



KIEREN PHELPS

It is time for some new initiatives on the community architecture front. Little has been seen in the media recently on the once vociferous campaign to promote user involvement in the design and management of the built environment. But much has been happening behind the scenes. While a return to the tub thumping of the mid-eighties might not be helpful, ways now need to be found to refocus attention on the benefits of user involvement and the steps required to make it more effective and widespread.

It is worth reviewing some indicators of the current state of play:

■ All major government inner city programmes now incorporate participation as a central element, most notably City Challenge and Estate Action. The participatory element may not always be handled as well as it could be but the opportunity is there.

■ Development trusts – one of the best mechanisms for involving communities in developments – are forming constantly. Several hundred now exist, most started within the last five years. A new organisation – the Development Trusts Association – was formed last year with government funding to champion their cause at national level and provide back up services.

■ The RIBA Community Architecture Group has secured British Telecom as a long-term sponsor and committed partner in persuading government to fund participatory design work. The Group's Community Projects Fund continues despite the recession and in 11 years is estimated to have generated over £80 million of community projects with grant funding of just over £1 million.

■ Increasing interest is being taken in the concept of 'architecture centres'. The first national conference on the subject was organised last month by the Arts Council which billed them as 'new models for public participation in the planning and design of Britain's towns and cities'.

■ Community planning weekends are also becoming increasingly popular. Based on the American Institute of Architects' Assistance Teams programme, they provide an ingenious mechanism for involving communities in creative urban problem solving. Over 20

have been held in the UK since the RIBA's pilot exercise in Southampton in 1985 and the Urban Design Group has recently decided to promote the approach.

■ National pressure groups are increasingly focussing on systematic community empowerment at all levels. Notable examples include Business in the Community and the Civic Trust.

So, to a considerable extent, community participation in planning and design has become absorbed into everyday practice. More developers and local authorities than ever before acknowledge the need for it and more professionals need to be able to deliver it. But there are still many barriers to overcome.

First, the full benefits of participatory planning and design are not generally understood. Anecdotal evidence suggests that participatory approaches can have immensely positive effects on user satisfaction, community strength, wealth creation and use of resources. If benefits claimed for some local schemes were repeated countrywide the implications would be staggering. But the evidence has not been sufficiently analysed or well presented to provide the simple but powerful arguments necessary for policy making or for generating popular campaigns of the kind used so successfully in the broader environmental field.

Second, good quality practice information is scarce and hard to obtain. Many new techniques have been pioneered and developed over the past decade, ranging from community planning weekends to 'Planning for Real'. Yet most published information is in the form of case studies rather than user-friendly 'how to do it' material, and distribution systems are *ad hoc* and inadequate. Third, there is little systematic training of enabling skills and participation processes. In short, community architecture and planning suffer from the typical British disease of inadequate research. What is needed is some solid empirical research combined with the development of better communications systems and training programmes.

Some positive steps are discernible. The DOE recently commissioned a major research project on the effectiveness of community participation in planning and development to be carried out by Bristol based BDOR Ltd (in association with the Newcastle Architecture Workshop), due for completion in October. Results are expected shortly from Partnership Ltd's more general study on participation processes funded by the Rowntree Foundation and several other research programmes are in the offing including an action-based study by Caplan Associates in Glasgow and a programme focussing on improving communications in the participatory planning and design field funded by the Prince of Wales's Institute of Architecture.

These initiatives should help pave the way for a new thrust for community architecture and planning based on solid evidence, experience and technique rather than slogans and theory. Hopefully, they will also herald an end to the misplaced perception in some quarters that there is a conflict between participatory and good modern design. If we are to build better human settlements, both must go hand in hand. □

PS

Nick Wates appraises the past achievements and future potential of community architecture

ROYAL INSTITUTE OF BRITISH ARCHITECTS
Journal