

HISTORIC TOWNS AND VILLAGES FORUM

MANAGING CONTEMPORARY AND HISTORIC DESIGN AND DEVELOPMENT

A REPORT

The forum took place on 13th September 2017 at Kellogg College Oxford. The list of delegates was truly impressive and included two professors, a number of architects, senior planning consultants, design officers from major urban councils, principal conservation officers... and me – a romantic novelist and town councillor with a few old and tatty A levels. However, as the day wore on, I realised I was the person in the room probably actually *learning* the most.

We started on a walking tour of some incredibly interesting and (occasionally) startling new buildings designed by architects even I had heard of, and built (largely) as statement pieces by wealthy Oxford colleges. The afternoon was spent discussing how best to place new developments into old cities, with Newbury and Oxford being the ones that were concentrated on the most. Newbury and Oxford have their own challenges – many of which are not relevant to small market towns and rural villages – however, even on a small local scale there is a relationship between buildings and interconnecting streets which can be enhanced or ruined with good or bad planning.

The most memorable thought I was given about new buildings was how they relate to their surroundings: does it 'shout', 'talk politely' or 'whisper'. When we'd walked around Oxford we'd seen examples of all three and in some cases it was appropriate for the building to be 'look at me' and in others it was much better that the passer-by might barely notice it – or to believe the building might have been there for decades or even centuries. We were also made to think about how a building looks from street level – and what it does to the surrounding buildings; maybe blocking off a view of something else more noteworthy. Overall the building might be an architectural marvel but if it ruins a vista that has been enjoyed by the townsfolk for centuries it may be more of a blot on the landscape than a potential RIBA prize-winner. Lines of sight, how the building sits on the street and whether the scale is appropriate to its neighbours are considerations that need to be addressed, even if the architect is someone with an amazing reputation.

As the forum ended, I realised that, as a member of the town's planning committee, I get to vote on whether we recommend refusal or approval of projects with almost zero knowledge. My criteria are: does the building block a neighbour's light; is it too big for the plot; do I think it ugly; should the repairs be like-for-like or would modern materials be better...? Basically, I have been working on gut-reaction – as, I imagine, do councillors like me the length and breadth of the country. Maybe, there should be more seminars like this for 'ordinary' planners like me to help us make the decisions our historic towns and villages deserve.

Cllr Jones
20 September 2017