

**Wood wows Edinburgh residents**  
**Why architects are turning to unions**  
**Sarah Allan, Whitehall's chief architect**

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# Planning should be plan-led

How do all these identikit homes on the edges of towns and villages get through? We need to stand with planners not against them, says Hana Loftus



Places, planning  
& community

How often have you wondered how the acres of identikit housebuilder development on the edges of towns and villages get through the planning system, while you are mired in weeks of negotiation over a small extension? The truth is that planners are often forced to accept projects that fall far short of the placemaking ideals that drew them there.

Most of the country has no up-to-date local plan in force, making planners near-powerless to control development. If a council cannot demonstrate, by having planned development in the pipeline, that local housing demand will be met, then the National Planning Policy Framework states that any new development proposal at all should be looked on favourably. While councillors can refuse speculative applications at planning committee, they are virtually guaranteed success at appeal. And the developments permitted by this process don't need to worry about placemaking, community or car-dependence – all that matters is keeping up a supply of homes.

This 'five year housing land supply' rule is meant to be an incentive for councillors to put up-to-date plans in place, but it's not working. New

development is so unpopular with local voters that councillors increasingly refuse to approve any schemes at all. From Oxfordshire to Kent, elected members are ditching new local plans – pulling the plug on years of work by officers and hundreds of thousands of pounds of reports and consultations, and even rejecting them after they have been passed by the Planning Inspectorate. Some planning committees are even rejecting proposals on sites actually allocated for development in their Local Plans: indefensible decisions which are inevitably overturned at appeal.

These councillors can claim on their campaign leaflets that they have pushed back on development – conveniently blaming the Planning Inspectorate for overturning local decision-making. But all they have done is waste taxpayers money and demoralise their planning officers, while allowing unrestricted development to take place in the worst of locations. In the face of climate breakdown, these councillors open the door to thousands of homes on car-dependent sites, by cynically refusing to plan proactively for development close to jobs, services and public transport.

Architects come in all shapes and sizes, and some will be doing well from this breakdown in planning – producing site layouts for cookie-cutter development is easy and profitable. But if what you entered the profession to make durable and inspiring buildings and

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**Above** We need to fight for better places, beyond identikit houses.

spaces – what the RIBA stands for – you should be deeply concerned. Without a functional planning system, with spatial plans and placemaking goals guiding development, developers don't need architects of any quality. Our role will become limited to heritage projects, one-off houses and the trophy architecture of pavilions and 'signature' towers.

Architects need to stand up for a plan-led system, while making constructive recommendations to improve it. We must stand with planners, not against them; call out the cynicism of local politicians chasing votes with half-truths; educate communities about the way planning really works. Genuinely meeting our housing needs – affordability, quality, sustainability and quantity – needs wider housing and land market reform, but spatial planning is part of the solution. We need the right homes in the right places – as planners try to achieve through local plans – and will continue to as our needs and circumstances change.

Planners and architects love to complain about each other, but at heart both want the same thing – to leave a legacy of wonderful places. We may disagree on what makes a great place – on style or density or mix – but we can't have those debates without a framework within which decisions can be made and followed through. It's time to recognise that we need planners and planning, and to work with them rather than blaming them for failures that are all too often down to their political masters. As we approach another year in which national political uncertainty will provide an excuse for local prevarication, architects should be louder than ever in backing long-term planning for the public good. ●