissioners and providers of the built environment to achieve far more.

There is ALREADY A VERY STRONG NATIONAL DUTY to achieve sustainability in the form of the Climate Change Act and various international treaties. It is the detailed regulation and incentive structure that is dysfunctional. So many schemes aimed at achieving lower energy and carbon have recently been suspended or cut back that there is no longer any confidence in investing in the sector. A new long-term plan for the journey to zero carbon emission buildings that is an essential part of the Carbon Plan needs to be formulated jointly by government and the industry. Performance contracting

There is a very Good Model For Achieving This In The Jointly Sponsored Zero Carbon Hub. Unfortunately another victim of government mind change.

5. How might the appointment of a chief built environment adviser improve design and sustainability? How else might the government improve leadership on design matters?

A Chief BE advisor would become the main point of contact and conduit between government and the industry. The track record of the Chief Construction adviser is good, as is the longer-term role of Chief Scientists. A CBEA would on one hand ensure that the message to and from the industry was co-ordinated and clear and on the other hand ensure that government's multi-departmental thinking was coherent, long-term and doable. The role would need to be supported more than that of the CCA. MEMORY

Government leadership on good design became well formulated in CABE's statutory years. But CABE's shrinkage has left a vacuum behind it, both in government and in other bodies that provided advice. Part of this role might be taken by a CBEA but other bodies need to develop a knowledge and leadership role as well.

Government should consider re-instituting ministerial design champions

6. How can sustainability standards best be delivered and maintained in new and existing buildings? Should there be prescriptive minimum standards or regular reviews based on performance?

We need to see how buildings are performing and Display Energy Certificates are the most straightforward way of achieving this. They are supported by the property industry so why not?

Information on building and infrastructure performance needs to be available and transparent to researchers, practitioners and members of the public alike. Only then will we understand how to make improvements.

The current compliance-based system relies on computer modelling and relates little to the reality of energy use or carbon emissions from buildings.

There are already prescriptive standards but since regulatory upgraders have been effectively scrapped there is now no planned route to the zero carbon buildings the UK has signed up to in the EU and at Paris. There is not only a performance gap there is a gaping policy gap.

Regular reviews and revisits are essential to ensure and keep buildings working as they were designed

7. Is the education system for planning and the built environment in need of improvement, and what initiatives could be undertaken to enable this?

There is a need to educate for a career working across the industry and starting in with a good understanding of how the other parts contribute to it working. The silos need breaking down.

Several universities are working on this but are finding it hard going without institutional will.

As a result of C4C the CIC is pushing ahead with both industry and educational reform with the support of the RICS.

Numerous studies have shown that the current model of silo-ed education - for building trades through to built environment professionals - leads to poor quality outcomes. Building projects need a synthesis of skills and education must provide a common language and a greater empathy with others' contributions. For example, Zero Carbon Hub's analysis of the Performance Gap in housing identified industry's energy literacy as a key requirement for the delivery of good energy performance - this would require education to provide a high level understanding of climate change, of the role of building performance in reducing emissions, and of how the collaboration and interaction of the range of actors in the design, build, and user roles is needed to achieve successful outcomes. Education is the key, and could start in schools!

Educating for the industry will be the Edge's next major cross-industry inquiry.

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