

Blogs

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[Beauty Matters: PassivHaus and Prince's House debate. Issue 3](#)Filed under: [Sustainability Hub](#) — Thomas Stoney Bryans @ 6:39 pm

While [the National Trust](#) may be on a [campaign to kill off the Government's overhaul of the planning system](#), there is at least one point within the [Draft National Planning Policy Framework](#) that they must surely agree with: the idea that good design, in creating better spaces for people, through ensuring that they are 'attractive, usable and durable', is "a key element in achieving sustainable development". It is after all an opinion that James Hulme of [the Prince's Foundation for the Built Environment](#) voiced himself in the PassivHaus – Prince's House debate, and there can be few organisations that share the Prince's Foundation's ideals more than the National Trust.

Remarkably however, issues of beauty and quality of design rarely seem to be raised within sustainability discussions. As Hulme noted, "If we're feeling confident we'll introduce issues of beauty into a sustainability debate, if we're in the right forum. We wouldn't try that with everyone". Why is it that to many this would be a provocative or irrelevant suggestion? Is it that sustainability is seen as somehow ascetic, about self denial and restraint? Or is it simply that design is perceived to make little difference?

On the contrary, the creation of beautiful places and spaces is essential in the drive for sustainability, and sustainability should never be used as an excuse for poor design. If you create buildings that delight and inspire, and places that people can be proud of, feel ownership of, and actually want to preserve and protect, then they won't be vandalised, and they won't be demolished in 10 or 20 years. For that reason, beauty matters.

The problem of course is that beauty is subjective, it raises issues of style, personal preference, and taste. The recent controversy over [CABE's perceived bias against traditional architecture](#) is a case in point.

It was surprising therefore that both James Hulme and Justin Bere reached a common consensus. Coming from opposite ends of the stylistic spectrum, they were united not by a shared aesthetic vision, but by a shared appreciation of craft, and the beauty that comes from refined detailing and making. As Bere explained: "beauty you can see in terms of proportionality and so on, and that's to do with order and design, but you can also see it in craftsmanship. If you look at a brick wall, deep down you think that that has been placed there by a person; it has human scale."



Carefully crafted: Justin Bere's home and office in north London © bere:architects

This is a significant point, it is after all in the human-scale details – through the haptic and other sensory experiences of them – that most people understand and fully engage with buildings. As Peter Zumthor wrote, "the door handle is the handshake of a building". This is a universal concept, as true of both traditional buildings as contemporary ones. As Justin Bere has written elsewhere: "While some contemporary design can be insensitive and even crude in the details, [a] delicately detailed approach [can deliver] beautifully crafted buildings reflecting the craftsmanship of the surrounding [historic] building stock".

All too often in our cities buildings are badly built and poorly detailed, a failure inevitably both of design and construction. Many otherwise good pieces of architecture have been let down by such failings, and many bad ones made far worse. Such failures transcend stylistic expression, a badly finished georgian pastiche is just as damaging to its context as its contemporary alternative, and neither will stand the test of time.

Beauty however is inevitably about more than just a carefully crafted handrail or perfectly pointed wall, it will always involve questions of style and taste, and those arguments are ones we will never find answers to. But beauty in craftsmanship and detailing, as both Hulme and Bere agreed, is universal, and done well it can increase both the appreciation and longevity of a building, ultimately making it more sustainable, whatever style it happens to be.