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Empathy Architecture

I was recently appointed Chair of the Tyneside Committee of the Northumberland and Newcastle Society (N&N). The N&N is a volunteer based civic society dating from 1924 to protect and enhance the landscape, culture and built environment of Northumberland and Newcastle for the enjoyment of this and future generations. To fulfil its objectives, the N&N has established committees made up of society members whom have extensive professional experience and or great passion in respect of the built and natural heritage of the area. N&N activities are detailed at: www.nandsociety.org.uk

The N&N's Tyneside Committee sits monthly to consider planning applications relating to Conservation Areas and listed building consents within the City of Newcastle upon Tyne and North Tyneside. Newcastle's historic architecture is a fundamental part of the region's heritage and is a profound, visible representation of the City's pride in its cultural identity which is the envy of many other cities not only in the UK but internationally too.

I am writing to you in respect of the concept of 'Empathy Architecture'. This concept echoes the Committee's sentiment in its review of planning applications where developers often show a lack of sympathy for heritage and cultural identity through bland and inappropriate building designs. The focus on short term financial gain seems to drive planning applications in many cases rather than a considered approach where good design complements the existing environment. All too often the Committee reviews applications where proposed developments will clearly have a negative visual impact and it is difficult to understand why their promoters have not considered a more empathetic design.

Empathy architecture is not just about how a building affects its environment today, it is as much about sustainability and value for money in the longer term. Good design will endure because it adds to the visual environment in time becoming part of an area's attraction whereas ill thought out bland buildings have the reverse effect. In the domestic housing market character properties almost without exception attract a price premium because they are so appealing. The reality is we all need to consider making better use of existing buildings in city centres given not only the colossal challenges facing traditional urban based business but critically the need to better use finite natural resources.

As a Committee we want to dispel the perception that renovation represents poor value for money in comparison with demolition and reconstruction. Innovative conservation incorporating good design and using quality materials may cost more in the short term but these costs are invariably insignificant in the real estate value of the completed building. An empathetic approach is much more likely to receive early planning approval and therefore reduce developers' submission costs where these often involve complex multiple revisions to inappropriate plans. There is a clear financial benefit to developers in getting an earlier return on their investment rather than having to maintain and fund vacant buildings during drawn out planning processes with uncertain outcomes.

The decline in the urban retail industry has and will continue to leave many character commercial buildings vacant thus presenting a generational opportunity to substantially alleviate housing shortages and in doing so reenergise city and town centres. There are many fine examples of innovative, sympathetic design being incorporated into existing vacant

buildings where the outstanding original character architecture has been respected, protected and enhanced.

The Committee's aim is to promote and embed the concept of 'Empathy Architecture' where good design that respects existing heritage architecture and the local environment is always a primary consideration in planning applications.

We would very much welcome your response to this concept and particularly your views on our aim to mainstream 'Empathy Architecture' as the foundation of desirable urban planning and development.

Tim Wickens

**Chair, Tyneside Committee, Northumberland & Newcastle Society
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