A Design Quality Unit for England – Zoom Launch Round Up

On the 27th May *Delivering Urban Quality, Time to Get Serious* was launched setting out the case for a Design Quality Unit for England. The launch was joined by around 450 participants on Zoom and over 300 comments were made during the session.

There was an overwhelming concern that greater attention should be given nationally to raising the quality of design, and strong support for the idea of a Design Quality Unit (DQU) to help drive that ambition. Many questions were raised about the exact form a DQU might take, and only a very small minority view (less than 1% of the comments received) expressed reservations over the proposition.

There was broad support for five key propositions:

1. **Government support required:** The attitude and support of Central Government was highlighted as crucial to the prospects for a DQU. Several expressed major doubts about the present administration's willingness to set up a new arm's length body. This needs a cross-Government commitment.
2. **Housebuilder allies required:** It was observed that developers held a lot of the power in the development process, but that their current business model often discouraged good design. At the same time some developers are producing good design and Housebuilders should be engaged in a DQU. A DQU could help to improve the skills of developers and engage them in a discussion about the value of good design.
3. **Enabling local capacity and commitment:** It was generally felt that while it is the role of Local Planning Authorities to demand good design standards, in practice they are too weak to do so. A DQU should be able to support LPAs, for example through an enabling programme as CABE had done.
4. **A community engagement role:** A DQU could have a role in genuinely giving a voice to the people that are being designed for - perhaps by providing guidance on how developers could engage better.
5. **A national culture change:** Education of the public was also seen as a priority, helping ordinary people to understand the design process and what creates quality. It was argued that if the public become engaged in championing good design, councillors will see that there is political value in the quality of the built environment.

A number of questions about a DQU were raised:

The pamphlet focussed on putting the idea of a Design Quality Unit (DQU) on the table and beginning a debate, and deliberately did not offer an 'oven-ready' solution. Those commenting identified a number of questions that need to be addressed within that debate:

- what it's role would be, what form it could take
- what sort of resources or funding it would need
- how it would relate to existing organisations, the regions and support Local Authority planning departments
- whether it should include stewardship (as well as design) in its mission
- how it could be linked to the Department of Transport as much as to MHCLG and PINS
- the need to avoid becoming a "*Lipstick on Pigs unit*" with an aesthetics focus

- where it would be based e.g. outside of London
- Whether a DQU could rely on soft powers alone or would it require teeth to enforce good design e.g. as a statutory consultee
- some felt that monitoring outcomes acted to alienate housebuilders, others that a strong research and audit function was vital in order to command attention and give authoriity.

There was much discussion about the sorts of challenges for a DQU to help address:

There were many comments on problems with the planning system which are seen as inimical to achieving good design, and that these also needed to be addressed. Chief among these concerns was the definition of "sustainable design" in the NPPF. There were suggestions that *The Ladder of Place Quality* and Building for Life ought to be adopted to improve design standards of schemes. However, the poor resourcing of LPAs made the problems with the system much worse. Some questioned whether the resources needed for a DQU could not be better spent supporting LPAs instead.

One topic which featured strongly was transport and highways, particularly as an obstacle to achieving good design; "*the stranglehold of highway design*". The problems of car dependence, the encouragement of cycling and the impact of the C-19 lockdown were remarked upon. A particular concern was how to include highways in Design Review, which is not happening as a matter of routine. Another was for the *Manual for Streets* to be obligatory.

The implications and lessons of C-19 for the built environment design were discussed, such as that the tower block might have had its day, more working from home and co-working spaces. Regarding transport one comment was to point out that C-19 could lead to worse design quality because cars might become more popular in preference to using public transport. The importance of good place-making in ensuring health, well-being and for an ageing population was highlighted. C-19 had shown the importance of nature for health and well-being, including parks. Design now needs to ensure good access to nature for all as a health imperative. However, some argued that the C-19 changes are not transformational.

Following from this there was concern about how the Climate Change emergency and resilience could be more at the heart of good design. Others commented that the procurement process needs changing, and that partnerships of professions and communities are vital, to break down silos and benefit from using existing networks

There was much discussion about what makes for good design, and what the costs of good or bad design are. It was observed that good design is still generally regarded as 'an expensive nice to have' rather than essential. The contribution of Design Review to achieving delivering good design was emphasised, as was the role of the historic environment for good places, and the use of design codes or guides.