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## **ARCHITECTURE CENTRES HIT THE BIG TIME**

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This is the dawning of the age of the Architecture Centre and what a prolific dawning it has been. In the past twelve months the Architecture Centre Network (ACN) has seen its membership boosted by a whole new generation of these so-called hubs each offering its own very potent mixture of “*participatory opportunities*”, “*educational events*” and other choice ways to spend a rainy Sunday.

To be honest, most of the UK versions do in fact compare very favourably to their overseas equivalents. Less showy perhaps, but with that endearing air of earnest endeavour that pervades so many new Labour institutions. But, worthy intent aside, someone sooner or later is going to start asking difficult questions. Namely, what exactly is the value added of yet more talking shops, particularly if the conversations continue to involve an ever diminishing gene pool?

Don't get me wrong, some of the stuff which these people do is great but I can't help but worry that this is one more excuse to delegate the art of communication to third parties instead of getting design professionals to do it for themselves. Now I know what you are going to say – the centres provide a “new and different platform for debate”. Well, that maybe so but to be honest, any platform is only really as good as its audience. Moreover, the reality is that you can host as many exhibitions and design competitions as you like but nothing – and I mean NOTHING - persuades a cynical Joe Public more effectively than real change in the back yard. So, the big question is will these centres actually deliver where it matters most?

Well, according to the panel at last week's ACN sponsored debate, the answer has to be a resounding yes. In fact speakers from public, private and voluntary sectors virtually fell over each other to embrace the concept most notably because these centres provide yet one more tool in the armoury of public engagement. And, as we all know participating punters are happy punters – or are they?



I for one am increasingly beginning to believe that in many instances participation in the design and development of the built environment is becoming a sorry excuse for: unrealistic wish lists; ill informed dialogue; as well as unsustained and unsustainable solution building. Worst of all, it is being used as a placebo which has allowed all and sundry to brush real responsibility under the carpet. Now if there is one thing that these new (and established) centres should fear even more than a cut in CABA funding it is the battle cry to “*empower the community*” in the absence of any real power to change the way the game is played.