

Realising the Design Dividend 27th October 2016

Chris Lamb, Director of Design South East, opened the discussion with the statement: not everyone is convinced of the value of design. This conference questioned whether design delivers economic and social value. Is design simply unviable in areas of low value or actually even more important? How does it create value – by helping to create an identity, by raising aspirations or by raising demand? How do some organisations manage to deliver quality consistently? The conference invited a range of speakers to discuss the different views, arguments and examples of the value of design from the public and private sector perspective.

The first session asked ‘What is the Value of Design?’ Tony Mulhall, Associate Director of the Land Professional Group at the Royal Institute of Chartered Surveyors, started his presentation asking whether architects added value or just added costs? Tony called for a shift in thinking from one of design as a liability to that of an asset. He argued that if people pay more for good places then developers will develop them. The question then is how does design contribute to asset making? Tony demonstrated how a business case could be made based on an understanding of the process and the conditions needed to make design an attractive proposition. Taking the audience through an evaluation of Upton in Northampton, Newhall in Harlow, Hampton in Peterborough, Kings Hill in Kent and Accordia in Cambridge, Tony showed how ‘placemaking’ added value by addressing the climate change agenda, increasing house prices and improving resident perceptions. In these case studies developers regarded design as a means to a financial end - not an end in itself.

The next speaker was Alison Brooks, Founder and Principal of Alison Brooks Architects, who admitted the difficulty of making the case for good design. By introducing her practice and its work, Alison identified a number of key design principles that she felt made good economic sense. The first principle is adaptability. In her work, housing is designed so it could always be something else. Another principle is embedding generosity which she described as spaciousness, large windows and above average floor-to-ceiling heights, as well as attention to detail. These two principles create a future heritage, she argued. In her scheme in Folkestone, Alison showed how the Quarterhouse was not only regarded as a new civic piece of architecture but also as part of the public realm leading to the widening of the street, a new public space, and a beacon of light during the evening through its curtain-like scalloped shell and luminosity. The building’s success lies in its creative use of materiality. Alison also talked about her scheme in Newhall Be where the enlightened stewardship of the land and the flexible masterplan and design codes allowed her to challenge the format of the standardised suburban house plot from a long narrow plot to a square plot with back to back housing. This allowed for more dwellings to be built and greater street frontage. The location of internal spaces such as the study at the front of the house transformed the street during the day. In ending, Alison attributed her design success to care and effort in the making of public and private buildings. She urged local authorities to offer an openness to new talent like her practice who do not meet all the tendering criteria.

In the following Q&A Newhall Be was identified as an exemplar that demonstrated the value of an 'open to new ideas' approach that helped to create a new market. A key factor is how to reduce risk, which Local Authorities can remove by doing all the planning and commissioning on their land. Key to successful developments are developers with long term interests; people like Roger de Haan in Folkestone and the Moen Brothers at Newhall.

The next session was called 'Can design change the local market and add value?' The first speaker was Guy Holloway, Principal of Holloway Architects, who stated that value can come from many different places. He focused on two places: Margate and Ashford. Starting with Margate, a campaign to encourage visitors to 'stay longer' has transformed the perception of the town. The campaign was called 'Margate; kiss me slow' where art, culture, and tourism are combined as an offer. Key to this approach is making heritage cool and accessible, such as Dreamland. Guy believes it is critical to understand the place and respond with architecture. In his Beach Houses scheme he converted an old hospital achieving uplifts in land value from £275/sqft to £534/sqft. This has created a confidence in Margate not experienced for many years.

In Ashford, the driver for development is the proximity to London of 37 minutes on the train, and a key challenge is to change the perception of the town centre. In response to a poor night time economy, a new cinema has been designed with transparent facades illuminating the town centre. His practice has received planning permission for a new brewery in the town centre, which will encourage more activity. A new model of town centre living has also been developed in Ashford for the Private Rented Sector (PRS). Modelled on a hotel with shared spaces, people are experiencing the benefits of sociable living. This model has filled an important gap in the market.

During the Q&A the issue of migration from London came up. Are well-designed places aimed at London buyers? Many people are releasing capital from their London home seeking convenience living in Kent then after ten years of having their second home, moving to Kent. They are called 'last time buyers'. It has become a coastal trend.

When questioned on the barriers to value, the response from some was that good design does cost money - and in areas of low land value there is a ceiling. But there may be other ways of delivering value. The role of the masterplan is one way. It was felt that major sites needed a masterplan to prevent piecemeal development and variable quality outcomes with no social or urban ideals. Another tool is the competition. This is an opportunity for young practices with bright ideas to get involved. In Newhall Be, this was the starting point for transformation. Roger Evan's masterplan helped with planning and was constantly updated.

Some lamented the erosion of places by piecemeal development where distinctiveness was lost due to generic solutions. Some felt it was critical to move the masterplanning back into the hands of the local authority as arbiters of good design. However, what is the payback to incentivise this? By selling off land to seed phases in a development the receipts can get ploughed back into self-financing future phases.

The third and final session was on 'how to deliver good design?' Teresa Borsuk, Senior Partner in Pollard Thomas Edwards, argued that architects can assist clients in making the most of their assets/investments. Focusing on the award-winning scheme of The Avenue in Saffron Walden, Teresa showed how significant features of the place were used as simple repetitive forms. These features were landscape and the avenue of lime trees; quality in the distinctiveness of materials and architectural elements and detailing; and the urban fabric and grain of the place such as the courtyard housing. The challenge has been in the rules and regulations dictated by the Essex Design Guide and parking standards. What the scheme succeeded in doing was working within prescriptive parameters by being creative with the contemporary style of the buildings and relating closely to the site. There was no standard house type, simply a repetition of parts such as the locating of rooms; canopies, windows, verge details that were distributed intelligently across the site. Character areas were created with set parameters. The success has been in the building footprint that is efficient and maintains good densities. In this scheme, the architects were able to encourage the developer to accept a departure from standard house types and in return the high demand and rate of sale, as well as values were far above that anticipated. In summary, Teresa identified key factors for success:

- A vision
- Clear ambition
- Commitment of the developer
- Smart thinking
- Rationalization and affordability, deliverability
- Resource efficiency and creativity
- The layout improved people's behavior and lives
- There was delight, respect and care.

The final speaker was Mario Balducci, Development Director at Kitewood. He outlined the developer's ambitions to create destinations, change perceptions and placemaking. In his view, vision drives value both from an economical and social aspect. Mario showed one of their schemes in Biocity in Istanbul where car-free spaces, pockets of public spaces, homes, bio-medical research facilities are creating a new village. The masterplan has attracted international investment. In East Village, Stratford, a unique proposition was tabled to sell four years before the development was built through a Private Social Rent (PRS) scheme. This demonstrates the importance of thinking long term. In this case a 30-year whole life cycle model.

The panel discussion began with a question; how to create an investable proposition in Kent and Medway where sale prices are low compared to construction costs? The answer was to focus on quality. Design doesn't have to cost. Returns are much greater when there is a legacy. Care and attention in the crafting of the building and intelligence in the design is intangible but is what reaps the returns.

Another question was about the constraints of Design Guides and other guidance documents. The benefit is that they may help to bring up the standard of bad

design; however, good design is usually a produce of better practice. Similarly, public realm needs a champion such as enlightened developers who have landscape architect on their design team from start to finish.

Chris Lamb ended by asking 'has the discussion changed planner's thinking?' The response was that the challenge remains viability versus design quality. The discussion has helped to argue the case for design; and to identify the importance of the right development partner and a carefully planned pre-application process that enables collaboration and the development of quality places.