

Intimidating - but in a good way

By Jackie Sadek on September 21, 2012 1:05 PM

I was invited to speak at the National Planning Forum at the Local Government Association yesterday on the theme "What next for planning?" Honestly! It was another of those "What would I know?" moments. I shouldn't really have accepted the invitation, but I do like the cerebral planning mob, and my ego got the better of me (flattery will get you anywhere, as you well know, Mike Hayes).

I think my role at these events these days is that of comic curmudgeon. A sort of "angry old woman" meets regeneration practitioner incandescent with rage about thefunking of common sense, coupled with the lack of decency and trust. Oh, and for good measure: how impossible it is to get anything done.

The worst thing about this gig was that I had to follow a glittering array of really clever people: Matthew Spry of NLP really has to be one of our finest private sector planners and Mike Kiely of Croydon council and the Planning Officers Association really has to be one of our finest public sector planners. These guys imbue confidence. One feels that the quality of the built environment really is safe in their hands.

Richard Blyth of RTPI was authoritative and refreshingly pragmatic; and totally honest about the breakdown of trust. And, as I have no clue as to "what next for planning?", really, I chose instead to tackle "what next in defence of planning?" and urged the old planners there to push back in the protection of our built environment and our country against this bonkers notion that it is our planning system that inhibits growth.

Start looking outward, I shouted, dump the earnest place-making clichés, ditch the elephantine processes. And most of all, don't give in to pressure to give approvals to stuff which is obvious short-term junk. Philip Inman in the Guardian said on Monday that "developers are as culpable as bankers - they need sticks not carrots". A bit outré and extreme perhaps. But it gets the point over.

And it was rather intimidating in the room, such a concentration of brain power. All the big stars in town planning were there: Michael Bach, Brian Waters, Roger Pidgeon, Ian Phillips, Corrine Swain to name but a few. I was delighted to observe the lack of any of the bleating "It's not fair!" (the universal cry of the toddler) that you normally get whenever a (collective noun please) of planners is congregated.

Last on the bill was our keynote speaker, Alex Morton of Policy Exchange, who is the progenitor of the latest policy thrust of course, and who really does have three brains. He made a hugely cerebral case for market realism in planning reform grounded in hard economic theory and global comparisons. I tried to follow as best I could, but I was struggling. I then regretted that I hadn't really explained my own complete (and conviction of the converted) devotion to localism properly. And I may go back to them about how to drive bottom-up regeneration.

I do think that, given all the wrong-headed nonsense about planning inhibiting economic growth, planners should start to really give the development industry (and the government) something to think about. The public is, essentially, on the side of a decent and trustworthy planning system. And I reckon it is time to take the case to the people, offer new hope to towns and cities, point to great examples out there and talk to real people, not just other planners.

All in all I was ever so glad I went. Even if planners en masse are a little scary.

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