

Design is only a matter of opinion



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COUNCIL planning policies call for building developments to achieve a high standard of design but where does that get us when people say – and they often do – that ‘design is a matter of opinion’?

Administrators tend to set guiding principles and then leave the decisions to others – it was said of President Carter

that ‘when he came to a fork in the road he always took it’.

But few would want to claim a personal opinion as a definitive judgement and we obviously run into a problem at decision time – whose opinion to take?

Can there be a single truth – a definitive, objective and independent judgement of quality?

Put like that the answer must be no but I believe that there is an answer and it can be found in the collective wisdom of the crowd which develops over time.

What else explains the queues to see the world’s treasures? The trouble is that we can’t delay planning

decisions for a generation, let alone a century, until the wisdom of the crowd reveals itself.

Can anyone help? I thought you would never ask.

Fortunately, in the large crowd there is a small group specialising in opinions; we call ourselves the experts. We can help you to take a collective view by teasing out a design’s strengths and weaknesses.

Inevitably our opinions will vary (and when they do it always makes a good read) but our opinions and the reasons that inform them based on our knowledge of our subject are probably the most you can hope for.

They are certainly important, and all the better if they are not couched in jargon (pretentious – moi?) if only because when a planning application is refused the reasons have to be given and they have to stand up to challenge if there is an appeal – how tempting for the appellant if he can dismiss the people’s view as just a matter of opinion.

We are guided by certain basic ideas and values and we develop an eye for quality and truth.

Unfortunately if building design is taught at all it is probably as historical styles – ‘classical’ (think columns and flat arches) or ‘ecclesiastical’ (think round and pointed arches

etc) or ‘modern’ (think steel, concrete and glass, though timber is getting its nose in front again).

The criteria for judging the qualities of any design lie in the mixture of cultural and practical reasons behind it and my guess is that people will dismiss it who are not aware of them and rely on personal opinion – hence ‘design is a matter of opinion’ – but that can’t be right; we know there is more to it than that as there is to all artistic endeavours and perhaps look more to the future; remember the world is not given to us by our fathers but lent to us for our children. Enjoy!