

## **Cities, Communities and Homes: Is the Urban Future Livable?**

- **Paper / Proposal Title:**

Re-establishing cultural identity within small-scale housing developments

- **Format:**

Verbal presentation

- **Author(s) Name:**

Ruth Dowsett

Ian Ewart

- **University or Company Affiliation:**

School of the Built Environment - University of Reading

- **Abstract (300 words):**

There is an urgent need for additional housing within the UK. However, the drive to build one million new homes by 2020 has prompted construction and planning methods that poses a risk to the cultural significance of communities created within the built environment. Homes need to be built faster and on a larger scale, but economies of scale dictate that developers must produce standardised and repeatable homes, the design of which is abstracted from the context of their location. Planning considerations are dominated by the practicalities of space efficiencies whilst rarely considering ways to maintain the vibrancy, nuances and cohesiveness of local communities. This is in spite of widespread recognition of the positive effect of culture and heritage on health and wellbeing, and the development of a sense of community. A cultural vacuum is created within large housing developments when the design of homes within them is decoupled from the vernacular architecture and history of the towns and cities that they surround.

However, low-volume housing development, built on small brownfield sites within existing towns presents itself as an opportunity to better balance the social, economic, and ecological outcomes of regeneration. Small housebuilders tend to build more bespoke homes, their supply chains are more flexible, and they are in closer contact with the local community. This research looks at ways of reintroducing historically and culturally significant architecture into new housing, whether through reclamation of materials, reviving traditional skills and knowledge of their application, or introducing distinct and exemplar materials and methods. We recognise that it is unrealistic to influence the totality of national or regional housebuilding, but our suggestion is that by introducing culturally significant architecture into small newly developed housing communities this will go some way toward generating a greater sense of local pride and belonging.

• **Author(s) Biography (200 words each):**

Ruth Dowsett:

Ruth Dowsett is a research associate at the University of Reading. She started her academic career as a Building Surveying undergraduate, moving on to complete a Masters in Renewable Energy: Sustainability and Technology, and then went on to complete her Engineering Doctorate looking at the implementation of information systems in construction. Her EngD research focused on the reconfiguration of actors, activities, and technologies that occurs when new technologies, namely Building Information Modelling (BIM), are introduced and how to assess the success of technology implementation practices employed to facilitate this process. During the final stages of her doctorate, completing November 2016, she began her career in academic research and is currently looking at the skills needs and cultural change required to introduce manufacturing robotics into near-site construction factories. She also spent 6 months examining supply chain issues in the delivery of timber-frame solutions for small house builders. Much of that time was spent onsite observing trade practices as they engaged with and adapted to the new environment, materials, and methods associated with modern methods of construction. Her most recent research activity investigates ways in which to reestablish cultural identity in small-scale housing developments.

Ian Ewart:

Ian Ewart worked in industry for many years as a mechanical design engineer before studying anthropology and turning to academic research and teaching. Combining these two pathways has led to an interest in the perception and application of technologies, the practices this influences, and how these inform the real, social experience of the world. His DPhil fieldwork was carried out in rural Borneo, investigating the social and technical practices involved in the construction of houses and bridges. Further ethnographic research has taken him to the Didcot Railway Centre, where he spent 6 months restoring steam locomotives, looking at issues such as skill, craftsmanship,

and the loss and recreation of technical knowledge. Since joining the University of Reading in 2011, and the new School of the Built Environment, he has carried out domestic ethnographies looking into the use of technology by elderly people, and the social implications for providing healthcare at home. His recent research has investigated the use of digital technologies to inform and influence our engagement with the built environment, in particular as design tools and through 3D visualizations, combining technology with social science research methods.