

We need architects who understand this city



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10 Mar 2011

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New housing developments are unpopular with the public, pretty much wherever they are. Yesterday housing minister Grant Shapps weighed in, decrying the "Legoland" character of much new housing.

He wants to make sure that new homes - and this Government wants to see a lot built - are designed better. He appears to advocate an approach that would see buildings faced in traditional materials to fit in with their surroundings.

But while I sympathise with the desire to give our cities more coherence, I fear Shapps is playing a populist game here. If he is not careful, appealing to the public's fear of new buildings will enforce banal stylistic preference whether appropriate or not, and obscure the deeper issues around what makes London a great place. London did not become beautiful by the meddling of amateur guardians of taste like Prince Charles. It was built by visionary developers and landowners, in it for the money and with a desire to adorn the city they lived in and loved.

While modern architecture is often seen as the problem, you don't see people throwing street parties to celebrate the completion of the latest Prince Charles-inspired brick boxes, or the latest estate of executive suburban homes, either. A long time ago, the development industry lost the public's confidence. Think of St George Wharf in Vauxhall, one of London's ugliest buildings, or the overbearing blocks appearing now at Hale Village in Tottenham.

It is not conservative taste that drives the public's scepticism but the often negative transformation of the city into a place of monocultural housing blocks with cheap supermarkets on the ground floors. These are not what London is made of.

There are many great examples of contemporary housing in London that use appropriate materials, respect local context and understand architectural history: Tony Fretton Architects' housing scheme in Vassall Road, Brixton, Karakusevic Carson Architects' Claredale Street Housing in Bethnal Green, or Sergison Bates Architects' project on Finsbury Park Road. All work with the existing city but leave something new, of our times and a legacy for future generations.

If Shapps really wants to avoid "bog standard, identikit Legoland homes", then he will have to do better than such bog standard, identikit clichés. Lego's designers, comfortable in the vernacular of castles, space stations and pneumatic dinosaurs, have considerably more eclectic and popular taste than the average housebuilder.

Shapps must get architects and planners around him who understand how to make a characterful place, one that reflects our times but is sensitive to the city's history and the relationship between buildings and people's lives.

Arguing about whether a building should be brick or glass conceals a much more important issue: the lack of strategic physical planning by local authorities. Often they display a failure of understanding of their area's culture and history. If Shapps wants better planning decisions, invest in better planners. Perhaps a few of London's thousands of out-of-work architects could help? Yet those same council departments are now losing staff.

Shapps needs to go beyond conservationist cliché. We need to find more innovative developers, in this country and from abroad, who can bring back to their work a sense of pride in the public life of the city.

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