



RIBA President's Debate: Do Planning Committees Stifle Creative Architecture?

Monday 12 June 2017

This unprecedented and welcome event for Leicester was well attended with around fifty assembling at the King Richard III Visitor Centre in Leicester's Cathedral quarter. Architects, students of architecture, planning professional and others who were perhaps just intrigued by the motion, heard past RIBA President Ruth Reed, chair of the RIBA's Planning Group, speak for the motion with Grant Butterworth, Head of Planning at Leicester City Council arguing against it. Pat Brown, former CEO of Central London Partnership and past chair of the London Festival of Architecture chaired the proceedings.

Few could argue with the credentials of Ruth to understand the planning process and its possible shortcomings and that's exactly where Ruth made her case. Planning committees can affect the design process! Ruth gave an example. She spoke from personal experience where a planning committee had insisted on design features that were aesthetic and contextual as they saw it, but which had fundamentally misunderstood the design concept and strategy of a housing scheme application.

Ruth made a general observation. Planning committees she said were, 'Male, pale and stale', comprising of mainly older males with relatively conservative views on design and so consequently schemes that challenged their preconceived views were unlikely to be received positively.

In his response Grant made a good case in favour of the planning process and the committee approach. If as is the case in Leicester, where only around five percent of planning applications are put before the committee and only half of those are refused by the committee, this rather suggests that planning committees don't have quite the sway and influence that the motion and the profession might consider they do.

Ruth however had made the strong point that for architects and their clients, there was a perception that should a design scheme be considered to present a planning risk of refusal, then it was this fear that potentially perpetuates more conservative design output to ensure a smoother planning process and subsequent surety of program and costs.

Grant confirmed that committee members in Leicester were given design training so that they might better understand the position of architects and their designs. He confirmed 'We like architects {good clear} information, it makes our job easier'. Ruth acknowledged that whilst design training was a good initiative, she doubted if cash strapped local authorities would be able to afford this and questioned if decisions of a town planning nature should be reviewed by a political forum at all.

Grant maintained that in Leicester at least the committee was politically neutral. Ruth thought this was somewhat fanciful when future re-election considerations and lobbying by constituents could potentially influence a voting decision.

Joint Presidents: Jennifer Oxley / Sylvester Cheung

Hon Secretary: Richard Crowson

Limehurst House, Bridge Street, Loughborough, Leics LE11 1NH

Tel: 01943 876665

richard.crowson@watsonbatty.com

Leicestershire & Rutland Society of Architects

A member of the East Midland Region of the Royal Institute of British Architects



Perhaps the motion, 'Do Planning Committees Stifle Creative Architecture?' was too narrow in its scope. In reality is its implication of a commonly held view in the architectural profession that an aesthetically challenging design may not get through 'planning' whether through delegated powers or by committee?

So was the scope of the motion too narrow and hence unfair on Ruth, when in reality few schemes are actually decided by committee? Perhaps yes. Perhaps that's why when it came to the vote, the motion was defeated.

On balance perhaps those assembled felt that on the basis of what Grant had to report; committees don't have that much opportunity to influence the planning process. At this point perhaps it might be worth considering instead the larger headline grabbing schemes that are controversial and by default are taken to committee. These might be the schemes as a profession that we look to, outside of our 'bread and butter', to represent the best that the profession can offer.

Would we still be so comfortable voting against the motion with these in mind where a planning committee had voted to refuse permission on a project of national importance? Grant made some compelling comments about the reality of planning refusals by the committee in Leicester. A member of the audience, former LRSA president Kanti Chhapi pointed out, given the opportunity to speak in the chamber, it is possible to overturn a planning officer's recommendation to refuse. Ruth talked about this too and gave a worst case experience of planning committees.

In the end the motion was defeated, not because the content of the argument in favour of the motion was weak, but because on balance most felt that if committees only refuse a relatively low number of applications then perhaps they are not stifling creative design, whatever creative design is of course.

With a superb venue, extremely well qualified speakers delivering persuasive arguments and with insightful questions from the audience, the event was roundly agreed to be a great success. At the close there was scope for another hour of questions. Overall a compelling case for more discussion and mutual understanding between professions. The conversation then continued at the Rutland and Derby pub.

Nigel Rawson
Pick Everard

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richard.crowson@watsonbatty.com

www.architects-lrsa.org