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The Numbers Game

Dr Stirling Howieson of the University of Strathclyde is interested in numbers. From understanding the 'big bang' to managing your credit card repayments, numbers hold the key to everything. Here, in his regular Scotregen column, he offers some more interesting figures…
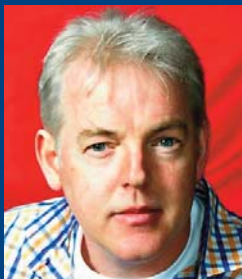
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24 hours (to Tulsa?)

We wait with unrealistic expectations to evaluate the impact of the new Planning (Scotland) Act 2006 that apparently aims to make the system, "efficient, inclusive (more Nimbyism?), fit for purpose and sustainable".

To build anything requires a variety of statutory approvals and co-operation from a significant number of utilities. Such complexity invariably produces stumbling blocks and delays to the process, but of all of these hurdles, gaining planning permission is undoubtedly the most fraught. Although local authority planning departments are required to operate under a 'strong legal presumption in favour of development', this is not the experience of most architects who perceive Town Planners rather like the school janitor, congenitally predisposed to repeat one clear message - "you're not on laddie!"

Planning departments are actually obliged, by Government diktat, to produce a decision on 80% of applications within two months. According to the Royal Town Planning Institute (RTPI), only 34.3% of minor and 12.6% of major applications in Scotland are decided within this timescale, and many of these have been the subject of intensive pre-application negotiations that will normally have been instigated at least 3 months before the date of submission. In Edinburgh, the average time to process an application is 22 weeks (4.2 months for minor applications and a staggering 10.2 months for major applications). It is actually impossible to discover the average time it takes to achieve planning permission in the UK as a whole, as the RTPI insist on using a quite bizarre timescale protocol for data presentation (under 2 months, under 3 months and over 4 months). It is a technique specifically designed to hide the scale of the delays to development caused by a planning system that was clearly not 'fit for purpose'. Such delays make our privatised rail companies look models of timeous efficiency. How would passengers react if the average journey time to London (or Tulsa?) was 24 hours – over five times that published in the timetable?

To speed up the time taken to get on-site you can of course take a risk and submit a Building Warrant application concurrently, but the substantial warrant fee will be lost if planning approval is refused – and a remarkably high number are; of 253 applications made for housing in Edinburgh in 2006/07, 67 were rejected outright. Although nominally charged with ensuring 'as built' compliance to standards, this has recently become a moveable feast with energy efficiency certificates now being issued by private companies. When audited by the Building Research Establishment, they discovered that 43% of new homes with compliance certificates did not meet the standards laid down in the Building Regulations. If you are a company offering this service it does not appear to make commercial sense to be rigorous.

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So there you have it; those of you wishing to regenerate the built environment must enter this process knowing that you will have to endure Kafkaesque Planning and Building Warrant departments, and be at the mercy of an industry where price fixing is endemic (see Office of Fair Trading report of April 2008), which has the highest level of bankruptcies in the UK, and where compliance to standards is at best lax and at worst incompetent and corrupt.

Having migrated east as a young man, my first few weeks at university were spent comparing the new town of Edinburgh with the new town of East Kilbride (NB: Town Planners were only involved in the latter!). It was only then that I understood the profound Gene Pitney '…and so I hate to do this to you …but I love someone new, what can I do? … I can never, never, never go home again!'

If time was money

The Northern Rock bank borrowed £26.8 billion from the government. Some commentators are forecasting the UK national debt to surpass £2 trillion in the current financial year. Do we know the difference between these colossal numbers?

Thanks to Alistair Grimes of Rocket Science for the following fresh way of thinking about the scale of the terms millions, billions and trillions:

- **One million seconds is 11.5 days**
- **One billion seconds is 31 years**
- **One trillion seconds is 31,688 years**