

How to CREATE STREETS – a councillors’ guide August 2015

Many hundreds of councillors from London and beyond now follow us on twitter or are on our rapidly growing monthly mailing list. And an increasing number are saying to us ‘we agree with what you are saying but what can we do? We feel boxed in by the planning system or by developers claiming that it is only ‘viable’ to build up and to build horrid.’

Here is a short ‘**How to CREATE STREETS**’ guide to get better homes and places built *in* your neighbourhoods and, crucially, *with* your communities. Doing so can make home-building more popular and (ultimately) ease the planning system.

We’ve deliberately written this **baker’s dozen top 13** points to be usable by councillors of any (well nearly any) party. Other than those with vested interests, the only people who we think might ideologically dislike this are;

- (a) anyone who thinks that it is always crucial to innovate in the built-environment rather than to build what people actually like;
- (b) those who think that the economics of development should only be understood in the short term;
- (c) those who think there should be no planning system or controls whatsoever;
- (d) those who think that all new homes should be social housing; or
- (e) those who don’t want to build any more homes at all.

Ultimately the planning system can only be justified if it is effectively mediating between what actually gets built and what people want to see built. If it does this, it can increase support for new homes. If it can’t (and it currently too often doesn’t) then it serves little purpose.

So here goes. If you want to help solve the housing crisis by increasing the chance of building in your borough, county or district being popular, being supported and (in the last analysis) being good, do this....

1. Ask members representing planning or housing what **actual numerical evidence** their officials have on what types of built form, material, typology and style **local people prefer** (we have never met any local government team who can answer this question with statistically robust data);
2. If they don’t have any evidence, suggest they **do some proper research** - using pictures and polling to get a usable and meaningful understanding. If they *won’t* do the research, **do it yourself** using online polling or focus groups. Thanks to improving technology this can be done very cheaply now on a very modest budget; (we can help advise with questions – for example [here](#));

The Create Streets pop-up poll

In April and May 2015 we ran a ‘pop-up poll’ on a **£0** budget. In total 283 people took part.

Our poll asked respondents “which of these would you most want to see built on an urban street very near to where you or a close friend live?” and presented four options whose order was randomised. We also asked respondents their profession. 37% of respondents worked as architects, planners or in creative arts. We attempted to use photos which showed a roughly similar amount of street from roughly the same angle in roughly the same weather conditions. Two photos had parked cars and two did not. Building heights were consistently between 3 – 5 storeys.

The four options – two newly built, two more innovative



We found that:

- **Place trumps time.** 87% of our respondents preferred the two options which most clearly referenced historic housing forms and which had a very strong sense of place. This was nearly seven times more than the 13% who preferred the two more original forms which prioritised a sense of time over a sense of place.
- **People are from Mars. Professionals are from Venus.** There was a sharp and important distinction between what non-design specialists and design specialists would like to see built. 25% of supporters of the more popular two options worked in planning, architecture or creative arts. 46% of supporters of the less popular two options worked in planning, architecture or creative arts
- **Architectural awards ARE a good indicator of popularity** – but only if you invert them. We are aware of nine architectural or planning awards that the least popular two options have received. We are not aware of any architectural or planning awards that the most popular option has received (the second option has not been built so is not able to win awards)

To be clear, we are not claiming any nation-wide proportional significance to these findings. However, they are indicative and they do corroborate previous research. They were also done on a budget of precisely nothing showing what you can do thanks to the new polling websites.

With some money to spend we also commissioned MORI to obtain firmer results. These were very aligned to our pop-up poll findings and you can read more about them on the [MORI website](#) or on at [Create Streets surveys](#).

3. **Publish the results.** If necessary (it almost certainly will be), ask officials how they intend to make use of this evidence to inform the council’s strategy and development-control decision-making;

4. Lobby publically and in private for the evidence of what people like and want to be **embedded in the council's planning strategy** and development-control decision-making. Ask if borough strategy or other rules make it hard to produce the type of built environment that people most prefer. Changes may well be necessary – particularly guidance on **light** and **street-width** which are normally at borough level;
5. Encourage communities to form **neighbourhood forums** and use **neighbourhood plans** not to be NIMBYs but positively to set out the types of urban form and buildings that they like;
6. Most specifically, encourage residents on **post-war estates** to do this. Due to low densities and appalling post-war building standards many such estates are likely to be regenerated in the years to come. **Encourage residents and neighbours actively to help shape the estate regeneration process rather than having it done to them;**
7. Simultaneously, encourage the council, developers or local residents via neighbourhood plans to undertake **characterisation studies of what it is that defines their and makes special their neighbourhoods**. These can be quite specific (height, materials, block size, height to street width ratio);
8. Don't just think about style or materials – also think about 'typology', 'form' and, yes, **streets**. What it is about the way in which some older developments are arranged, about their walkability and spatial arrangements that people seem to love? Do any borough rules (for example on street widths) prevent such neighbourhoods?
9. Don't be fooled by the old lie that high density must equal high rise or large blocks. **High density categorically does not require high rise or large blocks**. With the right urban design and planning you can normally achieve high (though not ludicrous) densities within a perfectly conventional street-scape. Here is some guidance as a rough rule of thumb:

Description (example area in London)	Storeys	Homes/hectare	Habitable rooms/hectare
Terraced houses (Victorian/suburban e.g. Wandsworth)	2-3	~50	~250
Terraced houses (Georgian format e.g. Kennington)	4-5	~75	~300
Terraced houses plus a few flats (e.g. Notting Hill)	4-5	~100	~300
Mixture of flats plus some terraced houses (e.g. Pimlico)	4-6	~175	~525
Terraced flats (e.g. Ladbroke Grove)	5-7	~220	~600

10. **Don't be fooled by viability assessments**. Every developer we have spoken to about it in private has admitted to us, that you can make them

say (nearly) whatever you want. A whole dark science has grown up around this. Wherever possible, push for viability assessments to be transparently public – so that independent experts can test and question them;

11. **Push for whole life costings of buildings not just short term economics.** Huge buildings' economics look much less good understood through this prism. And better-designed, more modestly scaled buildings' economics look much better. Other than in the very poorest parts of the UK, any developer who says he can't afford to build anything decent is wrong or has too short term an approach. Likewise, any developer who says he must build high or huge is merely reflecting that he has over-paid for the land (or that the market assumes consent will be given);
12. Encourage developers, neighbourhoods and councils to use or demand a **co-design** approach to large schemes. These often (but not always) use methodologies such as **charrettes** or **enquiry by design** where residents, neighbours, architects, developers, local planners and other stakeholders actually design the scheme together over several days. This is very different from the standard design and then "consult" approach where architects design a scheme and then ask (often inconsequential) questions about it afterwards. We can tell you more about this but so can organisations such as **Civic Voice** and the **Prince's Foundation for Building Communities**. Some (but not many) architectural firms also have wide experience of them;
13. Encourage developers, neighbourhoods and councils to use or demand a **design code approach** to large schemes, created in close conjunction with the local community. A Design Code is 'a set of illustrated design rules and requirements which instruct and may advise on the physical development of a site or area. The graphic and written components of the code are detailed and precise, and build upon a design vision such as a masterplan or other design and development framework for a site or area.' Design codes are not new. Statute-based codes on what could and could not be built dominated London for over a hundred and fifty years expressed through legislation such as the 1667 'Act for Rebuilding London' and the 1707, 1709 and 1774 Building Acts. Design Codes have not always sat easily with the Planning system as it has evolved in the UK post-1947 and so design codes are now far more common abroad than in the UK. Today, design codes in various forms are used internationally, for example in Germany, France, the Netherlands, Australia and the United States, as a means to focus on the delivery of high quality with popular support.¹

¹ A 2006 UK Government assessment of 15 different Design Codes contrasted to 4 non coded approaches found that: "*Significantly, where codes are being implemented on site, schemes have been delivering enhanced sales values and increased land values. When set off against the up-front investment, this to a large degree determines the value added by coding, at least in crude economic terms. The qualitative evidence suggests that the outcome is positive, and for commercial partners, over the long-term, codes seem to be more than paying for themselves.*" DCLG (2006), *Design Code Practice: an evaluation*, pp. 14-5.

To summarise, throughout all your interaction with your council's strategy and development control decisions;

- push for a proper factual understanding of what people like and want;
- push to embed this understanding in strategy and decision-making; and
- push for economic decisions to be made on basis of longer not shorter term economics.

Mount Pleasant – a case study

As a case study of how the modern planning and development process is *not* always or necessarily aligned with what people most want or even with optimum density, consider the case of the Mount Pleasant development site in central London. The land-owner is Royal Mail Group. Their proposals of 681 units (23% affordable) were designed to 'fit' with the London Plan and local rules. But the consequent series of large blocks have proved deeply unpopular with local residents with eight times as many objecting comments as supporting, only 1% support in a survey of 258 local residents. The main objection (66% of responses) is the height and massing with a typical comment being: "it's like a fortress."

Two schemes for Mount Pleasant – the public support the one with more homes but which is 'on the cusp' with the London planning system



Working with and for the local community, Create Streets have worked up an alternative design (**Mount Pleasant Circus**) which has ~730 units and can provide around more affordable homes. It attracted 99% support in a survey of local residents with a typical comment being: "**the whole of London would fight for Mount Pleasant Circus.**" In a telling insight into why and how councils and the GLA need to change their approach one developer commented: "**very beautiful. You'll never get it through planning.**" It cannot be right that such a massively more popular, high-density scheme is less well aligned with the planning process than one that is hated.

The question is not 'how do we build more homes' but 'how do we make new homes more popular.' The planning system needs to change and give staggeringly greater focus to what people want and like. It is arguably one of only two components of the British state which remains, in its fundamental shape, as it was it designed in the 1940s.

The disconnect between what gets built and what most people like must be fixed for all our sakes. And Neighbourhood plans should be but the first step in a **direct planning revolution** which removes planning power from property funds and city officials and returns it, where it belongs, to the rest of us.

This direct planning revolution is coming. Improving technology, social media, the desperate need to build more houses in a politically acceptable fashion and (perhaps above all) collapsing confidence in an inefficiently representative state are all pushing for it. You, as an elected councillor can, if you chose, be at the vanguard of this necessary revolution. Please do – for all our sakes.

If you would like to learn more about any of these points – please do e-mail us at contact@createstreets.com as we plan to run a councillors' webinar on this.