

Balancing reactions with informed opinion



by **Oliver Palmer,**
vice-president,
Horsham
Society

find order in a disorderly world, order which can be expressed visually as patterns and proportions (musically as scales and harmonies).

Neuroscience tells us that our brains have a liking for pattern-making and are hard-wired to respond to rules to separate what we need to know from all that there is to know. These seem to have been recognised first by Indian mathematicians but they were enthusiastically taken up by the classical Greeks.

So much for what our heads tell us. What do our hearts tell us? Again neuroscience comes to our help. The limbic system of our

brain (apparently the oldest part) serves a range of functions and these include our long-term and short-term memories.

We can suppose that these affect our reactions to the world around us – we all know just how powerful the smell of new-mown grass can be. We must not be surprised if, subconsciously, these reactions influence all our opinions (even if they cannot be said to inform them).

Science has left alchemy behind but still has a long way to go and, with training and study, it is possible to understand something of the forces that subconsciously influence our attitudes and then to

go a step further – to apply that understanding to achieve some desired purpose.

It is here perhaps that opinion and informed opinion will not see eye to eye and where the balance has to be struck between the traditional and the modern, between the historical and the technical.

This is particularly important when we come to judge public design in general and planning applications in particular.

A major obstacle to the pursuit of the high standard of public design to which we say we aspire is the severe shortage of applications of quality. Perhaps the

first question we should ask is what does an application say to us?

This will help to focus our attention, discover whether the author has anything worth saying and question the values they express before we consider what, as the means to an end, we want to see.

The Horsham Society is concerned about the town's past, present and future and seeks to promote good planning and design for the built environment and open spaces. For more information and details on how to join visit our website www.horshamsociety.org or telephone 01403 261905.

IT IS often said that good design is a matter of opinion and in an earlier article I suggested that it would be the better for being informed opinion. That of course raised the question – what informs it?

In a later article I suggested that the brain shows a strong desire to