

The Times Letters Monday 7th October 2019

The Future of Housing

Sir, The national design guide for civic architecture is welcome but it is superficial in matters of sustainability. Power generation from solar panels, when combined with modern battery technology, offers huge long-term opportunities for national and domestic wealth and health. It is therefore surprising that the design principle of building orientation in relation to the sun is not made more explicit, such that at least one large roof area in new buildings should face south, wherever practical.

David Rew, FRCS Southampton

Background

The UK National Design Guide was published on October 1st 2019. It provides a high level framework for creating high-quality, sustainable, and inclusive places. It defined key characteristics around context, identity, public space, and, sustainability to guide local authority planning, development and design decisions to generate better civic environments. See www.gov.uk/government/publications/national-design-guide

My attention was drawn to this work by the articles in The Times of 5th October 2019, which I reproduce below. I had recently installed a Smart Meter, Solar Panels and a Tesla Powerwall 2 battery in my home, which were collectively transforming my electricity costs and usage as I followed the minute by minute power fluctuations on my new Tesla App. I was therefore particularly interested in the topics of sustainable energy and solar gain.

I was therefore very surprised that such an important document on building design and layout had so little to say on the topic.

It was very kind of the Times letter editors to publish my note. I don't know whether they briefly mistook my FRCS for an august architectural qualification, but from time to time I now feel empowered to cite the letter in domestic dinner table discussions as indisputable evidence of my authority in architectural matters.

Report with designs on beauty will encourage more traditional houses

Chris Smyth , Whitehall Editor Saturday October 5th 2019,

Vitruvius, the Roman architect, set out three principles of building that have been followed down the centuries. The government has gone even better with “ten characteristics of beautiful places” that it expects planners to follow.

A design guide issued to councils explains how to make sure new houses and developments inspire “a sense of delight” rather than objections, in an effort to boost home-building.

Residents will be able to object to ugly buildings as ministers accept that more homes must not come “at the expense of beauty, quality and design”. The government argues, however, that more attractive development could help overcome Nimby opposition to building if local residents see that the developments can “lift our spirits”.

It encouraged tree-lined avenues, respect for local history, clear streets and a mix of housing types in its “planning practice guidance for beautiful, enduring and successful places”.

Architects praised the advice, saying that a “communal standard of beauty” would encourage more classical schemes, but officials said this would be a choice for local residents.

The final report of a government building review is due next month. As part of efforts to encourage more attractive development, ministers are setting out a framework for councils.

Robert Jenrick, the housing secretary, said: “This is not just about the quantity of new homes but the quality too. I want new homes to be well designed, in harmony with the local area and rooted in communities.

“Our new design guide will provide a national standard for planners to adhere to. We want to empower local people to decide what good looks like.”

The guidance will give planners more powers to reject unattractive developments. “I am confident that these plans to create well designed homes will be welcomed by communities and home buyers,” Mr Jenrick said.

Vitruvius laid out the principles of durability, utility and beauty. The government has said that new housing must: enhance its surroundings and be “responsive to local history”; have a distinctive identity that will “delight occupants”; have a walkable form with “recognisable streets”; be easy to move around; enhance and prioritise nature; incorporate a range of tree-lined public spaces; include a mix of housing types; have good quality internal spaces; use resources efficiently; and be built to last.

Robert Adam of Adam Architecture, which specialises in classical design, praised the guide, saying that it made traditional buildings more likely.

He also said that architects would have less latitude to impose their own visions on local people, adding: “If you say beauty is personal architects can do what they like — never mind the community. Once you admit there is a concept of beauty that belongs to the community, that changes things.”

LEADING ARTICLE

The Times view on the new National Design Guide: Home Sweet Home

The government is right to put beauty at the heart of its guidelines

Saturday October 5th 2019

The Roman architect Vitruvius set out the three principles of building in the first century BC. He argued that all buildings should have *firmitas* (strength), *utilitas* (utility) and *venustas* (beauty). At some point in the twentieth century, the last of these principles was largely forgotten, at least when it came to the design of housing and development of modern towns and cities. Sensitivity to aesthetics and local context gave way to an ugly modernism, often with disastrous social consequences. Rather than fostering community cohesion, bad design fuelled isolation and alienation.

In this context, the government's new *National Design Guide* issued yesterday as part of its overhaul of the planning system is welcome. It sets out not three but ten principles of good building, with the importance of beauty rightly at the heart of them. It argues that a well-designed plan should enhance the surroundings, be attractive and distinctive, fit into a coherent pattern of development, enhance and optimise nature and provide safe, social and inclusive public spaces.

These guidelines should not be seen as a rejection of modern architecture but a plea for developers to build the kind of homes in which people want to live. When buying their own homes, Britons overwhelmingly prefer houses in tree-lined, walkable streets rather than high-rise towers linked by busy roads. The success of Goldsmith Street in Norwich, which has been shortlisted for this year's Riba Stirling Prize, shows that it is possible to provide attractive high-density housing using innovative low-rise design.

Besides, there is a practical dimension to the call for more attractive design. One of the main obstacles to increased rates of housebuilding is delays to the planning process caused by nimby opposition from residents. The answer to Britain's housing shortage lies in more beautiful homes.