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Does design have any role in planning?

When asked a similar question by the Government’s Schuster Committee (1948-50), Thomas Sharp declared: “planning is design.”1 Today, few practitioners would respond so uncompromisingly. For as the planning system matured its role expanded to encompass an increasing array of socio-economic and environmental issues and shifted from its design-orientated origins, partly responding to accusations of physical determinism. Sadly, Punter and Carmona’s observation that design quality in planning is highly contentious, often reduced to aesthetic control and the first to be sacrificed for broader planning objectives, will reflect the experience of architects, planners, developers and elected members alike.2

Given the unprecedented need for more affordable housing and a professional imperative to improve residential design quality, has there been a better time to reconceive of planning as design? Tackling the false division between plan-making and plan-implementation to reimagine planning as something architects do when they evaluate, interpret, challenge or endorse planning policy during the design process may be a valuable first step. Metropolitan Workshop’s proposal at Roding Lane in the London Borough of Redbridge, springs to mind as an example of how the design process in the hands of a skilled architect and planning consultant can interrogate existing planning policy to reveal an apparently undevelopable site, thoughtfully developable. By painstakingly examining planning constraints the team demonstrated visually, that the proposed building profile would be no more imposing that previous depot buildings.

The potential for local authorities with limited internal design resources, to reflect-on and learn from participating in site-specific design processes when preparing new policies, plan-making and considering future proposal is likely highly valuable. Likewise, closer working with local authorities and architects to ensure design quality is faithfully realised, using the full policy and legal toolbox available to the planner, including enforcement, if need be. After all, although less strident than Sharp, the NPPF now proclaims: “Good design… is indivisible from good planning”.3