

Planning portal An architecture of circumstance would help local character evolve, says *Piers Taylor*

At present, the British planning system is predicated against any development that doesn't conform to a ubiquitous homogeneity and sit in a banal middle-ground. It is a fundamentally flawed system that wastes a vast amount of time, money and resources writing misconceived and half-baked design guides. These discriminate against anything that doesn't fit into an unbelievably narrow pigeonhole. How on earth do we go from here to a system that allows architects to do what they are trained to do – imagine the future?

Architects are locked in a seemingly never-ending battle with local authorities over design – an area, it should be remembered, where planners have no training. It is easy to imagine a system where planners do what they're trained to do – plan – and leave the rest up for grabs for architects and individuals to act as they see fit.

The only thing that really matters in housing is the big picture; the infrastructure, the streets, the relationships between buildings, the open spaces, the mix, density and use, and local demand. I've no doubt this should be highly controlled, but everything else should be determined by architects, developers and self-builders.

A diverse, dynamic new local character that genuinely reflects place and context in an immediate way could evolve from this. Local character as defined by local authority typically means 'as it was historically' rather than 'as it could be'. Local character only ever truly evolved through an architecture of circumstance, an architecture where individuals used materials, skills and techniques as appropriate for them. It is this, a new architecture of circumstance that I am arguing for – an architecture where true local character and individual expression has a place.

For this to happen, planning guidance needs to change. Planners also need to stop meddling and micromanaging areas outside their expertise. The planned city of Almere in the Netherlands (*pictured left, compared to Staffordshire, right*) is an extraordinary example of how planners can get it right. Almere is a dense city with inherent flexibility at its core, and importantly, the city has a straightforward planning process for the easy bit; the buildings. Each



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plot comes with a 'passport', which is effectively a permit to build, and outlines the key restrictions, such as the gaps between houses, the relationship to the street and overall maximum height. Everything else is unrestricted. Homebuilders and architects are free to decide for themselves what the building can look like.

It's mind-boggling to imagine how much time and money we'd save in the UK if we adopted this type of system. It could work not just for new towns, but also for infill sites in any city, irrespective of conservation area or world heritage status. For example, each vacant site should be submitted for an outline consent specifying mix, density and use and the entire next step (that of detailed planning) omitted. Architects would be trusted to design buildings with no petty micromanaging from mealy mouthed planners. A new – and true – vernacular would begin to emerge, an exciting and diverse one where individual expression was valued and unregulated.

The irony is that most of the interesting urban areas of the UK were developed in this way up until the introduction of the planning system 70 years ago. Yet, under the current system, it is impossible to imagine that any comparable new-build development could exist.

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