



# Architects' Journal

## First-ever national housing audit hopes to push design up the agenda

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A national audit of new-built housing is launching this summer to examine how design quality has changed in the past decade

The independent project, which will examine at least 100 major schemes across England, will be led by Matthew Carmona, professor of planning and urban design at the [Bartlett School of Planning](#) (UCL).

The survey will be the first housing audit since the abolition of CABE, which conducted a series of regional audits between 2004 and 2007.

Project backers the Campaign for the Protection of Rural England (CPRE) and UCL's Place Alliance say they hope the audit will feed into the government's controversial Building Better, Building Beautiful Commission.

The audit will focus on the top volume housebuilders in regions across England, looking at the quality of mixed-tenure schemes with a minimum of 50 units up to 3,000.

Carmona described the audit as 'long overdue', adding: 'There is so much discussion on the shortage of housing and the need to build more. You hear anecdotally about the quality of housing without systematic study.'

'CABE were able to engage housebuilders in the debate around the need for design quality. Since it was [scrapped], there hasn't been anyone in that role. I hope this audit will start a coherent debate based on rigorous evidence.'

Asked about the impact of the audit for architects, Carmona said the profession should be more involved in the house-building industry.

'If we're talking about volume housebuilders, architects haven't been as centrally involved as they should be. My view is that if we can raise the question of design up the public policy agenda again, architects will find a more central role.'

In [a blog post](#), Carmona has described how CABE's housing audits were used to 'embarrass the housebuilders' through a campaign that publicised how poor, on average, their developments were.

However, he told the AJ, 'naming and shaming' was not the aim of this audit, but rather to gather evidence which can then be used to look back at whether volume housebuilding has improved.

According to Carmona, there will also be an accompanying study sitting beside the audit, which will look at whether the development team used a design code and if the scheme had gone through a design review.

Former CABE chair Paul Finch said he was 'delighted' to see the design watchdog's policies and initiatives had been revived. 'A key finding was that most housebuilders could deliver good design but also bad — depending on the attitude of local planners and councillors to the importance of quality,' he said.

'It has to be said that this sort of audit has nothing to do with quantity of completions; nor is it true that better design automatically means faster permissions. We need to be grown-up about this.'

The audit will assess developments against 17 criteria similar to CABI's to enable comparisons, including proximity to transport, community facilities, character and architectural quality.

In addition to investigating how housing schemes have changed, the audit will also provide a 'baseline' for measuring progress on placemaking in future schemes.

## **Comment**

### **Dean Clifford, co-founder of Great Marlborough estates:**

We've been pushing for more emphasis on high quality design when it comes to considering new housing developments and clearly more aesthetically pleasing homes would help overcome local opposition but it is important any design audit doesn't act as a smokescreen for Nimbyism or add more needless complexity to the planning process.

Strengthening local design codes to ensure new developments reflect or at the very least don't jar with the local vernacular, and giving local planning departments the resources to enforce them, would give developers certainty, local residents' assurances on the look and feel of what is coming forward while also avoiding yet more bureaucracy.