SUFFOLK DESIGN

HOW DOES DESIGN SUPPORT GOOD GROWTH?

Let me begin by saying that I think that growth is always good. Without it, villages, towns and cities stagnate, and ultimately, they die. A healthy community is therefore a growing community, and if we live in a town, or a village, or a city that is growing, we should consider ourselves lucky. We certainly shouldn't feel threatened.

In the past, cities, towns and villages have always grown from their centre out. Concentric rings, or extending fingers, of development have slowly, but inexorably, eaten into the surrounding countryside. The urban is enveloped by the suburban, and the rural is forced to retreat.

But today something different is happening. Growth is taking place not just on the outside of our settlements but also on the inside. And these two types of growth – internal and external – both have a crucial role to play in the future evolution of our communities.

These two types of growth also have two important things in common, regardless of their different locations.

The first is that they both have to respond to sets of inherited site conditions. They have to engage with their context. Obviously in the middle of a town there are existing streets, historic buildings, established uses, and familiar urban patterns all of which need to be assimilated and drawn into any new development proposal. But equally, on the edge of a city, there are interfaces with adjacent communities to deal with, highway capacities to assess, public transport systems to extend, gaps in social infrastructure to fill. And, more positively, there is an obligation, and an opportunity, to engage with the natural landscape.

The second thing they have in common is that they both require a design response, a design proposition about what goes where, what form buildings might take, where roads are placed, how open space is disposed, and what function it performs.

But the point I want to make is that growth is about much more than the erection of individual buildings, much more than the laying out of roads, the allocation of green space, or the provision of amenities.

It is about the challenge of creating new urban fabric.

It is not about the design of the individual pieces of the development but about how these pieces come together to make a whole. The aim is to make new urban fabric that is

continuous, connected and coherent: it hardly needs saying that far too much new development is , in contrast, fragmented, insular and confusing.

In using the term 'urban fabric' I want to make clear, however, that I am not just talking about a condition that is exclusive to the city. The qualities of continuity, connectivity and coherence are just as evident in towns or villages like Southwold or Woodbridge as they are in Ipswich, or indeed, London. Unfortunately, and curiously, there is no word to describe this quality when we encounter it in a more rural context.

The best phrase I've encountered is one coined by the archaeologist Jacquetta Hawkes. Hawkes, who was married to J. B. Priestley, wrote an extraordinary book (published in 1951 and entitled "A Land") about the evolution of the British landscape, natural and man-made. At one point, in discussing Chipping Campden, one of the small Cotswold towns that she so much loved and admired, she coins the phrase "rural urbanity' to describe this very thing, the consistency and completeness of its built fabric.

Achieving such qualities is not easy: they certainly no longer happen naturally. For me, this is why design is so important, because it is the job of the designer, the architect, to look beyond the individual components of the project to find a way of making a whole that is greater than the sum of its parts.

When I'm asked to describe what an architect does, I like to say that what they do is to design relationships: relationships between spaces, relationships between components, between materials, between the users of their buildings. And when the challenge is to create a new piece of urban fabric there are a whole series of other relationships that have to be considered.

Some of these are incredibly prosaic, but still enormously important. Where do the bins go? Where are the cycles stored? How can cars be accommodated without degrading the continuity of the built fabric? Others relate to issues of sustainability. How in the configuration of the public realm can using bike, bus or train be made quicker and easier than using a car? How can walking seem like the most attractive option?

Some relationships are contentious because they seem to run foul of planning orthodoxies. How closely can buildings be placed together to achieve a sense of intensity? How small and intimate can the public spaces be? And most importantly, what density can the development achieve?

Perhaps this is a good note on which to conclude but let me end by just saying one more thing about density.

For most of my career, the word 'density' has always had a negative connotation. Schemes would be turned down at planning because they were too dense. Neighbours would worry about an increase in traffic and about erosions of privacy. Schemes were certainly never turned down because they weren't dense enough.

But now we have a very different situation. We now understand that building at sufficient density is a prerequisite of sustainability, not least in order to minimise our consumption of land. Higher density reduces our carbon footprint. It also facilitates the provision of social infrastructure, of better bus services, more local shops, more cultural, educational, and health facilities.

And this is where good growth doesn't just benefit the residents moving into a new development. It also benefits the existing communities roundabout, because of the radical uplift in the quality and quantity of the amenities that in future be able to
 enjoy.

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