

Volume housebuilders blasted over design quality following Bartlett study

21 January, 2020 By [Richard Waite](#) in Architects Journal

A damning [audit of the nation's new housing](#), which claims three-quarters are either of 'mediocre' or 'poor' quality design, has prompted calls for urgent action

The investigation of more than 140 housing developments built across England since 2007 found that one in five should have been 'refused planning permission outright' with their design so poor the schemes were contrary to guidelines in the National Planning Policy Framework.

According to the audit's principal author, professor of planning and urban design at the [Bartlett School of Planning](#) Matthew Carmona, the research showed the UK's main housebuilders were 'putting profit before anything else' and failing to act ethically.

The investigation is the first into the quality of England's new housing stock since CABE carried out similar research 13 years ago. The audit assessed developments against 17 criteria similar to CABE's to enable comparisons, including proximity to transport, community facilities, character and architectural quality.

It seems little has changed in the time between the surveys. The UCL report states 74 per cent of schemes were either mediocre or poor, compared with 82 per cent from the CABE findings in 2007.

Tom Fyans, campaigns and policy director at Campaign to Protect Rural England (CPRE) the countryside charity which co-sponsored the research, said: 'The government has presided over a decade of disastrous housing design and must raise standards immediately. This research is utterly damning of larger housebuilders and their failure to build the homes our communities deserve.'

'[Housebuilders] must significantly raise their game if we are to create the sorts of places that future generations will feel proud to call home. It's no wonder so many of our communities feel apprehensive towards new development when the design is so poor. That's why significantly improving the quality of design is central to addressing the housing shortage.'

Comments

Jay Morton, associate, Bell Phillips Architects

We are in desperate need of more housing across the UK, but this rush to deliver should not be at the expense of quality and good design. I am not surprised by this report as local authorities have challenging housing targets to meet but few options on how to deliver. This leaves the power in the hands of the mass housebuilders, who roll out the same identikit homes with little relationship to their local context.

We need to be using the land we have in a much more efficient way, with a brownfield-first approach, ensuring that new homes are built with or within the amenities that communities need to form and thrive.

Sadie Morgan founder of The Quality of Life Foundation

We welcome this excellent and timely report and are unsurprised by its findings. Our housing model is too often characterised by short-term thinking that prioritises profits and targets over people's quality of life. The result can sometimes mean sprawling, disconnected, unattractive, car-dependent and environmentally damaging developments. But it doesn't have to be like this.

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Some of the best housing schemes across the UK think about the long-term from the outset and put people and the planet first. There is much the industry and the government can do to foster best practice and improve the homes and communities we create. The Quality of Life Foundation is committed to working with anyone who wants to achieve this aim.

Lord Best, past chief executive of the National Housing Federation and the Joseph Rowntree Foundation

It is not only architects who are dismayed with the dismal design quality of so many housing developments – particularly those of the oligopoly of volume housebuilders.

For those outside the profession, it is important – although depressing – to get confirmation from this authoritative audit that our subjective impressions are borne out by objective analysis. Time for action.

Ben Derbyshire, former RIBA president and chair of HTA Design

This [report] is no great surprise to those of us who have campaigned for years for better quality in the provision of new homes. In recent weeks, Persimmon's admittedly brave admission that they must seek a wider purpose than simply making profit is an indication that some housebuilders, at least, won't be surprised either. Persimmon's independent review of its own business pointed out that its model of assembling land and selling homes missed vital ingredients of building them well. The company's own review revealed it had been getting along without virtually any basic quality management systems.

But government has a role in this too – resourcing local planning authorities to deal effectively with planning approvals, creating a level playing field by mandating the Nationally Described Space Standards and the now widely acknowledged Building for Life standard would be steps in the right direction.

Default permission for housing schemes in local authorities without an approved local plan has led to the disastrous construction of housing estates remote from amenities and without social and physical infrastructure. And the review of Permitted Development Rights needs to get a grip especially on the calamitously poor quality of commercial to residential conversions.

Is it too much to hope that the forthcoming Building Better Building Beautiful Report will have the complete prescription for delivering an improved supply of quality and genuinely affordable home people desperately need? The government should take a hard look at the Carmona/UCL report and benchmark its findings against the recommendations of the late Roger Scruton and Nicholas Boys Smith. The comparison should be instructive.

Leo Hammond, chair of the Urban Design Group

The conclusions of [this] housing design survey clearly show now is the time for all involved to up their game. We say it is time to build neighbourhoods and not housing estates. That is housing, with a mix of other land uses, in sustainable locations, with streets and open spaces for communities and a sense of place.

Alan M Jones, RIBA President

As RIBA architects highlight daily and this report emphasises, the design quality of new housing developments is simply not good enough. This is a problem for people who need new homes now. The solutions available to government are clear: increased resourcing, better design skills within local authorities, and a clear planning framework that upholds standards. It is also vital that permitted development rules, which allow developers to sidestep basic safety and sustainability standards are scrapped. Without these changes, the country will continue to store up further issues for the future.