

What we need to make our environment better

Terry Farrell explains some of the planning related themes picked up in the review, which aims to provide some clarity and narrative to the complex and overlapping forces that shape our built environment

Last Spring, Architecture Minister, Ed Vaizey MP, asked me to lead an independent review of architecture and the built environment. This initiative has come to bear my name, but it's important to emphasise that what the government and the public will soon be reading will not be a monograph of my making, but rather an informed collection and synthesis of hundreds of ideas from thousands of people across the country.

The Review's launch in April should have prepared us for the overwhelming public and industry interest in the subjects we are studying: Design Quality, Economic Benefits, Cultural Heritage and Education. We had expected a small breakfast discussion. Instead, over 400 people arrived at the NLA and an overflow room had to be set-up. Even now, nine months later, I am still taken aback and gratified by the amount of time, energy and expertise that countless individuals have volunteered to produce the Review.

These voluntary contributions have helped to preserve the independence of the Review, which has been conducted without Government funding, freeing us to discuss and debate without political tether. This volunteerism has so inspired us that the Review calls upon built environment professionals to find ways to continue to engage their communities, whether in local schools, local politics, or local design activities, in conversation about the value of good design in order to create a more design-fluent public.

In this review we look at the whole educational system to consider the roots of our design literacy. The built environment is not just a business, it is

also a community pursuit so we include recommendations for how the community can best be involved in moulding their surroundings. Just as this Review will be the product of many voices it will also be the collection of many ideas.

We have been eager to engage all political parties in the process, and consulted with the All Party Parliamentary Groups on Architecture and Planning and on Excellence in the Built Environment. We also spoke with the Local Government Association very early on in the process – clearly a key player in bringing about changes in line with a popular view that decision-making should be localised.

From the outset, it was clear to me and to the Panel of Built Environment Professionals who have helped steer this project that it would be impossible to review architecture without also considering the role of engineering, surveying, landscape architecture, planning, and the many other pursuits that shape our built environment. The Farrell Review of Architecture and the Built Environment is not just about architects. Similarly, it will not just be about buildings.

One of the most critical links that the Review has sought to make is between architecture and planning. This Review was launched at the instigation of Ed Vaizey in the Department of Culture Media and Sport, but the Review naturally will touch on issues of planning, which is the provenance of the Department of Communities of Local Government. To begin to link-up these fields and break down government silos, I met recently with the Planning Minister Nick Boles at the invitation of Ed Vaizey.

We discussed the big issues that the review has flagged and agreed there is much work that can be done between DCMS and DCLG where architecture and planning find their respective homes in government departments. As a broad review of our entire built environment and the processes that shape it we have picked up on several key themes that relate to planning. The following are a few of the issues which relate to the idea that we could benefit from a more proactive planning system:

- The UK has got a bit stuck with a reactive rather than proactive planning system, based on individual applications. Proactive planning brings



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with it many benefits and Local Plans are one way to tackle this at a sensible scale. However, they are not quite working properly yet, many are not in place and there are often insufficient resources in local government to achieve their aims.

Another model that is frequently referred to is the United States zoning model, as exemplified in New York City. This has the advantage of building confidence in the development community of what they can and cannot build with a 10 year timeframe. As KPF's James von Klemperer said recently at the NLA, it allows for a "sharper scalpel" with which to operate.

One other option I have always championed in my career is the role of individuals in "Civic Activism". Architects and others getting involved at a local level to create a place-based vision for an area.

- Our planning system is entirely open to negotiation which means that anybody can submit an application, for anything, at any time. It is an inefficient use of the already stretched resources in planning offices to have to think about everything from scratch on every application. It is little wonder that 'design' – a word defined by many people in very different ways – can get sidelined in this process. Could efficiencies be found in laying out some ground rules first?

- Design Review and other mechanisms within the planning system play a key role in improving outcomes but these can still be improved. The review will make comments and recommendations on the process of Design Review and our ongoing dialogue with CABE at the Design Council has been very productive.

- Another issue related to Design Review is that it is triggered by the submission of a planning appli-

cation. There is scope, is there not, to have Design Reviews without the need for an application? The kind of civic activism referred to earlier could be bolstered and bring wider engagement into shaping local places. It is my strong feeling that it is the everyday places like housing estates, hospitals and high streets that need this attention as much as new developments.

- Our cities and metropolitan regions are the powerhouses of economic growth and international trade in the UK but they are also the key to unlocking the nation's sustainability potential. This is both in terms of the social and civic relations that grow from our multicultural population and also in terms of ecological governance. The efficiencies gained from density and shared resources, such as parks and green infrastructure, transport and waste management, can be most effectively planned at the city scale.

Our northern cities, that often get marginalised in this debate, have a critical role to play as our revamped manufacturing industries and exports are on the rise, along with newer creative and service industries. These should not be undervalued. Meanwhile, London defines itself an outward facing hub for both investment and our professional built environment services.

Politicians in Westminster are not necessarily "place responsible" – they rarely have residential qualifications in their constituencies, yet the UK Mayoral model is about local leaders.

- My experience is that infrastructure planning in this country is still too piecemeal. Rarely is there representation on these decision-making panels of any spatial thinkers: architects or planners. When decisions are based on engineering and economics alone, major opportunities are missed. Every train station terminal has the potential to become the focus for regeneration, every high street is where daily life plays out, and every airport has huge urban implications with the scale of the economy it tows with it.

- What do we mean by 'design'? In the course of hundreds of conversations, across the widest spectrum of stakeholders in the built environment, rarely is there a shared definition. Design is not just the way things look. Design is not the main role of the architect any more either. It is not just what you can draw with a 6B pencil. Everything is designed including briefs, processes and contracts. When it comes to architects creating buildings, much of the work has already been done. Doors, floors, windows, whole facades and so on are already designed. Since the Bauhaus, component design and standardization took a load off the architect. The review will consider the role of the architect in an age of increasing specialization and multi-disciplinary collaboration.

- Planning offices are fighting with the



FROM THE TOP: Design Quality Workshop hosted by NLA; Birmingham Workshop hosted by MADE; Cultural Heritage Workshop hosted by Alan Baxter & Associates; Education, Outreach and Skills Workshop hosted by UCL.

resources they have, and getting the right people in to these public sector jobs will be key. Policies are only as good as the people able to enact them, as Sunand Prasad on our expert panel pointed out "good people can work round bad policies but good policies cannot work round bad people".

- I would also like to see education broaden at all levels, and this is a substantial focus of the review. Higher education courses should do much more to merge syllabuses and work across different disciplines: planning, architecture, landscape, engineering. Lucy Musgrave, also on the expert panel, frequently cites the abolishment of a joint architecture and planning qualification as being to the detriment of the built environment.

These are some of the planning related themes picked up in the review, which aims to provide some clarity and narrative to the complex and overlapping forces that shape our built environment. The review will contain some high level messages aimed at Government, as well as at industry and the bodies and institutions that support it. It will also make several recommendations that are more focused, as well as providing an evidence base in the form of our extensive consultation carried out in this past year.

From the beginning we have stated that the publication and launch is the starting point. I hope that there will then be a loud and inclusive debate all the way through to the 2015 general election. ■

THE FARRELL REVIEW