

Context

The Borough of Kingston upon Thames faces unprecedented planning pressures:

- Mayor of London Housing Target - 964 homes a year + Opportunity Area Status
- New planning measures, e.g. the Levelling Up and Regeneration Bill and Design Codes
- Impact of Covid
- Climate Emergency: Environment Act 2021 + Emergency and Biodiversity measures

Yet there is no dedicated space where significant development schemes, design codes, or a strategic overview for the borough can be presented and communicated to the public. Where the public can discuss and debate policies guiding change to their neighbourhoods, and give constructive feedback, to ensure policies are tailored to local needs.

Involving the community in planning has become more important than ever since a purpose of the Levelling Up and Regeneration Bill is to “improve the planning system to give communities a louder voice, making sure developments are beautiful, green and accompanied by new infrastructure and affordable housing”. The Bill even proposes “street votes” to decide whether development should be given planning permission.

A neutral forum

What is desperately needed is a neutral forum where residents can engage with planning proposals, and developers and the council can communicate and consult about their plans. This would help to ensure that residents can positively contribute to change, and reduce the risk of bad developments happening.

That is the role of an urban room; to provide a space where proposals can be discussed, ideas generated, and plans developed. The urban room has been described as a place to foster meaningful connections between people and place, using creative methods of engagement. All to encourage active participation in the future of our buildings, streets and neighbourhoods.

An urban room can also provide a rich educational resource for local schools and higher education students. After all, today’s young people will have to live with the outcome of plans that are decided today.

What does an Urban Room look like?

The urban room is a flexible concept. The important thing is that it should be a space where the widest possible audience can be engaged, ideally on a high street location. It need not be permanent; pop-up urban rooms have been successfully set up in unused city centre shops. There has even been an experiment with a mobile urban room, to reach outlying areas.

One version is a space with model of the local built environment, highlighting future developments and providing historical context. However with the development of virtual models, this offers another possibility. For young people, digital means of engagement will be crucial.

KINGSTON URBAN ROOM

URBAN ROOM INFO SHEET

The term Urban Room was coined by the Farrell Review of architecture and the built environment (2014), as a collective label for spaces where a town's inhabitants can come together to debate the future of their urban area.

An Urban Room is a powerful way of involving people in the design process for their area. Urban Rooms are beginning to spring up around the country, often with universities taking a leading role in their establishment. Around twenty urban rooms both permanent and temporary are now linked by the Place Alliance Urban Rooms Network, We* believe Kingston upon Thames should have one too.

An Urban Room is a flexible model and it should be a space where the widest possible audience can be engaged, ideally on a high street location, like Sheffield's Live Works. It need not be permanent; the Church Street Urban Room (Birmingham) was done on a temporary 'pop up' model, making use of an unused shop. Sheffield has also experimented with a mobile urban room, to reach outlying areas.

Or they might even be virtual spaces, with online debate organised through social media. Virtual 3-D models of towns are available, e.g. by Arup, which could show significant consented and proposed schemes, to give a better understanding of their impact. Funding for an Urban Room might be part of a wider economic development strategy combining both public and developer resources.

An Urban Room for Kingston

The borough of Kingston upon Thames is facing unprecedented development pressures; the Mayor of London's housing targets, Cross Rail 2 etc. Schemes such as the Old Post Office site in Kingston centre and the Cocks Crescent SPD in New Malden, Seething Wells in Surbiton have aroused enormous public opposition. And yet there is nowhere that is presenting individual development proposals for Kingston or a strategic overview, and communicating them to the public. Given that so much change is happening to the built environment in Kingston, a neutral forum where the community can engage with development proposals, and developers can communicate and consult about their plans, seems desperately needed.

This is the role of an Urban Room; to provide a space where proposals can be discussed, ideas generated and plans developed. A model, virtual or actual, could help to give context and highlight possible linkages. Individual planning applications could be shown, with separate displays for large scale developments. It could also provide a rich educational resource for local schools and colleges.

A role for Kingston upon Thames Council

With the new Local Plan, Kingston Council's ambition is to create sustainable places where people will want to live and which will help people to meet their aspirations and potential. An urban room would be a highly effective way of helping to achieve this objective. Through giving Kingston Council's support to the exploration of the feasibility of a Kingston Urban Room, it would be demonstrating commitment to community participation, and the Council could play a leading role in its genesis and direction.

SUMMARY

- The borough of Kingston faces enormous change in its built environment
- To ensure development is sustainable and successful, better public engagement is needed
- Nowhere currently provides a neutral forum to engage the community
- As the local planning authority for the Royal Borough, Kingston Council has a duty to ensure proper public consultation about development proposals
- The model of an Urban Room could provide an effective response to improving public engagement.

*Kingston upon Thames Society together with the North Kingston Forum, the Chessington District Residents' Association and the New Malden Residents' Association support the idea of an urban room for Kingston. Other potential supporters/partners are being approached, including the University of Kingston, with a view to setting up a working group to explore the feasibility of the proposal, and its aims and objectives, and perhaps what form a Kingston Urban Room might take.

IF YOU CAN HELP US OR JOIN US LET US KNOW!

FOR MORE INFO:

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