

London needs creativity

Apart from the financial services sector, Britain's creative industries constitute our other world-leading economic sector – but one which, alas, gets little recognition from policy-makers and chancellors. This may be about to change as the coalition government realises that this amorphous and in some ways difficult-to-measure economic lever is far more likely to grow in size and profitability compared with agriculture or manufacturing.

In planning policy terms, the creative sector was often seen as a nuisance, always wanting to operate in buildings and areas zoned for more 'serious' activities that involve 'real jobs', sometimes based on unsocial hours or unsocial activities (noise).

That changed in recent years as the regeneration effects of artists and other creatives occupying redundant buildings in run-down areas led to their subsequent revival. This has been particularly true in East London, where areas like Shoreditch have revived, even as really big areas like the docks have been turned over to mega-developments entirely unrelated to previous activity.

What we have yet to see in London is any serious attempt to develop creative quarters in new buildings from scratch, along the lines of the media city in Dusseldorf, for example, where the old dock area now plays host to creative companies in an architectural zoo of buildings, some by British architects such as Will Alsop and David Chipperfield.

So how might we go about this and why would we do it? In economic terms, the reason would be to both accommodate and stimulate growth beyond existing concentrations of activity (for example advertising agencies in the West End); to ensure that London retains a prime position as a city for creative activity; and to benefit from the economic and social 'buzz' which derives from cities where creative activity is encouraged.

Interestingly, it seems that heavily mixed-use areas are the most attractive to creative companies; they do not want to be in monocultural ghettos. This suggests that we will need to think about developments which involve both fast and slow money; corporate space and informal cluttered environments; tight-grain planning as well as decent green spaces; and of course easy access to a variety of transport networks.

Step forward the BBC and Imperial College, who have joined forces to think about the future of their W12 property holdings as Imperial plans a second campus away from South Kensington, and the BBC rethinks its London presence in the light of some staff relocation to Broadcasting House and Salford. Although the corporation has nationwide production centres, 50 per cent of its activity will remain in London, and it would like to produce a development catalyst for wider development in White City, an area where large scale thinking and development look very possible.

All power to its elbow. ■

Unaffordable housing

Those of you with an aversion to attending committee meetings should try out the webcam service from City Hall. The Planning and Housing Committee meeting last month looked at the future provision of affordable housing in London. An all-star cast of officers were present – David Lunts, Peter Bishop, Geoff Raw and Richard Blakeway, who between them are responsible for delivering affordable housing and regeneration, and who presumably will be implementing the Mayor's new broader powers if he takes over the functions of the HCA in London, which could happen this autumn, Blakeway revealed.

Chair Nicky Gavron sought clarification on numbers of homes being delivered in this funding period which runs to 2011. Blakeway and Co maintained a stalwart insistence that delivery is on track. The statistics were clear as mud to anyone listening in though and as Gavron maintained, do not really diminish significantly 'need' which is too large to be satisfied by the current rate of

delivery. 70 per cent of the UK's unsatisfied housing need is in London she pointed out. That's the context in which the current 15,000 'starts' should be measured which are being delivered over several years – and some of which may yet not be 'delivered' as schemes stall. It has been generally reckoned we need around 30,000 starts – per year for 20 years – to meet projected household growth by 2030.

There is a complacent belief in affordable housing planning policy as the state's tool for delivering the housing people need. It isn't doing in sufficient quantities. It is hindering the process. Mayoral autonomy on this priority is needed, provided it comes with better scrutiny, independent assessment of statistics and whether policy is working, as members requested. But, as officers made clear, and politicians acknowledged, the days of Section 106 agreements, with or without grant, delivering housing Londoners >>>

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The London Planning and Development Forum (LPDF)

The LPDF was formed in 1980 following an all-party inquiry into the development control system. It selects topics to debate at its quarterly meetings and these views are reported to constituent bodies. It is a sounding board for the development of planning policy in the capital, used by both the public and private sector.

Agendas and minutes are at planninginlondon.com. To attend please contact secretary Drummond Robson: robplan@btconnect.com

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Choice and localism in processing planning applications

There are several 'straws in the wind' which suggest a growing understanding of the need for a closer relationship between Building Regulations and Development Control. These include reference in the PPS1 appendix on Climate Change to the interface between them; the recent paper on the Future of Building Control which talks about the need for a 'smooth interface', the very recent CABE paper on housing design standards which calls for integrating both with a 'clear separation of standards and assessment procedures' and the imminent report of the National Planning Forum *Improving the Connection*.

Graphically, the Planning Portal and its 'interactive house' for the new GPDO also demonstrate how building control and development control are becoming more integrated in response to the burgeoning overlap and duplication of regulation, guidance and legislation.

The Association of Consultant Architects believes that there should be a closer integration of the processing of building and planning applications, both to achieve a more efficient and competitive outcome which will also meet the new Government's 'localism' agenda.

We see the opening up of the building control process to choice of provider as having given a major boost to its efficiency (which we now take for granted) and believe that the processing of planning applications should be integrated with it while retaining the autonomy of the local planning authority in taking the ultimate decision on planning proposals which are not in conformity with development plan policies.

We propose that where development proposals conform with the new-style local development framework plan policies this will be certified by 'Approved Agents' who, as with building control, can be officers of any local planning authority or approved professionals, and are appointed and paid by applicants who make the choice – which is of course the key to improved performance.

Where the proposal is clearly Permitted Development this can be certified, as now, by an architect or other agent advising the client. Otherwise a procedure similar to that for telephone masts is used, whereby the agent submits his proposal and evaluation to the local planning authority which then has 28 days to raise objection (which is open to appeal), otherwise agreement is deemed.

If a proposal does not conform, application is made to the local planning authority for determination. Their decision may be appealed and determined by the Planning Inspectorate, as now.

Three levels of proposal may be considered:

i] Outline, ii] Full, and iii] Approved for Construction. The first and second will generally be subject to conditions which may call for the approval of reserved matters in the subsequent stage or stages.

Outline and Full applications will be able to deal with sustainability issues

>>> need, are also over. So what exactly is the point of a policy which delays and complicates housing delivery?

Peter Bishop would reasonably point out that it can deliver more mixed communities – but only when the housing is actually built. All parties want more housing in London. But if Boris gets new powers he really does need to think up more effective methods of delivering the goods. The six sites which the LDA is going to re-market this summer – having bought them several years ago and paid developers to get them oven-ready before taking them back off those developers – are really an expensive window-dressing bureaucratic intervention in a market that would normally deliver these sites

in principle – i.e. performance specifications – but not in detail. Local development plans cannot duplicate matters covered by other legislation (public health, access regulations, building regulations, etc.), except where special local conditions apply.

Agents will be responsible for public consultations and will have to demonstrate how they have been conducted and the nature of responses along the lines already required for major infrastructure proposals under the new Infrastructure Planning Commission.

'Approved for Construction' proposals will have to satisfy both planning and building regulations requirements on a 'deemed-to-satisfy' basis which will rely on clear guidance. There will remain the option of appeal in exceptional cases (as now for Building Regulations approvals).

Approved Agents will assess the impacts of proposals and where these affect other owners they are obliged to follow a consultation procedure which is modelled on the Party Wall Act (including provision for a 'third surveyor'). No such agreement may override a clear local plan policy. Agents may deal with planning conformity, building and environmental regulation approvals and party walls in an integrated way, with specialist input as necessary for matters like engineering, energy, traffic impacts and biodiversity. Consultations might include design review in relevant cases as set out and provided for in the locally adopted policy.

To ensure propriety and to keep the LPA informed, agents will submit their recommended decision and justification reports to the LPA for review following the 28 day procedure. Where the LPA does not agree or where for example included conditions do not in their view satisfy local plan policies, they can call it in for their decision. They will be subject to the usual appeal procedures.

Approved Agents will certify completion of developments in compliance with certified proposals. Architects and other qualified professionals may self-certify compliance (as, in effect, they do today), but owners are obliged to notify the Land Registry once development is complete and attach specified information to their title deeds.

Only strategic decisions and clearly non-compliant proposals need be considered by elected members, all others being delegated to officers or processed by agents as I have described.

Local planning resources will thereby be focused on plan making and keeping adopted policies up to date. This will of itself give more control to local planning authorities and reduce the scope for successful appeals. It will also focus local communities on the future vision for their area in the knowledge that their plan is constantly under review to keep it in tune with their wishes. ■

Brian Waters as President of the ACA contributed this paper to the RIBA Council as part of its debate on regulation on June 24th.

unassisted – provided there was a profit in it.

There isn't a profit largely because of affordable housing policy. End it. Get rid of it, or find a way of turning it into a carrot, not a stick. Giving the grant direct to developers to plug the state-created profitability gap, not inefficient housing associations, might be one place to start. Then of course you could privatise London's housing associations by sticking them in the Private Rented Sector Initiative lock, stock and two smoking barrels. They are sitting on billions' worth of (taxpayer funded) under-gear and inefficiently managed assets, not to mention a bevy of development sites which they overpaid for and need sorting pronto.