

Horsham Society

with John Steele



Why don't we insist on better buildings?

Almost everyone agrees that Horsham is a good place to live. More and more people want to come here as evidenced by the continued influx of new residents from London and other parts of the South East.

There are many reasons for this: we have safe communities, open spaces and access to the countryside, good schools and a splendid heritage.

Less obvious, but just as important, are our street scenes and building design. Horsham District Council has plenty of policies that encourage good design and the National Planning Policy says that good design is indivisible from good planning. So, why is it, when changes are made or new areas developed, that we are prepared to put up with so much mediocre design?

Part of the problem is that nationally there are too few innovative examples of good design, particularly in housing, and locally little is done to encourage developers to look beyond the current norm.

As a result, when you stand in the middle of most of our new estates (because despite fancy names that is what they are) you could be in any town in any part of England.



A multiplex cinema has been proposed for the western end of Swan Walk in Horsham

Developers tell us that they build what people want to buy and there is clearly some truth in that.

But given the housing market in recent years almost anything sells. There is no competition or market around innovative

design, and no encouragement to developers to move beyond their traditional market.

The results of design award schemes make depressing reading. The closest 2016 Civic Voice award winner in the new build category to us is in Winchester. To see a winner in the RIBA regional awards you would have to travel to Thurrock where you would find Derry Avenue, South Ockendon, a scheme for 25 elderly residents built for Thurrock Council Housing Department. This is interesting because one of the very few notable developments in Horsham in recent years is Standings Court, New Street, built for Saxon Weald Homes, which won a Horsham Society Design Award.

Whilst there are examples of good modern housing developments they seem to be one-offs. For example, Saxon Weald's latest proposals for the development of Winterton Court next door to Standing's Court are nowhere near so good using dark materials which in our view would create a barrack-like appearance.

As far as commercial buildings are concerned, Sun Alliance was responsible for a number of well designed office buildings but there has been little of merit

since. The current proposals for partial redevelopment to create the proposed Swan Walk multiplex cinema would in our view replace an average piece of street architecture with a bulky unsympathetic building that has no relation with others in the locality in materials or style.

So what can be done? First, the planners must make it clear that HDC's policies on good design will be enforced and our local councillors must reject examples which are simply not good enough. Despite a national requirement to have local design review arrangements in place HDC has not set up a Design Panel to which it could refer significant schemes. Independent advice is one way to overcome reluctance to reject planning applications on design grounds and ensure that local decisions can be upheld on appeal.

The Horsham Society is concerned about the past, present and future of the town. It seeks to promote good planning and design for the built environment and open spaces. Membership of the Horsham Society is open to anyone who shares these concerns. For more information, visit the website www.horshamsociety.org or phone 01403 261905.