

**Radstock Action Group
8 Colliers Rise
Radstock BA3 3AU**

20 December 2009

Mr Martin Willey FRTPI FCIS
President
The Royal Town Planning Institute
41 Botolph Lane
London EC3R 8DL

Dear Mr Willey

An Open Letter to the Royal Town Planning Institute from Radstock Action Group

We are writing to you with a mixture of concern and disbelief regarding the nomination of LDA Planning for an RTPI award.

Our comments go into some detail about some of our concerns and we look forward to receiving your responses. We suggest that the progress to date of LDA Planning's nomination could potentially reflect poorly on your much respected organization and would welcome the opportunity to put our point of view to you on LDA Design's proposal. We wonder how appropriate it is for an organization to be able to nominate itself for an award and for the awarding body not to seek out the views of the community which will suffer the consequences of the proposal should it ever be implemented.

Our concerns have been highlighted by an article in the Somerset Guardian of 17 December, describing how LDA Design has received a commendation in a regional category of the awards. According to the article, 'Judges said the regeneration of the complex brownfield site 'has been approached in a highly professional manner with local community support" '. We are puzzled since this whole project has been mis-managed and is most notable for its total lack of consultation with local residents, businesses and other interested parties. In fact, Norton Radstock Regeneration Company, which works in partnership with LDA Design, and which nominally still manages the project, now operates from a Post Office Box number with only a mobile phone number – hardly designed to reassure those of us who live and work in the area.

We understand from the RTPI that the documentation submitted in support of the nomination (by LDA Design of itself) for an award, cannot be disclosed to the general public, so we can only comment on our experience and in the light of having read the RTPI criteria for awards as they appear on your website.

We also understand that LDA Design's nomination is still in the running at national award level. We have quoted the details from your website in italics and our comments in normal type. We have chosen to concentrate on some specific criteria

as opposed to the whole range, but this should not be viewed as indicating that we think that the LDA Design nomination meets the other areas of the criteria. We do not think this.

According to the RTPI website, 'to merit a national award, entries must demonstrate outstanding achievement judged to have advanced significantly the science and art of town planning for the benefit of the community, or to provide an outstanding example of the beneficial impact of positive planning.'

Neither LDA Design nor Norton Radstock Regeneration Company has provided any evidence of how the project significantly advances the science and art of town planning for the benefit of the community. The parties involved have not even produced a viable business plan which has to be at the core of any regeneration of the town.

They have failed to capitalize on the valuable and valued natural and built environments of this town which should be central to any future regeneration; they have ignored the archaeological record; the evidence that the site provides a home for many rare species of plants and animals; they have failed to explain to anyone how they are going to address the very worrying pollution issues which this site has; they continue to ignore the wish of very many people in the town to see the reintroduction of the rail link to Frome and beyond.

In evaluating such achievements the following aspects, as appropriate, will be taken into account and should be specifically addressed in your entry submission:

1) Enhancement of the physical environment leading to recognisable social and economic benefit in terms of human happiness, greater safety and greater efficiency

There will be no enhancement of the physical environment. The plan is to construct a major new road through the centre of the town described by English Heritage as the best preserved mining town centre in the country. This town centre is a conservation area, predominantly of late 19th Century buildings which will be unable to withstand the vibration and air pollution which will result from bringing through the town centre, all through traffic, traffic which currently skirts the whole area. Structural surveys suggest that the integrity of the buildings will be threatened as, for example, they have cellars and were not built to withstand 21st century juggernauts. Additionally the shops and other traders housed in these very buildings will certainly be driven out as the small scale of the area so suitable for pedestrians shopping, visiting the GP, the Methodist Church and the Victoria Hall, is totally unsuited to the stresses of huge articulated vehicles and other heavy traffic.

2) How the scheme has addressed all aspects of sustainable development

This scheme has not addressed sustainable development issues and has opted to observe the lowest standard currently required by law and building regulations in this regard.

4) The key issues and problems that needed to be overcome

Far from addressing key issues and problems, this project will only introduce a whole new tier of problems relating to its poor housing offer, lack of observation of environmental/ecological qualities of the town, a total unwillingness to recognize the cultural and historical value of Radstock as the one-time centre of the North Somerset Coalfield and now the custodian of its history, through such facilities as the Museum of Mining Heritage and the Miners Memorial Park.

5) Quality of the professional work involved in project design, the development of planning concepts and the application of planning techniques

The design and quality of the housing has been the subject of a very serious range of challenges; the cheap wooden cladding is totally at odds with the beautiful architecture and stone of the conservation area, will look out of place and will provide crowded homes with little amenity space. We want affordable and social housing, we do not want cheap units which breach the government's pepper-potting principle, simply in an effort to attract government subsidy. Our young people and others in need of homes deserve better.

6) Extent to which the achievement may serve as a model for work elsewhere or as a basis for the development of further related schemes

It seems likely from comments made by the local authority that if this application were to come up now, with increased professionalism, greater transparency and a renewed commitment to consultation, it would be subject to far greater scrutiny than the planning application which was agreed for the current proposal.

As lay observers, we continue to be puzzled by breaches of what we are given to understand are current best practice principles in town planning and design. For example, not bringing through traffic into the centre of towns; not concentrating public housing all in one area; producing a business plan with clear indications of how new developments will aid and develop the local (sustainable) economy; preserving and promoting the distinctiveness of existing communities.

We cannot believe that this proposal would be a model for anywhere else.

This letter can only highlight some of our concerns and we hope that we will have the opportunity to elaborate to you our worries and our aspirations for our town, in the near future. We have sent a copy of this Open Letter to the press and will be forwarding a copy to your patron, HRH The Prince of Wales.

We look forward to hearing from you.

Yours sincerely

Amanda Leon
Secretary, Radstock Action Group