

Starter homes: design moves up the agenda

The constant challenge for the design profession is to meet demands and retain relevance in a changing economic, environmental and cultural landscape says Gary Young



Following the recommendations in the Farrell Review, which called for better design and placemaking through proactive planning, the government have published a Starter Homes Design document.

This document is a set of design exemplars for new starter homes, which can be referenced by housebuilders as a benchmark of quality and choice for future housing developments around the UK. Collated by the government's Design Advisory Panel as part of the new Starter Homes initiative, it aims to increase the supply of well designed, new homes, made affordable through discounts achieved with reduced section 106 obligations.

At present, a large proportion of new build housing is built from templates, but with minimal contribution from architects. The Starter Homes initiative proposes a collaboration between developers and architects, to achieve design quality through template. It has re-opened the debate amongst designers about whether they should contribute to, or oppose, the creation and use of templates.

Using templates as an approach to housing has been widely covered in the press, and primarily because of the opposing opinions of it. Critics argue that 'cookie-cutter' designs create generic homes which lack local and contextual variation, stifling localism and ignoring the varied approach already achieved in successful collaborative partnerships. Others argue that starter home sites in brown field locations will be too complex for a template approach.

However, there are many good reasons to use templates. Their use can raise the standards and expectations of people

who will buy and live in these homes, and there are many good examples already in use.

The template approach can be an advantage to localism. A range of well designed examples can assist early discussion of appropriate housing design among local communities. Contrary to the belief that this approach creates houses that lack diversity, the range of proposed designs includes different house types that vary in density, heights and design approach.

The many variations in vernacular architecture would inform the templates, adapting designs based on local context and regional architectural amendments, materials and details. Good templates for house designs should lead to earlier collaboration between planners, architects, landscape designers and placemaking stakeholders, allowing early discussions focusing on quality and types of streets and public realm.

The Farrell Review recommended the implementation of Place Review Panels, to replace the existing design review and take a more holistic approach to place making. Combining this proposal with the adoption of urban design principles such as Building for Life 12, and template designs could radically improve the process of design development and engagement with local people.

During the consultation process for the Farrell Review, the topic of template design was raised in discussions about the housing crisis and design quality. Nicholas Boys Smith, Director of Create Streets, raised the fact that historically templates were widely used to design our towns and cities with quality and consistency, providing parameters for buildings' size, proportion and design details appropriate to their location. He >>>



Gary Young is a partner at Farrells

highlights that the advantage of this approach is that it ensures all buildings within an area complement the existing character of a neighbourhood and boost the sense of place. Whilst the Farrell Review acknowledged that the vernacular and context of the successful templates used in the 18th and 19th century are very different from those of today, it recognised the benefits of the approach and suggested that it be looked at again by today's built environment professionals.

Farrells continue to contribute to the goal of an increased supply of high quality, affordable and diverse homes, responding to challenges such as optimised living spaces, energy efficiency, use of renewable energy and future proof design. Our contribution to the Starter Homes initiative builds on the valuable experience we have gained through working on projects such as North West Bicester, the largest development of true zero carbon homes in the UK, led by developer A2 Dominion.

The development creates residential neighbourhoods with a mixed use, retail community and employment local centre, pedestrian and cycle connectivity and extensive green infrastructure. The street scale is limited to 2-3 storey terraced houses in groups of 3- 5 buildings, creating intimate home-zones with high quality street landscape and shared open space.

The constant challenge for the design profession is to meet demands and retain relevance in a changing economic, environmental and cultural landscape. The suggested examples in the Starter Homes Design document are just a starting point. Our hope is that many more architects will come forward and pledge their support for this initiative, and submit their exemplars which can be used for new homes, making a worthwhile contribution to increased supply of well designed starter homes. ■

The second Progress Report of the Farrell Review was published in January and may be downloaded here: <http://goo.gl/MwIWBU>

THE FARRELL REVIEW
of Architecture + the Built Environment

JANUARY 2015

Introduction by Sir Terry Farrell

When the Farrell Review of Architecture and the Built Environment was published last year, I promised to continue to campaign to ensure our government, our institutions, professionals and the public all play their part in helping to shape better places throughout the UK and beyond.

As I hope this progress report demonstrates, I am keeping this promise. Over the past few months, we have been working hard to ensure that the Review remains high on the agenda of both policy-makers and the industry at large. From the many Urban Rooms that are rapidly multiplying up and down the country to the establishment of the Government's Design Advisory Panel, the Review is making an impact and sparking action.

These, and many other, initiatives are not just being instigated by the Farrell Review Panel and team, but also by our 'Champions' from across industry, local government, academia and beyond. As you will read below, these 'Champions' are now leading the debate and thinking around specific themes and recommendations within the Review and are working hard for positive change.

I am enormously grateful to these individuals for their energy, commitment and optimism. Most importantly, I am grateful to them all for proving that we can work together to create better quality places for people to live, work and play in.



Sir Terry Farrell CBE