

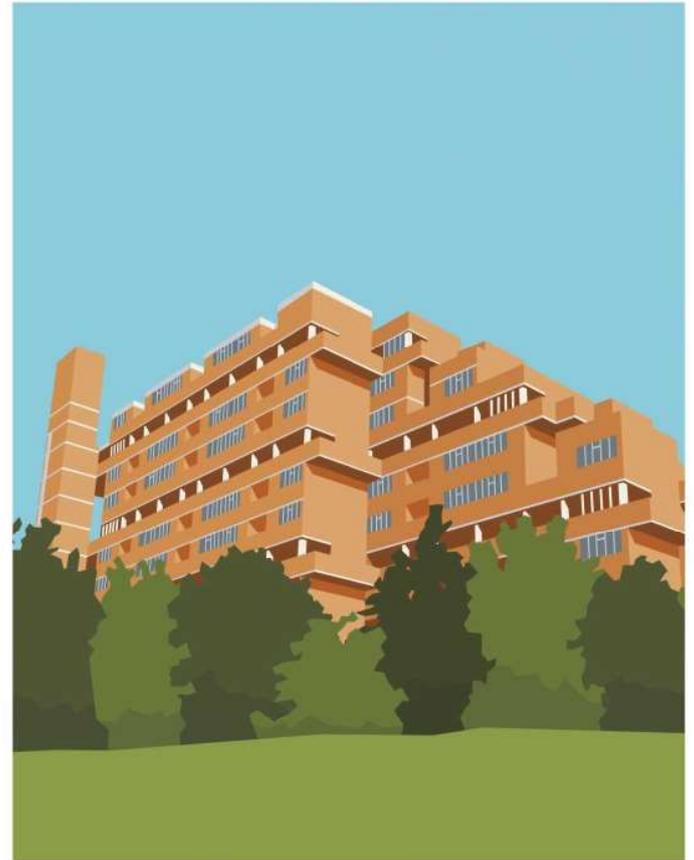
What became of beauty? In the 2020 report *Living with Beauty* by the Building Better, Building Beautiful Commission the word was central to the proposed extensive reforms of the planning system. That report opened by deploring the ugliness of most recent UK housing development and claimed the UK population resists new homes partly because new schemes are so unattractive. To restore acceptance, the report argued, developers must achieve beauty in their completed projects, not just as an exception but as a matter of course.

“Great weight should be placed on securing ... [beautiful placemaking] ... in the National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF)” [p.2, Living with Beauty]

In the event the 2021 revision of the NPPF did not give great weight to this. That status is granted only to six topics, and none of these are about beautiful new developments. Instead, the NPPF says that in determining applications significant weight should be given to “development which reflects local policies ... on design ... such as design guides or codes; and/or outstanding or innovative designs which promote high levels of sustainability, or help raise the standard of design more generally...” [paragraph 134, NPPF 2021]

However, the ten characteristics described in the National Design Code and the National Model Design Guide - the key policy texts for the first clause in the above quotation - do not use the word “beautiful” at all. What they describe is what makes a place well-designed. The Guide also makes frequent references to local character and the local vernacular. As for the second clause in the quotation, there are no explanations in the Code of what an “outstanding” design is, and the only mention of “innovative” is in relation to new construction materials and techniques, rather than design. There is no sign in forthcoming legislation that many of the Commission’s recommendations, such as equalizing the VAT incentive on demolition and increasing resourcing for planning departments, are on the cards any time soon.

The shift in language conveys a significant change in policy.



DAWSON'S HEIGHTS
LONDON

Poster of Dawson's Heights/Architecture by Kate Macintosh (see next page). Image from [Place In Print](#)

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What was exciting in Living with Beauty was the Commission's zeal for quality in place-making and a desire to engender a renaissance in civic pride. The report also addressed the implementation and aftercare of developments. There are many and strong criticisms of that piece* and I agree with many of them, but since reading *Towards an Urban Renaissance* I cannot remember feeling our government was holding in its own hands a paper that was a potential game-changer.

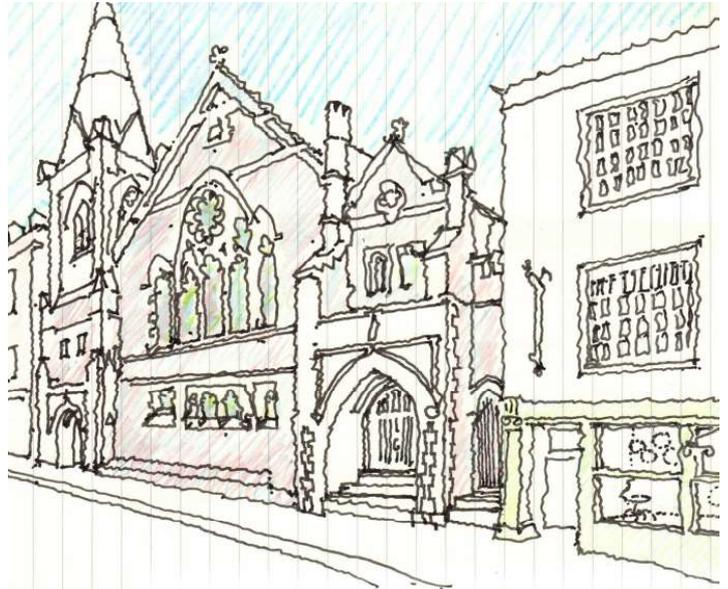
**Amongst the many criticisms were the report's perceived promotion of an aesthetic ideal over other important requirements for positive outcomes and insufficient emphasis on carbon reduction [for example, see Building Better, Building Beautiful Response, RIBA on [architecture.com / Resources](#)].*

In the shift from “beauty” to “well-designed” and in the move from Living with Beauty to the National Design Guide there has been a loss of passion.

Design Guides deal with the current time, they tend to say little about how to respond to the future or the past. Where I live in south London you see in local art shops lots of prints and drawings of modern architectural landmarks. Some of these are of estates designed by Kate Macintosh, architect and ardent social housing campaigner for many decades. Still, it took the threat of demolition to activate public recognition of the value of Macintosh’s 269 Leigham Court Road sheltered housing estate built in Streatham in 1968. Following a successful campaign by residents, the estate was listed in 2015 and described by Historic England as an exemplary representative of housing. None of these estates would meet the requirements of the National Design Guide. As for the future, the Guide does not address to any significant degree the problem of an over-warming planet.

What if we were to make prints and drawings of interesting and attractive buildings in towns and cities not currently widely recognized for strong architectural heritage, and share them locally in a guerilla campaign? I feel such images would trigger thoughts of pride and interest in people who may not normally think of the places they live as beautiful. That could have a big influence on the cultural confidence of councillors. If we were to calculate a ratio between the quality of a town or city’s built heritage assets and its reputation, and then create an index of the result, we would have an indicator of the potential impact of such activities.

Of towns I have visited recently, Grimsby, Hastings and Maidstone would come high on that index. Such towns have beautiful buildings but people have come to believe these places are ugly. Rekindling a belief in existing character and beauty is part of what makes people demand better quality of new developments. A town or city is culturally confident when it its cultural character, is willing to debate and revise its views about its own evolution and is discerning about the development it welcomes. Confidence is also expressed in the diversity of people who share these views.



Norman Road Methodist Church [converted to housing] is one of Hastings’s many built assets. Sketch by SI

You only need to add skilled resources and perseverance to achieve a high-quality outcome.

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Or a second idea. We are now often asked to make social value commitments in our public sector tenders: an undertaking to give pro bono work in pursuit of social goods. What about adding the discovery and creative exploration of our towns and cities to the list of validated activities? This also could help to build cultural pride in places and assist in increasing engagement in future planning.

These are small ideas but they could have a big impact. In parallel we also must, of course, demand the significant changes to national legislation that will tackle the extractive economy of land appropriation, poor practice in government procurement of buildings, and the VAT rules that encourage demolition of buildings. However, our arguments for these changes will be stronger the more certain we are what is the kind of development we want.

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