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A Cumberland Lodge residential conference
HOPE IN THE BUILT ENVIRONMENT?
Wednesday 18th - Friday 20th November, 2009

Sponsored by
ARUP

and supported by the Chartered Institute of Building

SUMMARY REPORT

Speakers

Alan Baxter, Alan Baxter & Associates LLP

Elizabeth Burton, Professor, Sustainable Building Design and Wellbeing, Warwick University

Alina Congreve, School of Real Estate & Planning, University of Reading

Rory Coonan, Head of Architecture & Design, Health Properties Management

Nick Day, Operations Manager, The Crown Estate

Tim Gill, Writer and consultant

Piers Gough, Partner, CZWG Architects LLP

Spencer de Grey, Senior Executive, Head of Design, Foster + Partners

Simon Henley, Buschow Henley Architects

Glenn Howells, Glenn Howells Architects

Peter Jacobs, Bovis Lend Lease UK EMT and CIOB Vice President

Charles Landry, Director, Comedia

Roger Madelin, Joint Chief Executive, Argent Group PLC

Anna Minton, Author of *Ground Control*

Anne Power, Professor of Social Policy, London School of Economics

Sue Roaf, Professor of Architectural Engineering, Herriot Watt University

Camilla Sheldon, Eco-towns Programme, DCLG

Rt Hon Lord Smith of Finsbury, Chairman, The Environment Agency

Joey Tabone, Prince's Foundation for the Built Environment

Victoria Thornton, Founding Director, Open House

Mark Watts, Director, Arup

The 2009 Cumberland Lodge conference on architecture and the built environment brought together over sixty participants. The two day programme explored how the built environment is implicated in the major social concerns of the day particularly wellbeing, sustainability and the economic downturn. A range of built environment professions and specialisms were represented amongst the participants: architects, builders, developers, academics and civil servants were

present. Six students attended the conference, one an undergraduate and five postgraduates. We were also pleased to have a group of Ambassadors from the Chartered Institute of Building at the event.

Some of the themes under discussion proved highly controversial. The atmosphere was mainly convivial, but in discussion there were sometimes robust differences of opinion. We concluded on the note that we need a clearer sense of shared vision. To this end, it was proposed that a letter be sent to some relevant politicians. A copy of that letter follows at the end of this summary report.

Comments on this summary report are welcome and should be sent to Amanda Fitzgerald (amandafitzgerald@cumberlandlodge.ac.uk).

Points from the discussion

1. Sustainability

1.1 The impending 2°C rise in average global temperatures poses enormous challenges for the built environment. There was a feeling, however, that climate change is not being taken seriously enough by the sector. Flood plains continue to be developed, new buildings, we were told, often exceed Code 4, we are not doing very well in tackling embodied carbon and there is some dissatisfaction with, even scorn for, the BREEAM (BRE Environmental Assessment Method) points system.

1.2 What can be done about the situation? Mitigation measures and adaptation strategies were discussed. The better we do at mitigating, the less we should have to do in terms of adaptation. We have some very good exemplars of carbon neutral buildings. Photovoltaics, green roofs, insulation and natural ventilation are all part of the solution. Retrofitting was highlighted as a key strategy for this country given the dense infrastructure we have inherited. The potential of Eco-towns was discussed.

1.3 New build equates to just 1% of the building stock. We need to get better at improving the energy performance of the buildings already in place and we need to make it easier for households to improve their energy efficiency. In particular, a coordinated, national energy efficiency programme was advocated. This requires strong political leadership.

1.4 One delegate suggested that until the UK sees an environmental crisis at home, it will be difficult to convince people to take the challenge of climate change seriously. We were also told, however, that as in the case of the flooding which ensued from Katrina, peoples' concern there with climate change in the aftermath of that event was only heightened in the short-term.

1.5 Must market mechanisms be relied on then? In the sphere of city transport, for example, introducing a congestion charge may be met with support once the

system is up and running. A congestion charge can be a very effective way for reducing carbon emissions from a city. These issues, though, raise questions of equality and justice. Indeed, how should the responsibility for climate change be distributed across the population?

1.6 Overall, even those seemingly disdainful of the measures currently in place to reduce carbon emissions from the built environment and critical of sustainability and eco paradigms, acknowledged the significance of climate change issues. Could greater commitment to the cause be engendered through promoting innovative and creative solutions rather than relying mainly on control mechanisms? Or is so much at stake that strict regulation is the best route?

1.7 It was mentioned, on more than one occasion, that the individualism and self-centredness of today's society is a major obstacle to change. Perhaps what this, along with the difference of opinion about method but overall commitment to the cause underlines, is that we must look not only to the science and engineering communities when addressing these matters, but also to the arts and humanities.

2. Wellbeing and design

2.1 Many aspects of wellbeing were discussed including health, safety, community, happiness, inclusion and identity. We saw a variety of examples of buildings and cities where, through the careful design of those spaces, high standards of wellbeing, in all its senses, have been achieved.

2.2 There is a growing evidence base about the importance of good design for quality of life and wellbeing. Work in this area is being carried out by academics and there were concrete examples that this research will be fed through into the training of architects. There is also significant anecdotal evidence that design can make a difference to human performance; school and hospital design are cases in point.

2.3 There was strong recognition that good building design relies on more than the design of the structure itself. The interior and exterior of the building, as well as the way people will move around those spaces, are of great importance. It was suggested by more than one speaker that the design of public space in the UK has not been as effectively done as it might. An array of more effective continental examples was presented. It was also highlighted that we are lacking not only the know-how but also the policies for how to deal with movement.

2.4 There was a strong feeling that the design of the urban environment more generally should promote interaction, stimulation and diversity of experience for all the senses. The vitality of the city can be boosted through injecting fun, enjoyment and excitement into the cityscape through design and art pieces. Regrettably, as the city has been increasingly privatised, the public good it can offer has been compromised and the city environment has become increasingly monotone and sterile. Some developers are not unsympathetic to these charges.

2.5 Safety and the risk-obsessed culture of today's society were addressed. It was highlighted how children and childhood, in particular, had been constrained through this culture. Projects were presented which showed respect for the child's rights to access and enjoy the built environment. Both through creating spaces inviting to children and through working with them to raise their awareness of their stake in the built environment, the child's relationship to and appreciation of the built environment can be greatly enhanced.

3. The role of the architect

3.1 The position that architecture should be treated as any other art was passionately defended by some participants. It was also underlined that empathy for humanity is central to the concerns that motivate that art.

3.2 The argument was made by a number of speakers that greater confidence should be placed in architects. As part of that confidence it was advocated that architects may not reach their potential and will feel frustrated, even disempowered, to work to their full capability.

3.3 These positions were debated. It was thought by some that architects, in delivering an art so stark to the general public and so enduring, should be more sensitive to public tastes and opinions. It was also thought that personal ambition or desire to be iconoclastic might taint, or in cases dominate, the architect's best intentions to serve humanity.

3.4 The role of public consultation in building design and development was discussed. It was generally acknowledged that public consultation could be factionist, but then innovative approaches to the process wherein individuals are given equal voice and occasions for conflict and confrontation are minimised can produce great results and give a community a strong sense of identification with a project.

3.5 Some high quality architectural examples of public buildings were presented to the conference – hospital designs and Academy schools were amongst them. Nonetheless, it was accepted that there are many examples of less effective architecture. It was suggested that alongside some very good students coming out of architecture schools, perhaps a third of their graduates, are not so good.

3.6 This was a cross sector gathering; the debate over the relative merits of modernist and classical architecture was touched upon but did not dominate here.

4. The recession

4.1 One message was that the economic downturn presents an opportunity. It is an occasion to make the sector more efficient and to sharpen up. It is also an occasion, perhaps, to re-establish some balance in the economy and move away from a model wherein private investment has dominated.

4.2 Also, if we are building less, there will be more time for thinking, which could lead to better buildings. As jobs become scarcer, people may look more to training toward qualifications. Such a trend would produce a better qualified labour pool.

4.3 On the other hand this issue did elicit cause for concern. It was posited by one speaker that with fewer financial resources at our disposal, sustainability criteria will be compromised.

4.4 Building in a time of recession was presented as a socially responsible activity. It creates opportunities to get the unemployed back into jobs. We were told that every £1 invested in the construction industry yields a contribution of £2.84 in total economic activity.

5. Working relationships

5.1 Delivering any element of the built environment requires a mix of expertise and inputs. It is a team project. Good partnerships will yield pay backs in various areas of project delivery (cost savings, knowledge exchange and sense of satisfaction).

5.2 A mutual sense of being underappreciated or misunderstood emerged across the main professions represented. Frustrations were aired. There was some feeling that greater mutual respect should be developed across the built environment professions.

5.3 Where all parts of a team pull together well, as at the site visited by the delegates, (The Savill Building in Windsor Great Park), that fact should be lauded when reflecting the successes of the project.

Letter to politicians

The letter which follows has been put together as a means of marking the conference and bringing it to the attention of some relevant politicians. It is being sent to Ed Vaizey, Patricia Hewitt and Chris Huhne.

"We have just completed a two day conference at Cumberland Lodge on the subject of 'Hope in the Built Environment?' (November 18th-20th, 2009). The conference gathered leading experts from architecture, construction, academia and government to address how there is potential, today, in the built environment to meet the social and environmental challenges we face. We attach the list of delegates.

The significant divisions in the visions, priorities and approaches between the participants from very different backgrounds in the Built Environment became apparent, as did the profound benefits of joined-up thinking and working in the delivery of better buildings and places. To achieve this shared blue-print for ways forward in design we felt we urgently needed a clearly articulated and credible

political vision of where we are all actually heading on this path.
This is the reason we are writing to you.

Because the buildings we design in 2010 will last well into the 21st Century we need to know what kind of buildings and communities we should be designing today to ensure that the safety, health and comfort of our citizens is maintained, if not enhanced, in the increasingly difficult decades ahead.

We would very much welcome a response outlining such a Vision for your Party on the Future for the Built Environment. How can we design for increased social, economic and environmental resilience and stability in a rapidly changing environment? What should our fundamental goals be?

We believe that your response is important because 'Hope in the Built Environment' will be dependent on the substance, quality and execution of such Visions developed together today.

We look forward to hearing from you and will circulate your responses for discussion to the delegates of the Cumberland Lodge Conference on the subject.

Yours sincerely,

(Signed Professor Sue Roaf and Dr Alastair Niven)"

24 November 2009