

OPINION

It's great that London has new design advocates. But what about elsewhere?

30 JANUARY 2026 • BY HANA LOFTUS



The 2025 Mayor's Design Advocates team

Source: Mayor of London

Travel even a mile outside the M25 and design literacy and quality of place drops like a stone, laments Colchester-based *Hana Loftus*

I spent much of last Thursday in a minor doomloop, but not because of Trump, ICE or Brooklyn Beckham. The trigger was the stream of congratulatory posts from the 50-strong new cohort of [Mayor's Design Advocates](#).

Schadenfreude from a rejected applicant? Far from it: I didn't apply, because it would be disingenuous. Not that I don't want to advocate for design, but because I am one of a rare species – a regional practitioner focused on improving the quality of place in my own region, and not on chasing work in London.

The calibre of the new MDAs is fantastic, but London is not where they are most needed. While appointing talented designers into positions of influence does not, by itself, guarantee great placemaking in every corner, the design culture that the GLA has – since the days of Richard Rogers and Ricky Burdett – managed to build and maintain, means that the baseline quality of schemes in the capital is almost always decent, and generally far better than that.

Travel even a mile outside the M25 and things look very different. In regional local authorities – whether rural districts, boroughs or small cities – finding anybody who genuinely champions quality of place is near-impossible. Design literacy – the skill to read a plan and understand what kind of environment this will create, and how this will be experienced by human beings – is virtually non-existent. And the ability to understand strategically how to use the levers of plan-making, policy and funding to steer schemes into being even half-decent is also vanishingly rare.

Industry professionals – including myself – need to maintain good relationships with the authorities clienting or consenting our projects, and prefer to nudge from behind the scenes, wary of being called uncollaborative or negative if we say too much, too strongly. We don't want to call out our fellow architects, those who are on the project managers' speed-dial, the outsourcing go-tos, the 'deliverers' whose work barely merits being called design.

Understanding of design and placemaking within the public sector is at an all-time low

But at some point we need to be more honest. An understanding of design and placemaking within the public sector – from planning and highways officers to senior leadership – is at an all-time low. When officers within councils don't know what good looks like, nor how to make it happen, and when nobody tells them what they are doing isn't good enough, we cannot hope for them to magically improve.

We all know the reasons that are trotted out to explain away this failure. The over-stretched, under-funded planning teams lacking senior expertise. The lack of budgets for anything other than cheap, lowest-common-denominator, 'that-will-do' design. The riskiness, the potential for legal challenge, the fear of a social media firestorm.

But none of this is an excuse. Expertise in design and whole-life construction and maintenance is exactly that: an expert skill that is developed through years of training and experience. A local authority would not dream of doing away with lawyers to ensure its contracts are sound or that Section 106 agreements are enforceable, yet they think somehow that the implications of physical design proposals – whether at the scale of a streetlight or a masterplan – can be assessed without any expert input.

This is where the real risk lies, because placemaking is not a 'nice to have' – it affects every council function, from bin collections and parking to social care and housing. When short-term, lowest-friction-point design decisions are made, they commit councils to long-term costs.

Expert designers know that natural stone paving rather than concrete will last longer, so will require a slower replacement cycle. They know that at providing shade structures in a park will require someone to occasionally clean them, but will also allow residents to spend more time outdoors, improving their health and reducing costs to the NHS, and encourage visitors to dwell longer and buy more from the nearby kiosk. That installing fewer bins may save on the cost of someone to empty them, but will increase the costs of someone to clear up the litter that gets dropped on the street instead. These are just a few of the discussions we've recently had with local councils, demonstrating the culture that has taken hold at every level.

The coming reorganisation of local government is an opportunity to put quality at the heart of communities

The **new NPPF** and **Design and Placemaking PPG** are far stronger in terms of putting design at the heart of the planning system – a welcome return. The coming reorganisation of local government is an opportunity for a new generation of council leaders to put the quality of the physical environment at the heart of how they provide for their communities – intersectional as it is, influencing all the statutory services they are required to provide.

Local government leaders should see engaging design advisers in-house, and funding town or parish architects to provide impartial, expert advice – as the Mayor of London has done – as a vital resource without which they are set up to fail. But this requires councils to do the uncomfortable work of recognising their own blind spots. Until then, London will continue to be the exception, rather than the rule.

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