



## The Place Alliance Big Midlands Meet

Birmingham, 15 March 2016

The Place Alliance Big Midlands Meet, hosted by JMP Consultants Ltd in Birmingham, was an excellent platform to discuss the future of regional planning and urban design. Conversations began with the pressing issue of housing demand and where homes could be best located to promote growth. David Rudlin stated, ‘...growth should be accommodated in a way that reinforces all regional cities by making much better use of urban capacity, only building in locations that can be connected efficiently to town and city centres by public transport. Birmingham

should pursue a growth agenda if it isn’t to be overtaken by the other provincial cities.’

The imminent introduction of the HS2 as a high impact catalyst to structural transformation was discussed at some length. Issues of design and quality of place and landscape were portrayed as being of great concern in central England. Kathryn Moore said ‘landscape is still undervalued and underrated’ explaining that innovation and creativity are needed to combine traditional grounded knowledge with emerging ways to explore places through phenomenology. Phil Jones pointed out that most comments emerging from regional review panels relate to poor road design and that if we do not get basic principles right we will not increase quality of place.

The presentations continued by zooming into the small scale, looking at how development can impact on personal wellbeing and

on the population as a whole. This is particularly important in a world where societal changes driven by globalisation and communication advances are having a negative impact on the physical and mental health of the population. Noha Nasser said: ‘As place makers we are responsible for ensuring our public realm works to bring people together. Think about uses and activities that spark conversations and can be enjoyed by everyone.’

Recurrent themes across all presentations were the need to create places with a sense of identity, and the importance of considering, respecting and embracing public perceptions, both regarding existing places and new developments. The event discussions will result in a ten point action plan for the region, covering all scales of design and planning. A team will be established to create a place-based action plan rooted in ethical practice.

A huge thanks is due to Emily Walsh, Chair of the RTP1 West Midlands urban design forum and Associate Director at JMP for making this event possible, who said:

‘Our Big Midlands Meet was a great success, with over 100 people attending from a wide range of organisations. The presentations and discussions on the day have pointed to a number key things we need to do to deliver great places in the Midlands.’ ●

Laura Alvarez, alkiki Co-founding Director  
UDG East Midlands Convenor



## The Big Meet 5

UCL, London, 29 April 2016

Place Alliance which describes itself as a ‘movement’, was borne out of the Farrell Review’s recommendation that place quality should concern us rather than urban design, arguably a semantic rather than a fundamental difference. The Big Meet 5 hosted by UCL’s Bartlett School of Planning aimed to reflect on design review and assembled a number of professionals involved in this growing industry. Matthew Carmona started the proceedings with a fascinating account of the history of design review, starting in 1802

and ending today with a free market and a variety of models. Former director of CABE, Richard Simmons then described these, how they evolved after the demise of CABE, what they have in common and what the differences are. Victor Callister, Deputy Director at the Design Council argued that as investment in the property market is so huge, it has a major influence on planning. Therefore design review, to be accepted, needs to be cost effective and show what impact it really has on quality, which can only be done with evidence based research – not available at present.

Turning to practical matters, David Tittle, formerly of MADE and now design manager at Design South East pointed out that place review is what is being done by panels and

suggested that the best approach was to review existing places in advance of planned proposals coming to a panel for review. He also emphasised the importance of timing, as schemes are often reviewed too late in the process and therefore the applicants are reluctant to change their designs. Andrew Forth from the RIBA showing some examples of successful design review, added that it works best when people understand what its purpose is. After a detour through Northern Ireland presented by Mary Laheen, Nigel Longstaff, Group Urban design Director at Barratt Development, the sponsor of the event, gave a heartfelt defense of his company’s work. This is perceived very negatively (the cul de sac, the endless nowhere houses, etc) but with examples, he showed that the reality was much better and affirmed that the company is committed to improve design quality and place making. He also listed the obstacles to achieve this such as antiquated design standards, highway authorities, and bins! For him design review worked in some cases and not in others.

The morning ended with a debate that focussed mainly on how panels engaged with communities and how design review could be evaluated. ●

Sebastian Loew