

Government considers fast-track for beauty

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Who has the right to define beauty?

A report commissioned by government into how the quality of house-building might be improved has recommended that beautiful buildings get fast-tracked through the planning process.

And the secretary of state for housing likes the idea – seemingly unconcerned by the implication that the state would then have to define the very concept of beauty.

The fast-track for beauty recommendation is one of 130 in a report called ***Living in Beauty***, produced by the Building Better Building Beautiful Commission.

Other proposals include opening old canals and urban orchards with a fruit tree for every home.

Housing secretary Robert Jenrick said he wanted to enable 'beautiful' buildings to be fast-tracked although does not yet know how it might be done. He said at the report's launch: "I will establish a 'fast-track for beauty' where individuals and developers, who have put in the time to create proposals for well-designed buildings, which use high quality-materials which take account of their local setting; that they can see their developments proceed at pace."

The beautiful deserved to be treated better than the ugly, he said.

"It can't be right that those individuals, those people who should be held up as the best and the brightest, people who are setting out to create communities as shining cities on a hill. That those individuals to be held up by the planning system and to be treated like the rest. They should receive an expedited planning process or even be removed from the planning system altogether with new, more sophisticated planning freedoms. And that's what we are going to do. The planning system must reward good design. So, I will be considering changes may be needed to incentivise developers to raise their standards. And to strive to create beauty."

The obvious question is: how do we define beauty? Aecom director Patrick Clarke reckons he is up to the task. He said that, just as with people, the inner beauty of a building was as important as its outward perfection. And we're not talking Colefax & Fowler wall coverings here.

"Quality design is about more than just the appearance of a project," Patrick Clarke said. "As crucial as that is, it is also imperative how we address climate change, promote better health and well-being, foster greater bio-diversity and deliver the necessary supporting infrastructure."

"If proposals for new homes are to win public support and gain planning permission more quickly, then they must not just look beautiful but also demonstrate how they will deliver on this increasingly complex range of public policy objectives. Success will require a fully integrated design approach across a wide range of technical disciplines alongside an extensive programme of community and stakeholder engagement."

However, Dean Clifford, co-founder of Great Marlborough Estates, said there were dangers in the state dictating any sort of definition for beauty. "Few could argue that many of today's housing estates are soulless and uninspired or that a lot of modern architecture grates against what most people consider 'beautiful' but there is a real danger here in having the government become an arbiter in what is beauty and what is not," he said.

He added: "The commission has some very solid proposals, such as slashing VAT on retrofitting buildings, but others such as fast-tracking planning for 'beautiful' buildings will do little to tackle the housing crisis, which is primarily one of affordability not aesthetics. The planning process overall should be more simplified and streamlined to reduce cost and uncertainty, with a rules-based approach to decision-making that include design codes that respect the local vernacular."

The Federation of Master Builders was more interested in the more prosaic recommendation to reform VAT. Chief executive Brian Berry said: "I am glad the commission has highlighted the perverse situation where people are incentivised to demolish old buildings, rather than restoring them, due to our archaic VAT regime, which puts a zero-rating on new build but charges 20% for repair and maintenance. If we want to restore and maintain our beautiful heritage it is vital we correct this anomaly in the tax system."

He added: "Our only critique of the report's recommendation is that it doesn't go far enough. The Treasury should cut VAT on all domestic repair and renovation, not just the areas listed in the report. The upcoming Budget provides the perfect opportunity to do this, and to help make the UK a greener and more beautiful place."