

Householders are not the only ones fed up with the poor quality of design — planners are too



IF you are unimpressed with a new housing development in your neighbourhood, finding it lacking in every aspect (aesthetics, suitability for context and the rest) and fearing that its horrible proximity will depress the value of your home, then you may be surprised to learn that your local planning department may be just as angry. Some of the fiercest critics of developers' standards could be working at your town hall.

The responses to a survey by Royal Town Planning Institute and published this week include: "When you look at the houses built throughout history, each says something about the age in which they were built. Today is no different. It tells us that the driving force behind developments is profit, which is reflected in the low-cost, poor-quality buildings devoid of character being built across the country."

Another planner describes the schemes presented to him as "illiterate in terms of sustainability", while another complains about "bland and pastiche designs". Somehow we know that he has seen too many neo-classical doorways tacked on to lacklustre modern structures. Of course, he can object to such schemes. But he may be overruled, if only because the council must meet its new homes targets.

'Buildings devoid of character are being built nationwide'

This is all rather alarming. Britain needs new homes and some developers are rising to the challenge with extraordinary flair. But what incentive is there to build the best when the shoddy and nondescript can get the go-ahead?

Planners at the end of their tether may find it comforting to know that they are not alone. This week, more readers have told us of their worries over the numbers of small flats being constructed in their areas. As our report on pages 6-7 indicates, families do not want two-bedroom flats; many single people, couples and investors are not that keen either. Although Halifax figures show that the price of new-build flats has fallen by 5 per cent over the past year, some developers appear determined to impose poky apartment living on homebuyers. This is a conspiracy in which the Government seems complicit. No wonder planners are miserable.

SPECULATION OVER SELLERS' PACKS

A year from today, home information packs (Hips) will have been compulsory for a month.

We should have some idea of their impact, although it will not yet be clear whether they are serving their intended purpose: to speed up the sale process. The unintended consequences of Hips (folders containing data on the state of a property, plus searches) could be another matter — if you believe Oxford Economic Forecasting (OEF). This body estimates that, if there were to be a 25 per cent drop in sales as a result of the requirement for sellers to provide a Hip, 93,000 people could lose their jobs.

OEF's housing market predictions may not always have been the most accurate in the past. But in this instance it was commissioned by GMAC-RFC, the General Motors mortgage subsidiary. GMAC-RFC claims that its aim was to illustrate the need for realistic Hip pilot schemes: if participants paid the £600-£1,000 fee for a pack, the exercise would be a more useful guide to the future. There are predictions, however, that some estate agents are planning to absorb the cost of providing a Hip; insurance and utility groups could also be happy to subsidise the packs through advertising.

Amid all this prophesying, only one thing is certain: lots of people will put their houses on the market next spring to avoid the fuss of supplying a Hip. Almost everything else is just conjecture or scaremongering.

DETAILS SPEAK VOLUMES

The latest reviews of housing market performance tell a story — London sizzling, but more patchy elsewhere — that is now so familiar it is tempting to skim read rather than concentrate on every word. This would be unwise, because the details speak volumes. For example, Home-track notes that prices this month have been static in 56 of the 2,200 postcodes in England and Wales. In Cambridge, prices have risen by 2 per cent, but there has been no change in Bath, Birmingham and 22 further cities.

Primelocation's latest survey reports that the stock of available houses is down by 28 per cent in West and southwest London compared with last year. This gives us a picture of the impact of the growing preference for staying put and improving. Savills reports that prices in prime Central London are 14 per cent higher since last June. But Yolande Barnes, the head of residential research at Savills, questions whether the boom can continue, remarking that "now could be a very good time for profit-taking".

The scene of the next feeding frenzy could be country houses: Primelocation records that viewings of rural mansions have risen by 60 per cent. Some of the aspirants to the lifestyle of a squire are City men who are apparently expecting another round of bumper bonuses in six months' time.

anne.ashworth@thetimes.co.uk