

## **Design Literacy & Leadership – for influencers and decision makers**

---

Most Councillors across the political spectrum enter local politics to make a difference and to positively bring about change. As the recent Farrell Review points out (1B.3), they can be thrust into decision making without having any experience or skills on placemaking or design literacy, invariably where the most visual and fundamental changes take place and where legacies are created or lost.

Most Councillors and other local leaders are not routinely briefed or necessarily sufficiently experienced to understand design principles, building types and land-uses which contribute to creating a great place, neither are they always briefed prior to decision making in the ability to interpret plans or understand placemaking. Alongside this required sea-change in placemaking expertise, supporting leadership skills to enable behaviour change, forging positive and creative partnerships with others to grow civic pride is essential.

Well designed places give a sense of ease and safety, are easy to get around and to locate a mix of amenities, they include high quality public space and are fit for their purpose; quite simply creating a place that we would wish to linger or long for. To get these qualities takes consideration, good planning and an understanding of good design.

As decision makers and influencers we need to make sure this happens. Land costs are high, to build is expensive and the decision process costly and unfortunately combative; in the context of planning powers diminishing and ‘pecuniary powers’ taking centre stage, it is vital that what gets built today contributes positively to our environment tomorrow. It will be there long after we have gone and the legacy of tomorrow is in our hands now.

Increasing our engagement with design professionals as members and local leaders would be a good place to start, understanding design principles and contributing to the debate in creating successful places for our communities will benefit us all. Understanding our landscape - how uses work together, how connected places thrive - and encouraging a consistent approach to design quality, will help us deliver successful homes and places in our communities.

The 15c philosopher, Vitruvius set out design principles as being “sturdy, useful and beautiful” – good design is as simple as that. We all need to understand the underlying complexity of what that is and how we can do it locally.

The process of supporting the development of effective place leaders will require funding, encouragement from professionals, support from local planning authorities, and collaboration with the gamut of national and regional design and creative networks and agencies.

Building relationships with professionals to share problems and work together to develop joint solutions will help Councillors and other local leaders harness ideas, energies, talent and expertise from a wide range of people, that can change places for the better and help leave positive legacies. Local authorities could take the lead in re-thinking place functions across departments and organisations, enabling a multi-layered and cohesive approach to local leadership and placemaking.

There are a number of initiatives taking place from the Farrell Review; A PLACE Alliance is being developed with industry experts, Urban Rooms are being created to show people how their cities are laid out, the Design Network is planning training events in their regions for local leaders and momentum is building across the industry to raise the bar in good design.

As part of the wider professional network, actively involving and encouraging local leaders and decision makers in improving their built environment and the quality of life in that place needs transformational change.

To help us get there, these potential next steps could be a catalyst for change:

- **Call for a cohort of Councillors and local leaders to promote design literacy and understanding placemaking**
- **Forge links with local leaders, neighbourhood forums, conservation and amenity societies**
- **Promote benefits of leadership and design literacy for Councillors through the Design Network, The Architecture and Built Environment Centres Network and other local and national networks**
- **Collaborate with the PLACE Alliance as a hub of knowledge and information sharing**
- **Develop national placemaking and leadership network & briefing programme**
- **Councillors integral part of cross-sector engagement on design quality through Urban Rooms**
- **Local Government Association representation on PLACE Alliance**
- **Recognition for effective place leaders within professional bodies**
- **Campaign for a integrated placemaking government Department of the Built Environment**

The call for interested councillors would be to engage and lobby chief executives to promote and support design literacy and placemaking skills within each local planning authority in order to support the delivery of better places, broaden leadership experience and develop placemaking relationships.

The role of a network would be to help develop skilled, knowledgeable councillors and local leaders keen to build alliances, cascade and promote good design and placemaking skills throughout neighbourhoods, through neighbourhood planning and by application in decision-making, alongside an advancement of civic pride. It would help broaden how to promote good design in policy, procurement and

The overall aim would be to influence beyond individual authority, creating positive alliances, integrating design literacy and placemaking experience whilst building knowledge and effectiveness of local leaders and decision makers. Working with others, the network could call for an integrated placemaking government 'department of the built environment' that would bring together the dynamic elements and professions of making good places into a cohesive, connected framework.

Ideas and thoughts on the above would be welcomed as would suggestions as to how these initiatives could be supported and/or funded and taken forward.

Please email [sue.vincent@urbandesignlondon.com](mailto:sue.vincent@urbandesignlondon.com)

Sue Vincent 30 September 2014