



PHILOSOPHER'S DOG DILEMMA

The odds are stacking up against development, with a lack of private funding, planning in chaos and a shift in power towards the nimbys, says **Pascale Scheurer**

THERE ARE NOT MANY CLIENTS OUT THERE WHO WANT TO DO SOMETHING A BIT DIFFERENT. THIS GOVERNMENT HAS NO TIME FOR 'ARCHITECTURE'; IT WANTS BUILDINGS THAT ARE JUST GOOD ENOUGH

We've just paid the balance on our weekend at the Balancing Barn, the first of Alain de Botton and friends' excellent Living Architecture series of contemporary holiday houses. Surface to Air Architects will be inviting a few friends and clients along to celebrate Surface to Air's six-year anniversary in early December.

I'm reminded of a joke in architecture school: that your first design challenge will be "a house for a philosopher's dog". Sitting next to de Botton at the Stirling prize awards, I was struck by the absence of private sector clients in the shortlisted schemes: three museums, two schools and a small mixed-use scheme on which the architect acted as client and developer. This led to a debate about who will be the patrons of architecture in the coming decades. There are not many private sector clients out there who want to do something a bit different, a bit better, create a legacy. In the public sector, this government has no time for "architecture"; it wants buildings that are just good enough.

If we are a dependant profession, it is because there are too many architects, chasing too few ambitious clients with the capacity to build. There are not enough philosopher's dogs to go round.

Architecture aside, the average philosopher's dog has two major challenges to overcome in the search for his new home: a mortgage and planning permission. Unfortunately, proposed changes to the regulation of both will make private sector development far less likely to happen. The question now shifts from "who wants to build?" to "can anyone build?".

Banks and the Financial Services Authority do not seem inclined to relax on the mortgage front, and this will continue to stifle housing demand. Buyers may love your properties, but if they can't access a mortgage, your development will sit empty and your business grind to a halt.

Planning is a problem architects, developers and lenders all agree on. It remains the

biggest area of unmitigatable risk in the process. Isn't it crazy that a planning outcome is less predictable than a court case? Even pre-planning consultation can just be an additional fee of hundreds of pounds, with no guaranteed impact on the outcome. Cabe's design review function may continue, but if it remains outside the main planning process, it will be an expensive doubling-up with no impact on risk. As Ike Ijeh pointed out (29 October, page 11), despite its many qualities, the problem with Cabe was that it disguised the planning system's inadequacies.

The government's "localism" agenda will only make the situation worse. Developers will be have to undertake costly and time-consuming "local consultation". Who will be getting involved? It's not the average hard-working parent or business person who has time to engage with a planning consultation. It's retirees with too much time on their hands and single-issue local councillors eyeing the next election. I'm all for power to the people, but at a certain point the government has to take charge and make difficult decisions. The unpopular stuff is going to have to go somewhere. Nobody wants a youth club or a nuclear power station near their house.

Individuals have very little incentive to embrace change. Why should we? Localism allows the nimby attitudes to very quickly become a "banana" (build absolutely nothing anywhere near anything) reality. The architect in me says that might be no bad thing. The original 1837 RIBA charter called for "the public improvement and embellishment of towns and cities". If we have neither the money nor the inclination to improve and embellish, then perhaps now is not the time to build. However, that will not help our industry, the people needing housing, the half a million children without a primary school place. Nor will it help to get our country out of recession.

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