

Shaping Better Places

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We are living in strange times. 'Wellbeing' has made the jump from the esoteric to the unremarkable in public discourse, perhaps because it gathers up and packages our disparate response to the feeling that something is slipping.

Effective interventions for a better public health have never been so needed, and nowhere more so than in the way we build to live.

I spend much of my time at the development coal-face, working with companies large and small to navigate environmental law. Sometimes it's a salvage operation, rescuing what we can of the habitats and landscape to be lost, sometimes a more optimistic exercise in designing new spaces that can extend and expand resources for wildlife. The latter is becoming a more common aspiration thanks to a shift in public policy towards what is called 'net gain' for biodiversity. Of course, this ambition is fraught with expedient interpretations and canny avoidance, but that's life, and the simple fact that the narrative has shifted is something good.

But this positive move for wildlife throws into even sharper relief the failure of development policy for people. It's not far from the truth to say that an average housing scheme will pay more attention and invest more ingenuity in the protection of its dormice, than in the basic wellbeing of the community it creates. We are building bad habitats for humans.

As a practice have begun to use the leverage that wildlife policy and law provides to drive up standards of public realm, play spaces and the shared and common areas that are the fabric of communities. If we can create more interesting, stimulating, appealing, diverse and flexible neighbourhoods for people by making those same qualities necessary for ecological compliance, then we might just avoid the terrible sterility and drabness of so much of our urban environment. We need to stop the erosion of public goods, the foundation capital of everyday places, starting with the rebuilding of our contact with the natural world.

We need to overlay a capacity to support biodiversity across the traditionally separate elements of development and construction: flood control, gardens, greens and verges; boundary treatments, layout and density, and even the materials of the buildings themselves. In this way we begin to concentrate environmental quality locally, folding enriched spaces for living into the development envelope. We have forgotten that we are organisms sharing our bit of territory with the encompassing natural world. It might too often be an impoverished and denuded ecology that we inhabit, but it is still an ecosystem, and we are still plugged into it.

Wildlife encounter, even a passing experience of something natural, is unequivocally good for us. We don't need to fetishize nature to benefit, we just need to make it easier, and more likely that we will see, hear, smell or touch something of the natural world in our daily rounds. By creating spaces for wildlife, in every part of the built and planted environment that our urban life generates, we can shape better places for people too.