



Mark Robinson
Co-founder, Ellandi

‘If we are suffering from a crisis of how we are perceived, this is a chance to change the narrative that’s too good to waste’

“**N**ever waste the opportunity offered by a good crisis” has been variously attributed to a number of diverse prominent thinkers, from Machiavelli to Churchill. And given that we seem to be lurching from one, albeit interconnected, crisis to another, it has been encouraging to be out and about with other placemakers at recent events such as UKREiif and Create Streets “Restitched”.

People seem to have got the memo that “this time it is different”, and a lot of talk has moved on to the systems change we need to consider to make the built environment work for all stakeholders.

Despite the industry being courted at these events by ministers and members of the shadow cabinet, I have increasingly come across major players not only articulating that politicians don’t understand the value of the real estate industry but are actively looking to pillory and undermine it.

Recent examples cited include the proposals for high street rental auctions and this weekend’s revelations that Help to Buy will end five months early after a £22bn subsidy. Soon, the logistics sector could well join the retail and residential sectors in a funk if the non-domestic business rates revaluation results in a doubling of liability for some sheds, as predicted in a recent JLL report.

Deliver change

I think it is fair to say the role the built environment could and should play in the much-needed change is probably not well understood or appreciated by government. As importantly, for that matter, by potential graduates or even the “man on the Clapham omnibus”. Actually, that doesn’t work as he is likely to be a surveyor, but diversity and inclusion is a



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different article! Unfortunately, however, how we are perceived is down to us. So often the narrative is dominated by industry voices complaining about change after the fact, unfortunately accompanied with a hefty dollop of entitlement – never a good look.

This is such a shame and a wasted opportunity.

With the built environment accounting for 45% of total UK carbon emissions, according to the Technology Strategy Board, the industry should be the government’s principal partner in delivering the net-zero agenda.

An industry with reported all-time record highs in vacancies should have more to say about its role in upskilling the existing workforce and be more successful in attracting new, diverse young talent. Instead, politicians talk about green new jobs in renewables. Still, with 80% of office and retail premises likely to be unfit for occupation by 2030 due to MEES regulation, this number will

be dwarfed by the army of contractors needed to bring our existing building stock up to standard.

Change the narrative

Place-based impact investing, a niche interest at the moment, could see more than £16bn of Local Government Pension Scheme money invested, in addition to the government’s various levelling-up monies – a big opportunity for the sector.

If we want to change the perception of investors and developers from, and I quote, “moustache-twiddling toffs”, these are three policy areas where I am sure the industry can stake a claim to be the key to delivering change. Moreover, they form a compelling basis for a new story to tell the government and society more generally about the social and environmental contribution we add.

If we are suffering from a crisis of how we are perceived, then this is an opportunity to change the narrative that’s too good to waste.