



CONVERSATION: " Do council estates have to look like Council Estates? "

5.30pm to 7.30pm on Tuesday 17 November, 2009

in the Charrette Room at the
at John Thompson & Partners LLP 23 - 25 Great Sutton Street,
London EC1V 0DN Tel: 020 7017 1780

Briefing paper – by Liz Kessler

Do council estates have to look like ‘council estates’?

This conversation has been stimulated by two convergent thoughts and presents an opportunity to discuss their implications in greater detail. The first was a phrase in Lynsey Hanley’s excellent book ‘Estates’ in which she refers to the fact that ‘Everyone is inside or out, but there is no-one merely out and about’. The second a comment that has been made repeatedly by residents, and others, in response to work that has recently been carried out on four estates in the EC1 New Deal for Communities (NDC) area saying that it no longer looks like a council estate but like private housing, a comment that has been made about each of the estates individually.

This latter comment has frequently been made with a certain twinge of unease and questioning as though perhaps council estates ought to look like ‘council estates’, whatever that might mean. And again I have been reminded of the analogy in Lynsey’s book referring to the prison like qualities of many council estates, a description repeated by a resident of one of the EC1 estates describing her estate, on film, before work was carried out and noting the difference the changed feel of the estate has made to her life subsequently.

The above quote from Lynsey’s book struck an immediate nerve; it reflected experience of working in areas of multi-deprivation, the estates, in particular. It was particularly apt to read it while carrying out consultation/engagement on proposals for a large estate with 270 flats in three multi storey blocks, and no one around on a Saturday in the middle of the day, while also observing the adjacent street, with about 30 properties, which was buzzing with informal chat. Landscaping work has taken place on half of the external area of that estate which is now busy and heavily used; the ex director of the NDC has referred to it saying ‘it no longer looks like a council estate’.

The approach that has been used for work on these estates has been designed using the principles of urban design, based on analysis, observation, creating connections and a context for as many different uses to take place as possible, albeit informally, with the aim of improving health and well-being. Each project has also highlighted further interventions that need to take place if indeed the estate is to function as effectively, and sustainably, as possible. Urban design principles, and the importance of design, are increasingly recognised in new development work but are not yet embedded in regeneration work on estates.

Areas of multi-deprivation attract government funding and the vast majority of the most deprived areas of deprivation in the country are large estates of social housing. The opportunity therefore exists to for a ‘place-based’



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approach, focusing on the multitude of issues that require to be tackled together if this deprivation is to be addressed, including changing the appearance and feel of the external areas. The temptation is to demolish and start again or, all too often, the approach is piecemeal, especially in relation to the design of the external areas, which have a major, and underestimated, impact on peoples lives, as has been brilliantly described in Lynsey's book. In a changed economic climate, with a greater emphasis on sustainability is another approach possible?

Many estates have areas of unused space – can this space be put to better use, possibly providing reasons for residents to be there and be doing something there? Can infill provide more housing or improve urban form?

Is there too much space provided for vehicles or are vehicles allowed to occupy space that once had other community-driven uses? And how do we improve on ground-floor spaces, in some cases ranks of garages, to encourage greater animation in spaces in between the housing? With less money, isn't it time that more is invested in landscaping and reconfiguring spaces between housing?