

POLITICS LONDON RESIDENTIAL UK & IRELAND

It's not a lack of design codes that has stopped Britain building beautiful

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The complicated, inflexible planning system continues to be a rough ride for smaller developers



Pocket Living's West Green Place development in Haringey



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When launching the government's new [Office for Place](#), Robert Jenrick made it clear he disapproved of the development industry's use of lawyers and consultants to overpower residents to get their way.

This is a misrepresentation of what is actually at play.

It is not the developers that created a system of such complexity that it requires such a range of advice to navigate, it is politicians. If planning were less complicated, less legalistic and less contentious then there would be fewer of these expensive advisers that the secretary of state so dislikes – and perhaps a few more homes built too.

That said, the objectives of the government's new design codes are laudable. Their vision includes reducing policy at a local level, increasing digitisation and making planning more visual and creative. This is a good direction if it can be underwired with enough land and housing data to support growth.

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However, a renewed emphasis on design and beauty will only succeed if wider reform is also achieved. If planning reform flounders, then it's another document among a whole range of documents. This will add more complexity, not less. One wonders whether it would have been more logical for this to all come forward together with the rest of the government's planning reform agenda.



West Green Place won a 2021 Planning Award

The dangers of design codes

The other critical element is to ensure that design codes are created which marry housing demand, resident engagement and professional input. They must not become tools of the few to obstruct the many.

There are other challenges. Design codes that are too prescriptive may mean we lose architectural diversity and design innovation. There is also the added danger that design codes become large documents which are dense and difficult to navigate, or all things to all people. That sounds very familiar to what we have now.

Done well, though, design codes can place architectural quality back as a central consideration of planning. This is imperative because there is evidence the system doesn't prioritise quality as highly as it should. Research conducted by Pocket Living with Litchfields in 2020 of sites in London showed that architecture and design considerations were only a primary issue in less than 20% of applications. The majority of planners' time was spent focusing on negotiating affordable housing, tenure and viability issues.

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The issue here is that urban design officers have reduced in number across many local authorities. When I was a councillor in Wandsworth the council had a relatively large urban design capability, but this has been reduced over the years to make way for more general development management processing. The knowledge base built up around local architecture and the history of place has been eroded, and will not easily be replaced.

If you read the reforms more widely, there is a shift away from policy making at council level and a shift toward code creation. This is a different skillset and will require a shift in local council capability. It will take time to bed in. Design codes should not become policy by the back door as councils attempt to stay with what is familiar to them.

Rewarding good design

Good developers place a great deal of emphasis on design, because good design leads to the development of places where people want to live. Therefore, if the system rewards good design, developers will deliver good design.

However, we know that the current system doesn't really do this. Pocket has a high level of design competency and is known for its approach to quality. A central ingredient of this is how we have endeavoured to gain support from local communities and create award winning buildings for our residents. A council-led design code wasn't the driving force.

Despite our efforts, the planning system continues to be a rough ride for many smaller developers because of its inability to be flexible on tenure and housing mix and the vast range of policies required to be met. The message that we have over a decade of experience building beautiful buildings hardly registers. To change this, design needs to be much higher in the hierarchy of asks. I am not convinced the government really gets this point.

It's not so much the lack of design codes that has stopped Britain building beautiful, it's that we have forgotten what the planning system should be about.