



# PUBLIC PRACTICE

## ENABLING A BETTER EVERYDAY: Discussion Transcript

A recorded panel discussion in Norwich in March 2025 between Janet Emmanuel, Richard Eastham and Sarah Harding, chaired by Nana Biamah-Ofosu

### PANEL DISCUSSION

#### **Nana Biamah-Ofosu (NB)**

Thank you so much for being here. And we are going to follow up that really wonderful discussion themed on housing with, you know, another hopefully very cooperative and thought-provoking conversation and the title of “Enabling a Better Everyday”. And I'm really pleased to have three wonderful panellists with me - all people that have contributed to this issue of a magazine in some way. So thank you so much, firstly, for your contributions, and then also joining me for this discussion.

So we have joining us, Janet Emmanuel, Sarah Harding and Richard Eastham and I'm just going to start by introducing our panelists.

So I'll start with Sarah. Sarah is a current Public Practice Associate and Senior Development Management Officer at Bristol City Council. Originally from South Africa, she holds a Master's degree in Architecture, and has experience in multidisciplinary science, design and research. Her career spans roles in acclaimed practices, and institutions including Adjaye Associates, Counter States and African Futures Institute. In 2023 she contributed to the 18th International Architecture exhibition at La Biennale de Venezia under the under curator, Professor Leslie Lokko OBE. At Bristol City Council she has assessed planning applications of various scales and has recently taken on a dedicated role managing applications within Bristol's city centre.

Richard is an accomplished urban designer and urban planner known for his expertise in creating design strategies and cities and development frameworks. He excels in working with local communities to shape effective spatial strategies and has led major projects for towns, including Liverpool and Waterlooville. Recognised by the Royal Town Planner's Institute as one of the profession's most inspiring figures, he serves on several design review panels.

Richard also teaches at Arts University in Bournemouth and the University of Southampton. Before founding FERIA Urbanism, he had leadership roles at Terrence O'Rourke and NEW Masterplanning, following studies at Sheffield, Manchester and Oxford.

And then lastly, we're joined by Janet. And Janet is currently residing in South East London, and is a retired assistant head teacher and an English teacher with 19 years experience in secondary education. Janet also has 16 years' experience as a community organizer with Citizens UK, and is a board member of the London Community Community Land Trust. Passionate about genuine affordable housing for all she's also the chair of our Citizens House Steering Group in Sydenham, overseeing the community engagement and build of Citizens UK and Community Land Trust's first direct development in London. Citizens House has won many awards for both its community engagement architectural design.

So we're really pleased to have you all with us. And this conversation will explore the key themes raised in the "Process" section of the magazine. We dedicated a part of the magazine solely to talking about the processes that underpinned good place-making and good housing delivery.

So in this conversation, we'll be highlighting some of those exemplary projects that we presented through case studies, like the Deep Dive on Citizens House, but also case studies like Waterlooville's regeneration projects that Richard led on.

And then we're also really interested in hearing from Sarah about the reflections of her Public Practice Associates cohort, who you'll see contribute to their reflections on the programme so far.

So perhaps Sarah I'll start with you, and really wanted to ask about those reflections that you guys contribute to. Really explored the process of working and delivering within the local authority. Many of these reflections centered on what the differences between working in architectural practice and working within local authorities and trying to navigate good design while working with policy and certain constraints. I just wondered if you could maybe expand a bit on this, this transition from working in practice to working in public.

**Sarah Harding (SH)**

So I'll first draw on my own experience and then pick up on some of the key things from my cohort that are sitting here as well.

So on behalf of my cohort, many of us transitioned from architectural degree, I mean architectural practice and I think over the past year, I have developed an acute understanding of the challenges that councils are facing, which I think have been discussed a bit today, but to kind of repeat around resources, capacity and knowledge and skills gaps.

So from my own experience, I started a year ago it's my plan-anniversary, as the two might say at Bristol City Council. And when I first started, it became kind of immediately clear the challenges as a couple of weeks into my placement Bristol City Council was placed under special measures designated status, which is a bit of a challenging measure because it puts pressure on local authorities to overcome planning backlogs, while simultaneously making it difficult to do so because there's more work involved. So a large part of my role, therefore, has been to work through this backlog.

Was coming in at this really difficult time post-COVID, aware of there being kind of a recruitment freeze already, which had exacerbated staffing issues. And as a Senior Development Management Officer, my role is essentially reviewing Planning, guiding development through the planning process, so reviewing planning applications, promoting applications, and making planning decisions.

So a key aspect of this transition was the sheer volume of Planning applications in the system. Obviously, because of this backlog, as well as the quality of the applications themselves. The majority of resource goes towards small-scale applications, so minor applications, subdivisions, extensions, HMOs. It's quite a challenge to work through so many of those with offices kind of dealing with 30 to 50 applications at a time.

**[BACKGROUND NOISE BEEPING WARNING]**

And so, in that sense, I've been able to build a more nuanced understanding of the frustrations that architects and developers, on one hand, feel about the planning system and the delays that result, but also the kind of pressure that Planning Officers are under to manage so many applications at one time, while also dealing with consultee comments, conditions. It's been an interesting experience having come from an architectural background.

And then just a little bit about the quality of the applications. I think this has been a little bit frustrating, just to see how little input so many of the applications have had from architects themselves and to realise how our spaces aren't, in fact, shaped by architects for a large part, which was, I guess, a bit of a surprise.

And so when we have these smaller applications that have little regard for livability or they don't have a long-term vision, I think the most important thing there is really just to push for quality. And I think that's been the most fulfilling thing about my role is having poor, substandard proposals and pushing them to the baseline and further, on top of managing this backlog and firefighting this backlog and so on.

I think from my kind of experience, we've made a lot of progress. I think we're about to kind of have that Designation Status lifted, and therefore Planning Officers will have a lot more capacity to be able to refocus our energy onto hopefully developing longer-term visions.

Despite the constraints, I remain motivated by the potential for developing meaningful, long-term impact and ultimately making inclusive, enjoyable spaces.

So I've just kind of drawn out a few key points. Sohanna writes about needing to think big and challenge the status quo take risks, which I guess holds up the kind of risk-averse nature of councils, and I think that transition from private practice to public practice has made that clear. And similarly, Eleanor touches on ways of working and wanting to draw outside of the lines. Sophie and Laura reflect briefly on progress and how the public sector work operates on much longer times timelines, and you see progress much slower in comparison to architectural practice, where the results are immediate and tangible. I mean, not always, that's a generalization, but you do see them. And Nompsy hints at serving the public, so I guess this idea of seeing the public as a client rather than in private practice where the developer is your client.

I think all of us reflect on just working in a new place and being really grounded in that particular location. Some of us moved for our placement. So I moved Bristol. Amy and Alice are working in Cornwall. We've got expanded

new territory people in Dorset and it's quite something to be grounded in one particular, one particular place, rather than having ad hoc projects.

## **NB**

No, I think you've touched on a lot of things that I'd like to come back to. I found the postcards really generous, and your reflections of what it means for you guys personally in taking on these roles, but also what it means and the communities that you're working in, So thank you.

Janet, I wanted to come to you on thinking about something actually Sarah said about pushing for quality and thinking about what it means to develop high-quality places in local communities. And I also wanted to reflect on what it means to be part of a local community and champion a local community. And in real in your role in realising Citizens House, a project this spotlighted as part of our Deep Dive essay in the Process section, I thought was a real testament to community activism, engagement with the built environment.

And I just wanted to expand a bit on the importance of co-design in this process, how you went about that process. I know that you were involved right from the early days and work with London CLT, but that process of even selecting an architect, a contractor, if you can expand a bit on how you got involved in that and what that process looked like?

## **Janet Emmanuel (JE)**

Okay, thank you. Well, it was everything, really. We certainly believe that housing belongs to the community, not to private developers who are out for profit—sorry if there are any private developers here.

And it did really, absolutely begin with the community. So as part of Citizens, Citizens, basically is an organization that empowers local people to campaign on what on issues that they believe in. And as an organization, we were a part of Citizens. And one of the things you do to find out what people are interested in, you have a listening campaign. So that's what we did.

Housing came up as a big issue, a number one priority, mainly because, certainly, teaching in London, you see first-hand people, young teachers moving away because they can't afford to stay in London, or you've got children who, one minute they're living around the corner making a living in East London...there's a obviously big issue with renting and housing.

And we actually, we went to the council, got a campaign together, went to the council, and they said, there's no land. We just went there and said, We want land. There's no land. And it's really interesting what you're saying about actually community, you really made me think about what community means, and actually community does actually mean, the Council also, because you know that there was that kind of tension there.

So most of us that were in the that were in the group were middle-aged, senior women. So went back to the council and said, well, we it was one day after church, actually, just walked around the area with a big board and a map and just were looking over people's fences, car parks, wherever it was, scrubs of land, right? Put it on the map, put it on the map, and then we went back. Now it's very difficult sometimes because they had one lady Nana, she was 80, no one's going to be saying no to her.

But you know it? You know it was basically backwards and forwards, lots of perseverance. And we eventually, they, they gifted us some land. Now, the land they gifted us, it was having we found that they'd have a gas pipe through, it was a small it was underused garages, and I think they just gave it to us because I thought, they're not not going to do anything with that. We did.

And we started off, we did about 50 engagement interactions, newsletters. It was in between two states and a primary school. And so we did a lot of leafletting, asked them to come to a meeting. Most people actually were really lovely. Well, all of them were really lovely. And they said, look, we absolutely, we agree. You know about housing. Do you want to do whatever you like. But I don't really want to get involved. But we were able to get a core group of people to come along.

The first meeting was very interesting because, again, we certainly didn't look like your usual developers at all. And I don't really think they thought that we were up to much anyway. And our first meeting was about, I remember we did hopes and fears. So what are your hopes and what are your fears? And again, it's really interesting, you were saying the same thing. Parking was a really big, big issue. So they were talking about parking, but they had a lot of hopes, also. And it was really important as well as it for home being genuinely permanently affordable. We wanted genuine engagement.

I always remember a time when I was I was invited to go to some meeting at the town hall because they were building these, these huge flats in Catford,

and loads of people there, and they were really, really hostile. It was private developers and I remember afterwards what, I think one of them, I don't know why they spoke to me actually, because I was just, I just came along to support someone else. But he said, Oh, this is the time that you want to really challenge is not this now is too late. but I really, it really made me realize that actually it's about listening, and it's about making sure that if people know that something's going to happen when the trucks are rolling in, then you're going to get hostility. So it's really important to get the engagement right from the beginning, which is what we did. They were involved in choosing the architects.

We met the residents and the community where they were. So we went to the estate. We had a big pizza party. Mellis was there who we eventually chose. There were three shortlisted. So they chose the architects. The architects came. They had workshops. Or when Mellis was chosen, they had the workshops in the garages, and they had the children could come and move things around. We got the school involved, the local primary school involved. My school was involved at different stages, and they got to choose the builders, which was really good and the allocation process and the Allocation Criteria. So who should get the homes? They were involved in that/

I was really worried about the allocation meeting, actually, because you don't really know people. You don't know what they're going to say - I don't know that kind of person - you know, it's really difficult. But actually, well, it was interesting, because they felt that they didn't really want to say who lived there. And I had to really encourage No, but you're part of the community. What do you think?

And anyway, I mean the people that, the people who are in there now we, I couldn't design it any better, completely diverse, represent the community. It's wonderful.

The great thing about it was that it was during the pandemic, but the fact that, because we had done so much work. Because that's another thing I was worried about. Was that when the trucks do actually because people say lots of things, it'll be fine. It'll be fine. But once the reality sets and the noise is going, then they get, you get lots of complaints. We've hardly got any, I don't think we got any. Well, we chose the right they chose the right builder anyway. But it went really, really smoothly.

It took a long time because I do feel sometimes there is this tension with the local council in that we had to go to lots of, you know, we'd meet with one, then we meet someone else, and kind of pillar to post, and we had to be constantly showing our power. So for example, when we when they were having the planning application that the meeting to decide whether they would grant us a planning application, we turned out en masse with our big Citizens banners and said, "I dare you" so we were there, and so you constantly feel you've got to keep putting the pressure on all the time.

I mean, you have to. It's absolutely crucial that you work with the community. But as you said, the community is not just the community that are living there. It's, you know, relationship, isf I'm thinking and they may have that question later on, but certainly thinking ahead, making sure that you keep those really good relations with the council. And to be fair to Lewisham, they were, you know, Steve Bullock was good, the subsequent mayors were very supportive. And I was really proud, actually, that I had a meeting with James Ringwood, who was a Planning Officer, he did say, and this was, this was in January, that "if we had not built on that land, it would still be garages now", so, and you know, that's a really important lesson.

## **NB**

Thank you so much. Richard, I'm going to come to you following this discussion, especially sort of broadening out to the wider public realm. And I think something that Janet's picked up on, which I think your work in Waterloooville also does really well, is that empowering the community to recognise their own role in shaping their own built environments. And your project really highlighted different processes, for master planning and thinking about and centring, incremental, community-led approaches. Your community engagement program was really diverse and the tools that you used, produced some really enriching results, not just the result but also the process. And I just wondered if you could talk a bit about the how you build that community, but also empower them to recognise their own role and value in shaping their places.

## **Richard Eastham (RE)**

Yes, thank you. Yeah, the project that's on page 108 is Waterloooville, and it was a really rewarding experience. My practice, Feria Urbanism was the lead practice, but it was a really multidisciplinary project. And we had architects, landscape architects, business development, socio-economics, it was really broad range, and we worked together as a team on it really well.



And I think what Janet was saying, though, and other speakers too, about the listening was very important. But I would also go a little bit further to say challenging as you listen.

And we were quite progressive in terms of the sequencing of the events. So, our very first engagement was to we ran 27 walking tours around the town centre. We'd meet at 10 in the morning, midday, two in the afternoon, and this was November and December time, so we had the worst weather. And every time, I thought, there won't be anyone there, there's 10 to 12 people, 15 people every time. And so there's no apathy. And some people join these walking tours. I said, Well, tell us what's going to happen. And I said, we don't know what's going to happen. You're going to tell us what matters about the town, and you're going to lead the walking tour and show us around the town.

And we would listen, and my colleague Jade would furiously write in a notebook with her warm gloves on in the cold weather, but just the very act of writing it down in front of people. Not only were they being listened to, but they could see it being recorded as well. That was quite important, that it wasn't just tokenistic.

A lot of people's anger and frustration about regeneration is a lack of understanding about who's responsible for one. So, throughout all of this, we were trying to demystify some of that and explain responsibilities.

And it was Kieren, actually earlier, saying, when you tell the public these are really complex things, they aren't straightforward. They actually are much more receptive to that, and they start to become more accommodating of delays and the understanding of it. And that was part of the process, sort of woven into it.

The next thing we did was work with young people in schools. And I asked the head teacher for a photograph, actually, of me working with St Peter's Primary School. They were fantastic as the head teacher to have a selection of years, four, five and six. So I when I arrived the library, I was given the library for the afternoon, there's about 20 - 21, children there, and we have some worksheets, and they have some fabulous ideas, and they're really great. And a day later, went to Springwood school. I asked the same request for years four, five and six, and they opened the door and it was on to the sports hall, and they had given me all of years four five and six, I had 90 kids, and the

teachers went off to the staff room, they didn't have enough worksheets. They were sharing worksheets, and I've still got ringing in my ears.

But what was brilliant about that is we could go through all of this data. It was kids' drawings, so it was good fun. but we actually quantified each drawing. What was in it? Was it about greenery? Was it about play? There were lots of zoos. There were lots of sweet shops. But we were starting to break it down into quantifiable data as well as just the image, and what that was matching is the surveys later on in the process from adults were about greenery, about cleanliness, about leisure, and the percentages were broadly similar. So even under sixteens, we're thinking the same way, albeit perhaps in a different way.

And the last bit about young people is working with an A-level College, which was really interesting, because 16 to 18-year-olds are very different. when you consult young people, you've got to rethink of all age groups

On the walking tours, we'd heard about the Waitrose that closed a few years earlier and the people on the walking tours, "oh, we used to buy sourdough loaf", "Waitrose is shut", and then we were at the A-Level College, is a girl that 16, and she said, "I'm really sad Waitrose closed because I wanted to get a job there". And suddenly we thought, that meant something else to them. Their employment opportunity had gone, and maybe she'd go into Portsmouth or work somewhere else, or just not work. So that had a different perspective to it.

And then just finding the last bit of that process was to take all that rich information from the first few stages and take it into an empty shop unit. And Havant Borough Council were very supportive, it would have been easier logistically to maybe book a community hall or something, but we did get there was a lot of empty shops to choose from.

But it was something symbolic about a regeneration project taking over an empty shop for a week. We designed a new shop front, which became almost an advert for the project, and over that week, it became a really busy hub of activity, and a lot of the work from the children was pinned up on the wall. The map of the walking tours. Every walking tour we mapped with GPS. We had a really good map of that. And over that week, working with the architects and landscape architects, we took that and translated it into proposals, but proposals that could be tracked back to what we's heard, so they were really

responsive. And I think the role of planning experts and architectural experts to take the listening exercise but turn it into something is really important.

Just on that bit about the shop, we have, again, another great moment where a lady came into the shop and said, "this is all rubbish. It's all a total waste of time. None of it's going to happen." I said, Well, have a look around and read all the information and let me know if you still think that. And at the end, she came up and said, Yeah, I still think it's all rubbish and it's not going to happen. But the fact I can sit here and tell you that is what really matters. I've never had the chance to tell them." and she left quite happy with. So you give them a chance. It's great.

And it's been a it's a terrific project. And just going back to timescales, I think this was mentioned on the first panel, we had the pre-election period middle of March last year. Local elections were coming, so we had to get it all wrapped up. The public-facing side all had to be wrapped up by the middle of March, and although that did present us with challenges as a team, the programme was really compressed, looking back on it, we would probably have chosen to do it that way, because the momentum and the movement between phases quickly and working quickly with the public was actually really, really quite an intense way to do it and more rewarding. Big gaps between things. You lose that momentum. You start to re-explain yourself about why things are happening. Thank you so much for that.

## **NB**

I think you picked on something, you know, the sort of challenges the local authorities face, the precious spending pots, but also, I think, you know, we've all highlighted this afternoon some of those challenges. But despite that, you all have highlighted really, really interesting and successful processes for delivering and enabling good place-making.

And so, maybe wrapping up, I wanted you all, if you could, give us an example of a process that, for you, is sort of an exemplar that we can all learn from moving forward or what you'd like to see happening. Maybe I'll start with you, Janet.

## **JE**

Thank you. Well people, I mean, I talked about it, but certainly. funding is one of the key things. And I think what we tend to, obviously we go to the local

Authority, but what we're doing now is just trying to widen our relationships with other institutions. So, at the moment when we look, we're trying to see if we can work with the NHS. NHS has lots of land. Citizens are working on that. We're working on a project called "South London Listens" which is between citizens and the wards, and it came about due to the pandemic, and the mental health and issues that arose from there, and the direct correlation between poor housing and poor mental health. And they've got lots of land, and they're very, very willing. But it's the red tape, so we'll see with that.

We've got one site, Cable Street, and that's TFL land. So, trying to widen the people that we work with and obviously going back to the council but the council obviously it's quite difficult because they best land honest and they're very honest, the best land they're going to give to a private development so but they're going to come back with some small bits of land hopefully.

And again talk about engaging the community it's the you know that's got to be a must it's a community that's trying as well as the project, most certainly.

I would also say, well, perseverance, obviously. But Richard, we were talking earlier anyway about this whole idea of listening to the community even when we don't like what they hear.

## **NB**

In the article, Mellis talked about speaking to community and trying to actually understand what they wanted from the public realm, and very quickly it became evident that something that was hard to maintain was not perhaps the right strategy. So actually, sometimes that listening helps you with things that could have become mistakes, because actually they know their own capacity as well for maintenance and what works best for them, and actually now what is there is a really lovely, well-maintained, easy to maintain in the public realm that doesn't only offer immediate community something, but works also as a cut through for the rest of the place, and that's a really beautiful moment.

## **JE**

And they changed their mind too, because what they told us at the beginning, suddenly once the architects came they were telling them something else. But you're saying we've got something.

## **NB**

And Sarah, maybe I'll come to you.

## **SH**

At the risk of sounding cliché, I'm going to use Public Practice as my example of a process that I think represents a really valuable contribution to equipping councils for what we need in the future. And having had the opportunity to reflect in Public Notice about my cohort, it's just been really a pleasure to meet such talented, ambitious people who have such a broad range of skills and expertise and knowledge and passion to bring to across England and beyond, that I think that's definitely something we're going to need moving forward into political uncertainty and the poli-crises we're facing, is ambitious people who are ready to challenge the status quo and have insights and ways of thinking that go beyond what councils are used to.

I think maybe some of that comes from like our architectural educations in some ways because mine was very ideological in some ways and it was really about trying to change the world, and I think the people in this room and certainly in my cohorts have demonstrated that.

## **RE**

The question was about what would we like to see moving forward.

I think the key thing from the Waterlooville experience was the benefit of trusting the public with a lot of information. The week we had in the empty shop was the end of January, and it was a sort of chaotic, messy, there was Play-Doh, and there's lots of felt pens, and it was a, it had a real studio environment. But we then had about six or seven weeks as a team to turn that into a whole series of proposals. And when we returned in the middle of March to the same building, we had what you'd call a gallery and exhibition. The room was serene, it was tidy, and there was lots of well-presented ideas. We even played a bit of ambient music to make it feel like a gallery. But there was an anxiety that we had 27 posters and the room was full of lots, really rich in ideas, but the public absolutely want the full story. And there was one particular person, she came in every day with a notebook and she sat, she pulled a chair up in front of each poster and read it all and made notes. And over the three days, just absorbed it all.

I think as experts, people with a built environment education, it's important to share as much of it as possible, to as many people. It may be too much for some, but that's fine. But those that really have a thirst to know more, I think we owe it to them to give them the full story. And as a consultancy team, at

some point our commission ends and we leave the town, and if we can leave behind local people that know the story in a lot of detail, they're going to carry on pushing for that. And that, I think, was a great experience to see the work that was generated in January reflected back six or seven weeks later, and people saying, I know where all this has come from because I was with you in January. And I can see how this has evolved. I think the message is don't be scared to share as much as possible.

**NB**

Thank you so much. Thank you very much. You can write down one other thing.

**JE**

Yes. because you can get a bit carried away with meetings. And then I think one of the, they said, look, if you've not got anything to say, please don't meet, I've got things to do.

So I think that's quite an important point.

**NB**

Well I think it goes to actually speaking to something about meeting people where they are and how they are willing to engage with you. And actually groups that are harder to engage with, you might have to think about why, and why that might be, because actually they don't have the time. So respecting that and valuing their time and also their expertise that they're providing, I think it's really important.