Dissertations

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Happy Communities
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Synopsis

Architects, politicians and planners believe well-designed built environments have a transformative effect on people's lives.

Yet the billions spent on house building and regeneration do not seem to improve them. Curious that both thriving and failing communities come in many guises, I decided to investigate the relationship between their built form and social circumstances.

I focused on two in London's East End: the Holly Street Estate in Hackney and Bromley-by-Bow in Tower Hamlets. Among the most socially deprived wards in the country, Holly Street has undergone a costly and well-designed redevelopment, while Bromley-by-Bow has received minimal funding for piecemeal improvement. Yet Holly Street's social problems persist, while Bromley-by-Bow is enjoying a revival through locally-generated social enterprise.

This investigation reveals a gulf between well-intentioned aspirations and the reality of community life. We have a poor understanding of what makes a happy community and an inflated sense of the built environment's ability to create one. Social factors must be tackled before the physical form can help transform them. Communities evolve slowly. Architects can contribute to their success, but only with others can they create physical conditions to help them thrive.

'impressive, well-argued, and ambitious piece of work that lives up to its ambitions' ADRIAN FORTY

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Building happy communities

What is the relationship between the built form and social circumstances? (Edited extract)

It is difficult to make definitive statements about how to create happy communities, or to be prescriptive about the role architects play in the process. It has, however, been possible in this investigation to make some significant points about the nature of communities and the factors that influence them and to answer, if only in part, my initial question about the relevance of the built environment to the social sustainability of communities. Although it would be rash to make pronouncements based on two deprived inner-city communities, the comparison provides a useful model for a wider application.

There is enough evidence to identify some essential components of successful communities and to suggest steps to improve our chances of creating them.

A community is a complex, evolving, social construct, which must be considered in the context of its physical environment. The relationship is symbiotic: the built environment can both damage or enhance communities.

In *The Cost of Bad Design* Cabe says that the characteristics of 'well-designed places' are well understood and can be known and applied by good designers.

They are: continuity and enclosure, quality of the public realm, character, ease of movement, legibility, adaptability, diversity and inclusiveness. These are the generalities of architecture; and it is telling that the list barely acknowledges the social role of design. This failure to take social issues into account creates false expectations and undermines the creation of sustainable communities. The design of places is a social science involving social factors over which designers have little control.

So where does this leave architects? They are integral to a social continuum, not heroic individuals acting from a position of enlightened detachment. Projects should be viewed holistically so social and historical context, economics and environment can together inform design. Architects can look beyond physical boundaries and extend the realm of the possible, but this must be grounded in both material and social facts.

The chronic shortage of homes means that most new communities will continue to house the least well off on large estates. If the built environment is to improve people's lives, we need a better understanding of what makes a happy community.

It is not enough for architects to be intuitive – research is needed to produce

evidence of what makes communities thrive, to close the gap between the designer and the user. It is essential to avoid repeating mistakes and to learn from what has worked, through developing mechanisms for the measurement of success. Some specific factors appear to increase the chances of creating a sustainable community: continuity and stability are essential, so redevelopment should be phased to avoid displacing the existing community; a failing community will not recover unless the impetus comes from within, engages a significant proportion of the community in a genuinely collaborative way; small-scale, infill social housing developments in already sustainable communities have the greatest chance of success; mixed communities, in terms of wealth, ethnicity and land-use, are more likely to thrive than those that are not.

It is therefore essential to address the mix in anticipation and to understand the social make-up of an existing community, through a social survey. Buildings and spaces should be adaptable – communities are more stable if they can accommodate changes in people's circumstances and flexibility encourages a range of uses by different age and social groups. Local landmarks and institutions create a powerful sense of place and identity and so should be capitalised on. Clearly some of these points are already acknowledged by politicians, developers and designers, but they are not applied collectively or consistently. As Cabe points out, new development is often dominated by short-term interests, or good intentions compromised for reasons of economic or political expediency.

In the drive to produce 3 million new homes by 2020, local and national government (backed by the Sustainable Communities Act) expect 'built environment occupations' to take a lead in creating cohesive communities in which people want to live and work. It is clear that this is a role that architects on their own do not have the tools to deliver. It is worrying that this false expectation is backed by such vast sums of money, and even more concerning that people are being misled about the extent to which the built environment can transform failing communities, or form the basis of new

socially sustainable ones. Design can play an important part, but the process must become more socially responsive and collaborative.

Professional training needs to acknowledge the social role of architecture and universities need to adopt a more socially aware approach, so that future architects and planners can understand how places work, how people relate to their environments and can be involved in the process of shaping them. With the wellbeing of 6.6 million people (or a tenth of the population) at stake, to create sustainable environments for sustainable communities is extremely important. The architect is fundamental to the process, but does not stand alone.

It is essential for the profession to take a lead in acknowledging the collaborative nature of architectural endeavour, and to ensure that neither the architect nor the profession as a whole is stigmatised for failures over which they actually have little or no control.

'the writer gives the impression they really know the communities' RUTH SLAVID

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