At the University of Westminster's latest Supercrit, Leon Krier explained why his masterplan for neotraditionalist Poundbury in Dorset was meant to be boring. Niall Hobhouse was there.

Supercrit 6: Poundbury

Leon Krier masterplan, University of Westminster

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In the Supercrit, as devised by Cedric Price and others shortly before his death, the design practitioner is required to re-present an old idea that was, in its day, important principally for its timeliness. For the attentive audience, the reward lies in the knowledge that any managed outcome will be flawed and uncertain.

And so it was, magnificently, last Friday at Westminster University, where Leon Krier presented his Poundbury masterplan to a panel of critics including Michael Wilford, Jules Lubbock, Sarah Wiggelsworth, Sean Griffiths and James Woudhuysen.
Poundbury sits on an unstable hill, tirelessly constructed over the years by an army of critics, apologists, historians, historiographers, revisionists — with the help of politicians, princes and social-planners. The test of any great manifesto is that no thoughtful reader can remain neutral for long. The proper lesson of Supercrit 6 is that the reality of Poundbury will remain elusive because each of us feels so strongly about it.

Poundbury is most of all memorable for a slightly banal ordinariness. Krier, who has an answer for almost everything, tells us that this is just the point: Poundbury was meant to be boring, as any urgent expedient for solving a world crisis in housing, building skills and natural resources needs to be.

And in fact at Poundbury there are a surprising number of quite ordinary, or at least subliminally appreciated, things which do succeed. For a start, cars behave themselves, moving slowly in the virtual absence of signage; this is a small battle won against the traffic engineers, even if on ground that was carefully chosen. When stationary, they herd together into the “mews” space behind the houses.

People also seem to be behaving better, even if at times they look a little hunted. In addition, they seem happy to live — in expensive housing — at relatively high densities, and are quick to defend mixed-income occupation.

Above all, Poundbury has become the successful model for suburban development, not for the Duchy of Cornwall alone but for much of the south of England. And as one successful Poundbury builder told me: “We like it better, too. We can build a house for 10% more and sell it for 30% more.”

It is hard to blame planning officers or committees, under huge pressure to support housing development, for embracing a model that is generally popular with their constituents, but success has brought some new categories of problem. As Poundbury expands — and the model is replicated in almost every town and village — so also the rigour of the original design code is diluted. Krier’s own rules are at best misunderstood, and at worst observed in the breach: the massing of the buildings, use of materials and the quality of the streetscape become less convincing.

The other problem of success is that nothing like “trickle-down” gentrification can occur where gentrification is itself instant and all-embracing. There was never much at Poundbury for the entry-level buyer, but phase II now owes more to Regency Cheltenham than to Tolpuddle or Cerne Abbas.

Speaking at the Supercrit, Charles Jencks said memorably that, by the end of the 1970s, “Leon had become the most important communicator of architecture in the world”. Perhaps we need to remember that being able to draw so wonderfully or with such purpose did not itself make him a good designer. Krier has never claimed for himself much of an architectural role beyond the generation of the design codes.

At Poundbury, the codes do seem to have made bad architecture a bit less casually easy. The problem is that there is, equally, almost nothing that is very good. Probably the mistakes of detail and execution will come to be seen as a patination of Krier’s overarching idea, as he claims they will.

His comment, towards the end of the morning, that “...I could have designed a marvellous modernist town; but I didn’t have time for this; things are too serious,” may have been disingenuous, not least
because there was never a question of the client or the Dorset planners embracing the idea; but getting worked up about the look of the architecture was really never the point. After 20 years, what seems more interesting is the question the project raises about the real limits of the architect as auteur of social change.

It is worth pausing to acknowledge that younger practices in the UK are at last producing housing propositions that convince by their studied ordinariness and by the studied reticence of their designers. To a remarkable degree, these new schemes rely on what Krier himself describes as the rediscovery of the “tectonic logic of materials” — and increasingly the new materials deployed go well beyond his limited palate of clay, stone and stucco. They also rely on an understanding of space as a resource to be consumed frugally. Of course, we can recognise something of the same at Poundbury, but it was achieved there with Krier’s book of rules for planning the picturesque, and it alienates as many people as it persuades.

This is perhaps a moment to acknowledge graciously that Poundbury has won all the battles it possibly could have, then to reapply the most useful of its lessons outside middle England.

Readers' comments (2)

Ian Martin | 7 November 2008 6:08 pm

Nice, thoughtful piece. I really liked it.

Joseph Macneil | 10 November 2008 8:02 pm

I think the author missed an obvious issue. If Poundbury is so successful why has it taken so long to get established? Why is it taking decades to build a few hundred homes? If this was the answer to suburban development half of us would be homeless and the other half still living with our parents. Poundbury is a valuable lesson, it does have scale, mixed incomes and teaches builders there is premium to be made on design, these are good things, but I feel everything else is a lesson on what not to do.