

A Design Quality Unit for England: five ingredients of success

The recently published [Planning White Paper](#) contained a commitment to set up a new national body to support the transition to a more design-focussed planning system. It rightly confirms that the transition that is required will be long-term, necessitating a dramatic up-skilling within local planning authorities, supported by appropriate national and local leadership on design. It is envisaged that a key role of the new body will be “to help local authorities make effective use of design guidance and codes, as well as performing a wider monitoring and challenge role for the sector in building better places”.

The proposal picks up on the idea for a Design Quality Unit for England advocated in the pamphlet [Delivering Urban Quality, Time to Get Serious](#). Launched in May, the consortium behind the pamphlet made the case for a body that is long-term and authoritative “with the ability to reach across Government departments and its agencies, bring together and harness the energies of the wide range of professional, industry, campaigning and advocacy organisations and experts in this field, whilst influencing developers and local government and helping to give ordinary citizens and communities the confidence that design quality really matters”.

In a new pamphlet [Towards a Design Quality Unit for England](#), an enlarged consortium sets out proposals for what the i) mission, ii) tools of engagement and iii) modes of delivery of such a new body might be. It is written in the spirit of encouraging and helping to shape a public debate, not of having all the answers, and draws inspiration from practices around Europe explored by the [Urban Maestro](#) project. This collaboration of UN-Habitat, Bouwmeester Maitre Architecte (BMA) and UCL is examining the informal tools of urban design governance across Europe. From the various practices it is possible to extract five key ingredients for success which, in the pamphlet, also underpin ideas for the Design Quality Unit.

1. It's about long-term culture change as much as the immediate challenges of implementation

Across Europe, increasingly the quality of the built environment is being given a greater cultural significance. The [Davos Declaration](#) of 2018 called for a high-quality ‘baukultur’ (literally building culture) for Europe. It argued for i) “recognising the crucial contribution that a high-quality built environment makes to achieving a sustainable society, characterised by a high quality of life, cultural diversity, individual and collective well-being, social justice and cohesion, and economic efficiency”. This should be done whilst ii) being “aware of a trend towards a loss of quality ... evident in the trivialisation of construction, the lack of design values, including a lack of concern for sustainability, the growth of faceless urban sprawl and irresponsible land use, the deterioration of historic fabric, and the loss of regional traditions and identities”. As [A Housing Design Audit for England](#), showed these qualities are all too familiar to us here at home.

The idea that how we shape the built environment also shapes the culture in which we live and work is not new, but the desire to systematically move it beyond woolly aspiration and into the lifeblood of the national (and international) debate is new. In early 2020, for example, the Swiss government adopted their first Federal [Baukultur Strategy](#), which

clusters the Baukultur-related operations of the different federal offices together and defines binding goals for the state relating to how it will exploit its role as developer, owner, operator, regulator, sponsor and role model over the coming years. Such initiatives are about building a culture of great place-making and design in which sub-standard or mediocre is no longer good enough.

2. An independent, national voice is required supporting programmes that are evidence-based and grounded on a willingness to challenge poor practice

Over decades, attitudes to design quality have waxed and waned in Government in England (alongside attitudes to planning), and, perhaps as a consequence, local government and developers don't take policy statements – no matter how enlightened – nearly seriously enough. The need is to shift place quality permanently from the 'nice to have' category into the 'expected' or 'routine' category as it is increasingly in many parts of Continental Europe.

To inject a new commitment to its baukultur, in 2006, the German Federal government approved an Act establishing the [Federal Foundation for Baukultur](#) based in Potsdam. The Foundation is an independent organisation, funded by the state and working in partnership with it to promote baukultur, although not dictated by it. Whilst the Foundation promotes public discussion through events, networking and publications, its main focus is on the production of [biennial reports](#) on the state of German baukultur which it has the right to present to the Federal Cabinet and Parliament, and to which Government is required to respond. As one of the few organisations with such a power, the Foundation is taken very seriously by Government. Such a voice is a powerful force for positive change.

3. Local and national expertise should be harnessed through a networked approach

Whilst an influential national voice can shape the national conversation on, culture of, and priority given to design quality, ultimately delivery has to be local. Experience from around Europe suggests that a small and agile team nationally can have a huge impact, but only if they reach out to work with an inclusive network of local partners.

In the Netherlands, several mechanisms encourage a networked approach to the governance of design. The Dutch [College van Rijksadviseurs](#) (Government advisors on architecture and urbanism) initiated a system of spatial quality teams ([Q-teams](#)) across the country, set up by local or provincial authorities and national agencies to provide independent advice on spatial developments and urban development plans. Meanwhile [Architectuur Lokaal foundation](#), an independent centre of expertise and information on architecture and urbanism, is supported by four Ministries (heritage, town planning, environment and transport) to act as a link between national policies and local practices. They facilitate local stakeholders – public and private – to deliver national policies and act as a conduit of local experience to inform national decision-making. The foundation links to the country's extensive network of architecture centres (35 in total) and Bouwmeesters (city architects). Delivery has to be local, and so trying to do too much from the centre will not succeed.

4. Enhancing design skills is the fundamental starting point for place quality requiring hands-on enabling of practice locally and dedicated, affordable, training

A key feature of many continental European countries – when compared with the UK – is a much smaller division between their architectural and planning professions. This leads to a greater integration of design thinking into planning and a heightened urbanistic sensibility within architecture. However, even where design sensibilities are generally higher, mechanisms still need to be found to supplement variable local skills and capacity.

The French Councils of Architecture, Planning and the Environment ([CAUE](#)), for example, provide a wide range of professional enabling, negotiation and advice to stakeholders. CAUE exist in almost all French Departments for the promotion and development of architectural, urban and environmental quality. Besides developing guidance about architecture, urban design and heritage, they support clients (public, private and community) with free educational and technical advice on the different phases of a project and building work. The CAUEs are represented by a national Federation through a network of CAUEs organised regionally and nationally. CAUE can also enter into partnerships with other organisations that help to deliver their objectives of raising awareness and building capacity within localities. Without the right urban design skills in place, the best will in the world is unlikely to deliver place quality.

5. Tools should be engaging, innovative, inspiring and collaborative, avoiding duplicating or undermining what others are already doing

Beyond the hard regulatory powers of governments are a wide range of soft powers that can be used constructively together to guide, cajole and encourage desirable outcomes. The [Urban Maestro](#) project has revealed significant innovation in the field of urban design governance across Europe encompassing the full gamut of informal urban design governance tools. These range from those focussed on building the culture of good design through analysis, information and persuasion, to more active tools concerned with directly influencing and improving particular projects or places through rating, support and exploration.

[Architecture & Design Scotland](#) is the national advisor on design in Scotland. Realising that its greatest influence comes at the start of the development process, it has reshaped its tools of engagement to inject a strong design emphasis at that point. Its approach to design review, for example, has seen a shift away from a combative design panel towards a more measured, iterative and collaborative process of nurturing and enabling well-designed buildings and places, and involving communities in the process. It has launched a Pre-Design service to ensure that placemaking is at the heart of local housing strategies by building the right conditions for better design outcomes, and it has worked with others to develop the '[Place Standard](#)' assessment tool, which provides a simple framework to structure conversations about place and its physical elements, allowing users to consider all the elements of a place in a methodical way. The latter has now been widely adopted around Europe.

Everywhere is different

Whilst we can look for inspiration from elsewhere, ultimately everywhere is different – politically, in our market and development processes, and in our cultural and governance traditions. Despite this, surveying best practice from across Europe tells us, first, that we are not alone. The concern for urban quality is widely shared and seen as a legitimate and

vital interest of intelligent government. Second, there are no definitive paths to guaranteed success. Everywhere is different, we have a lot to learn from each other, and we shouldn't be afraid to borrow ideas and try them out for size.

To deliver on the five ingredients for success in England will undoubtedly require a new national body – a Design Quality Unit – with enough capacity itself (at its core) to harness the considerable expertise that already exists around the country but in a more concerted and directed manner. Whilst we live in uncertain times, one certainty is that if we fail to invest in a well designed built environment we will be greatly impoverished as a result. We can avoid that, but we need make this small and critical national investment now!

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