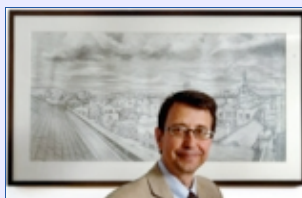


Latest issue

Hank Dittmar interview

Enjoying tea at the Wolseley, central London, Hank Dittmar, chief executive of the Prince's Foundation, asks if his interview with Housebuilder can mention his son's love of electric guitars: "He'll be very happy if you put that in." What makes this reserved but gently humorous American very happy himself is talking about his work with the Foundation, of which the Prince of Wales who recently celebrated his 60th birthday is president, and what it strives to do.



Dittmar settled in England after accepting the head post in 2004 and in his earlier years clocked up a masters degree in community and regional planning from the School of Architecture at the University of Texas, and a Bachelor of Science from Northwestern University in Evanston, Illinois. From those sturdy qualifications and his lecturing at the School of Architecture in the University of Texas, not to mention his appointment by President Clinton to the White House advisory committee on transportation and greenhouse gas emissions, it is easy to see why he is well suited to fronting the Foundation and is delighted to do so – the educational charity teaches and practices traditional but ecological ways of planning, designing and building, all in a way that strives to improve the quality of people's lives.

communities

"I agree with the Prince's views of making better communities for people and I really wanted to help him achieve his objectives," Dittmar explains fondly. "The Prince's Foundation is about enriching people's lives and delivering better environmental outcomes in a commercial way. It's a joined up approach to creating communities." One of Dittmar's first tasks – "what the Prince asked me to do" – was to set up a dialogue with the housebuilding industry about the Foundation's beliefs. The Prince's work at Poundbury, the urban extension of Dorchester, was an impressive example of his vision for housing and humans – a thriving, modern but traditionally housed community, integrating shops, businesses and a mix of private and affordable housing, and favouring pedestrians over vehicles. It is a town harking back to the past but could be the future if the Prince's Foundation has influence. "Poundbury proved it was possible to achieve these goals but the Prince felt like there wasn't a conversation about it in the industry.

Westbury and a number of building entities had been involved, including Stewart Baseley from the Home Builders Federation (HBF) so we brought together a coalition looking at ways to deliver better urbanism in the context of volume housebuilding." Urbanism is certainly a key word for Dittmar. In fact, it seems to be the driving force of all his dedicated work for the Foundation.

He has been chairman of the Congress for the New Urbanism, an international membership organisation that promotes the creation and restoration of towns, cities and neighbourhoods in which everything is within walking distance and ups the chances of social interaction, instead of sprawl, dominated by long roads and difficult access to places. "New urbanism is really an American term as there didn't used to be much urbanism in the States – it was suburbanism. In the UK we tend to talk about traditional urbanism which you can usually still see if you go to town centres." The Prince's Foundation has begun to conduct research into the economic, social and environmental value of urbanism.

Dittmar likes to concentrate on the environmental: "Urbanism provides profound environmental benefits. We talk about green buildings, but actually green neighbourhoods are neighbourhoods you don't have to drive through. A combination of access to public transport, connected streets and medium rise density reduces the need for people to drive and reduces

Defining



carbon emissions." So urbanism is also an important part of addressing the issue of climate change, Dittmar continues: "I think it's just as important as carbon neutral houses.

If you make a building that is carbon neutral but everyone drives to it, you're really not making a difference." Last November, the Foundation hosted a conference – Changing climate: the business of smart growth – which supported Dittmar's particular views on urban design. It called for investors to create products that go beyond "greening" buildings to support a "smart" approach to urban design, which allows whole neighbourhoods to make large scale carbon savings. The charity has been developing these smart projects in the UK and abroad. "Zoned development of separated retail, housing and offices wastes carbon, but smart growth helps solve the problem while giving people attractive, well designed places to shop,"

Dittmar explains. "You don't need to separate houses from other places – people don't usually tan animal hide in factories nowadays." Dittmar and the Foundation have also been busy developing Upton Park, an urban extension in Northampton, where Northampton Borough Council and consultants EDAW and Alan Baxter & Associates are also on board. The first phase, Dittmar explains, is purely traditional whilst the second is a hybrid of modern and traditional as a test to see if modern architecture and better urbanism can hold well together: "Most people actually want to live in a house that looks like a house and is traditionally proportioned.

I think most domestic architecture is not good traditional architecture, so we try to deliver in our projects traditional architecture that is correctly proportioned and also looks like the vernacular of the buildings in that specific part of England." This brings Dittmar to another Foundation buzz term – "eco vernacular": "Each area of the UK will have its own vernacular style of building, reflecting the materials available nearby. We aim to evolve that so that those buildings confront today's challenges – ecological concerns and matters of affordability."

tradition

"Tradition has always been something that moves forward", Dittmar continues. "Tradition is also pastiche and a repository of knowledge. As we face new challenges we draw in new knowledge and technology and take it forward. Eco vernacular describes that process." The variation of buildings in England clearly fascinates Dittmar and has inspired him in his quest to preserve tradition: "What's so special about this country is that you can go 30 miles away and discover that buildings are built with different detail and in a different way so that's what's so spectacular. If you can capture that in the way we build through the use of tools like a pattern book, we can deliver places that will continue to be as special as those made in the past." Not that the Foundation shies away from the cutting edge building world.

The charity carries out practical research around building methods and to that end has started to construct a house, dubbed the Natural House - at the BRE Innovation Park in Watford, alongside exemplars of various levels of the Code for Sustainable Homes (CSH). But this house will stand apart from the Green Houses and Sigma Homes, with its traditional architecture and its use of "natural material" as Dittmar puts it – clay block and lambswool insulation – that can easily be replicated by volume housebuilders, he says: "Other houses at the Innovation Park are designed for manufacturers and we really felt they were engineered to the point where they had such exacting tolerances, that it would be difficult to do them on site. So we wanted to come up with a method that was more forgiving in terms of constructing the building."

The outside walls of the Natural House, Dittmar says, are rendered in lime and hemp, and all timber for floors and windows is from ethically and locally sourced timber, certified by the Forestry Stewardship Council (FSC). Traditionally built homes can actually accommodate renewables and other code friendly elements, he insists. It is sometimes better to work with them as they have solid walls which allow for good insulation and rainwater capture. "There's no reason why you can't have photovoltaic and solar panels in a traditional building," he explains further. "A chimney can be used for your eco efficient wood chip stove. Modern architects always give us trouble about chimneys but you need them for ventilation."

Dittmar approaches timber frame and other modern methods of construction (MMC) with some trepidation, not because they are new but because, he says, of the level of training that is required and the fact that they do not always produce attractive houses: "We prefer solid wall masonry building which hasn't gone out of favour in Europe, using materials such as aerated clay block. This can actually be highly thermally efficient. It's engineered so the blocks can come together with mastic rather than a lot of water, so there's not a lot of thermal bridging.

"At the same time we're starting to look at techniques like tunnel form – concrete wall sections

– as a way of evolving housebuilding forms. We're going to do a series of houses, after the Natural House, with some other housebuilders to test those ideas. We think this will help us move towards a better environmental performance and also promote traditional building skills as well as evolve them to give better ecological outcomes." Wrapping up the interview with a polite "Ok?", Dittmar has been happy to talk at length with jokey asides, about the role he quietly but clearly has a lot of passion for which perfectly fits his background. He returns to his role just as his son would be happy to return to his guitar.

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Housebuilder Media Ltd, Byron House, 7-9 St.James's Street, London, SW1A 1EE
T: 020 7960 1630 F: 020 7960 1631 E: info@house-builder.co.uk W: www.house-builder.co.uk

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