

RURALISE – AN OVERVIEW

Ruralise is an on-line collection of short articles on rural design by Matt Wood, of Wymondham-based architects Lucas Hickman Smith. It covers two main themes. Roughly a third of the articles are about the Community Right to Build announced by the government in July 2010 and currently passing through Parliament. The rest of the blog looks more broadly at how we might build in a rural context today, creating contemporary architecture that speaks of its own time but also of its own place.

THE COMMUNITY RIGHT TO BUILD

In July 2010, Grant Shapps the coalition's Housing Minister, announced his intention to create a Community Right to Build for rural communities which would allow them to bypass the planning system to create modestly sized additions to their villages. To exercise their Community Right to Build (CRTB), project teams will have to gain the support of local residents through a formal referendum. CRTB developments will be limited to 10% of the size of the existing village in any 10-year period, and create a new opportunity for small-scale development in a rural context which has hitherto only been available to affordable housing developers through 'rural exceptions' policies. As they are dependent on local support, CRTB projects will have to demonstrate some element of public benefit. Much of the early commentary on the CRTB concerned the provision of affordable housing for local people, but CRTB projects may contain all types of development, including commercial development which might be used to cross-subsidise a community project. The blog has addressed a number of key questions about the Community Right to Build:

- How might commercial development be used to fund community projects?
- Could any CRTB project ever really get broad support from its local community?
- Aren't we just 'concreting over the countryside'?
- How will design-quality be ensured?
- Can small-scale rural development be sustainable?

There are a several articles about the [Pennoyer Centre](#) in Pulham St Mary, an exemplar of how local creativity and enthusiasm can be mustered to create a top-quality community-led development, and a detailed [worked-example](#) of a hypothetical CRTB project, designed to illustrate the sort of value that a commercial development could generate to cross subsidise a community project. There is also a down-loadable [guide](#) to the Community Right to Build.

CONTEMPORARY RURAL DESIGN

Hitherto it has been almost impossible to build in the countryside. The national house-builders have promoted large-scale development on 'strategic' sites, housing associations have built next to villages on 'rural exception sites', and smaller wiley house-builders and individuals have managed to build one-off and small groups of houses here and there. If the CRTB and other imminent changes to planning law really do mean we are about to build more in the countryside, Ruralise suggests we also have a responsibility to build better. The dominant aesthetic for new homes in the countryside is an un-controversial pastiche-Victorian. Are such developments as 'locally distinctive' as they claim? Do they really 'fit in' to the Norfolk landscape? And can modern architecture offer anything better? Ruralise identifies and explores a number of rural archetypes – rural Norfolk's architectural DNA, if you will – and has begun to suggest how (and why) they might inform a contemporary rural vernacular.

Norfolk DNA #1 – Villages

We all have an image of a picturesque Norfolk village in our minds, and it is this image which informs the pastiche-Victorian aesthetic of most new developments. Do Norfolk's villages really resemble this image? Do modern housing estates...and indeed, why should they?

See ['Norfolk DNA – The Non-Nucleated Village'](#) or ['Villages on Steroids'](#)

Norfolk DNA #2 – The Wide-Fronted House

Before the C20th almost all rural houses were one room deep and two or three rooms wide. The wide-fronted house has been resurrected by house-builders in their quest for the village aesthetic, but it also offers advantages of amenity which more contemporary architects could exploit.

See [‘Norfolk DNA – The Wide-Fronted House’](#) or [‘The Wide-Fronted House #4’](#)

Norfolk DNA #3 – Farmsteads

Alongside the wide-fronted house, the other dominant built feature of the rural landscape is the farmstead. Taken simply as a relatively dense rectilinear group of buildings, perhaps the ‘farmstead’ suggests a model for contemporary development in a rural context, or used to add variety to larger developments.

See [‘Norfolk DNA – The Farmstead’](#) or [‘Contemporary Farmsteads’](#)

Norfolk DNA #4 – Roofs Across fields

In the rolling Norfolk landscape the large pan-tiled roofs of barns and wide-fronted houses often have more impact than their walls and windows. Ruralise suggests the view of roofs across fields should be a key consideration in both small and larger developments.

See [‘Roofs Across Fields’](#) or [‘Roofs Across Fields #4’](#)

Norfolk DNA #5 – Building Materials

Before the industrial revolution, buildings were made out of what could be gouged out of or grown on the ground very close by. In the last twenty years there has been renewed interest in locally appropriate materials but more accurate observation and careful specification could yield more convincing results.

See [‘Local Materials Faux Pas’](#) or [‘Thatch-Fest’](#) (Ruralise’s most-read post!)

Special and Normal Buildings

Generally speaking, architects are trained to want to design special buildings, to shock, amuse or otherwise impress with their work – but not all buildings are (by definition *can be*) special. Most buildings are normal. Ruralise is interested in the normal stuff, and wishes it could be done better.

See [‘Rural Simplicity’](#) or [‘Contemporary Vernacular?’](#)

Local Distinctiveness and ‘Fitting In’

The planning system is keen that new development should have a ‘sense of place’, be ‘locally distinctive’. Ruralise agrees, but suggests that most discussion about this important question is confused and superficial. When should a building seek to ‘fit in’ and when should it have its own identity?

See [‘On Local Distinctiveness’](#) or [‘On Fitting In’](#)

Rural Sustainability

Over the past 20 years the planning system has preferred urban development over rural, for perfectly valid reasons of sustainability. If we are to start building in the countryside once more, it is right to ask whether a car-dependant rural lifestyle can be truly sustainable. How can small-scale development in villages make them more sustainable places?

See [‘Urban or Rural? The Sustainability Question’](#) or [‘Rural Sustainability #2’](#)

How to Use Ruralise

Ruralise is written in chunks and there’s not as much cross-referencing as there really should be. Use the ‘Categories’ in the right hand column to split the CRTB-related posts away from the design stuff if you want to. If you’re looking for something more specific, try clicking on keywords in the ‘Tag-Cloud’ or use the ‘Search’ box at the foot of the right hand column.