

# Futures Fair<sup>09</sup>

SOCIETY AND STIMULUS

*Retrofitting: Adaptation & Aspirations*

12/05/09

## ***'NORMALISATION: A GAME OF PROPERTY TOP TRUMPS!'***



President of the RIBA, Sunand Prasad opened the first Futures Fair 09 seminar held on the 12<sup>th</sup> of May with a call for greater 'Investment in mass retrofitting.' The four-part series of conversations hosted by RIBA's think tank, Building Futures, discussed innovative strategies to tackle climate change and engage professionals from the fields of architecture, construction and energy efficiency in a sustained way. The discussion was led by the need for cultural shift and the desire for a radical change of attitude.

Hosting the day's discussion, Jeremy Titchen, of Qatari Diar confirmed that in 2050, "all buildings will be close to carbon zero." The speakers proposed a variety of ways this can be achieved and concerns that ought to be addressed.

Before formal presentations the audiences were invited to meet each other and exchange contacts. During this Futures-*links* speed dating exercise, John Russell of the DEC revealed his desire for all homes to implement the "pay-as-you-save" system. This involves the resident undertaking a long-term contract, paying for bills only once energy savings have been made. If tabs are kept on the level of energy efficiency of households, properties could begin to compete with each other in what Titchen later called a "game of property top trumps".

However, this shift in cultural thinking was only likely to emerge if substantial funds were made available. Gary Taylor of Sidell Gibson Architects believed that funds would instigate a "new industry in refurbishment", as architects and urban planners would better acknowledge a building's need to evolve organically over time. Once this is realised on a grand scale urban centres will begin to avoid unnecessary reconstruction.

Professor Yvonne Rydin, of the Bartlett and contributor of Foresights SEMBE project, led discussions with a wide ranging look 50 years ahead and proposed that all buildings should undergo accreditation schemes, having to pass regular MOT-type tests to assess a building's energy performance. Rydin suggested that if a building (be it residential, official or commercial), does not meet a certain level of sustainability, insurance for that building should not be granted until the building is sustainably worthy.

Professor AbuBakr Bahaj, at the University of Southampton, reiterated the care that needs to be taken when dealing with building refurbishment, warning against waste and tokenism and enforcing the need for attention to detail in the adding of thermal insulation to existing buildings. This was a lesson that architects ought to pay close attention to and that a 'one size fits' all approach would not be ultimately effective.

Matthew Bennett of the Soho Society followed up the technical responses with a very personal and passionate review of projects underway in the heart of London. Citing a range of examples and concerns, particularly on maintaining the local characteristics of Soho, he offered up the area as an ideal test bed. 'If it could be made to work here, others will learn from it. ....we should be placing our efforts at the heart of our cities, not in business parks outside them.'

Dr Matt Watson of the University of Sheffield called for massive infrastructural intervention and asserted that there is a need to fit technologies into the dynamics of everyday service provision. In order for retrofits to find pathways which overcome the inevitable public resistance, "Retrofitting has to happen in houses it needed to be 'normalised.' The consumer could in this way lead at home. As our economic climate is encouraging us to change the way we think about

new builds, people need to be made aware of retrofitting as an option that will benefit them in the long-term.

During closing discussions, interest focused mainly on the behaviour of property owners and their crucial role in making retrofitting standard. The discussion settled on a 'top trumps' approach, where individuals could make direct comparison between assets- both residential and commercial. It was thought if more households and businesses choose to modify, renovate and reuse their existing buildings we would eventually see an increase in rates of return and these could be competitively assessed in a manner that could be readily recognised- like the card game. Self assessment between users, tenants and landlords would have a positive impact on future generations' quality of life. If the recycling of buildings became a market sector in its own right it would have an enormous impact on climate change efforts now and by 2029.

*Laura Chan- Building Futures 13/05/09*

**For more see: [www.buildingfutures.org.uk](http://www.buildingfutures.org.uk)**

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