Architects should get involved with design codes – before it's too late

Hana Loftus

At a time when everyone – planners included – despairs at the length of time required to resolve even a tiny planning application, design codes offer the enticing possibility of clarity and certainty. Proponents of coding promise that they will make it easier and less contentious to gain planning consent, particularly for the 'background' buildings – infill schemes and housing developments – that are the mainstay of the industry. Being told what height and pattern of development is permitted in a given area is intended to help everyone by decreasing the number of issues for possible negotiation. It is something that planners, too, will have to be bound by and cannot arbitrarily overrule.

But, as chief government architect Sarah Allan implied in a speech to an AJ100 event last month, much of the architecture profession is currently on the sidelines of the coding debate. Many architects seem aghast at the idea of being bound by yet more rules and parameters, and put off by the suspicion that codes are a Trojan horse for the Poundbury-fication of all new development, that their creativity will be stifled by requirements for neo-Georgian windows and mansard roofs. As a result, the development of codes is happening in a near-vacuum of architectural input, and this is deeply problematic.

At the most basic level, it means that one of the primary users of codes has not been involved in making sure they are fit for purpose. Setting aside questions of style for a moment, is it actually possible to design buildings that work with the parameters a code sets, or are its rules mutually exclusive when put into practice? Is there a conflict with Building Regulations? Does the code ensure that overheating is avoided, or will it lead to increased carbon emissions, thanks to unwittingly requiring a design feature that has a huge energy cost? And, even on a stylistic level, is it really certain that the 'rules' within the code can't be manipulated to create something very different from the desired effect? Have the aspects of built form that generate a distinctive sense of place really been well understood and articulated, or is it all a bit generic and vague?

Architects are practised at resolving these sometimes conflicting requirements on a daily basis and, at their best, are able to come up with ingenious, creative and beautiful solutions. Who better to be at

Primary street layout detail from the Great Yarmouth Design Code

the heart of developing design codes in the first place to ensure they are practical, easy to implement and do, in fact, generate a better result? Who else has the wealth of knowledge and experience of real sites, real schemes, real coordination between the competing demands of design and viability, and a ready-made library of case studies to draw on?

Design codes could – and should – be the quickest and most effective way of pivoting the construction industry into delivering low-carbon, climate-adapted buildings that are designed for our ageing population and changing ways of life. They offer the opportunity to replace the stock building designs – which cheap plan-smiths repeat time and again across different sites – with models that are exponentially better for people, place and planet. The reality is that not every client – whether private or commercial – can afford (in time or money) a new bespoke design from the award-winning end of our profession, which is why they rely on the end of the industry which turns out a pattern-book planning application at a very low fee. Codes should provide practical and robust design templates – just as the Victorian and Edwardian pattern books did for their generations – that can be easily adapted with little effort to a given site, and that are buildable, affordable, and resilient.

But design codes will only deliver on this potential if our best architects elbow themselves into the process of developing them, rather than standing on the sidelines with a mixture of disdain and fear. This is an opportunity to shape a whole generation of new buildings for the better – and one that architects should seize quickly, before it is too late.
Hana Loftus is a co-director of Colchester-based HAT Projects and a chartered planner