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It's all about place shaping

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Place shaping has now entered the everyday vocabulary of built environment professions, academics and the public sector at large. This struck me when leafing through the job vacancies in a well known British regeneration industry publication as I happened to notice an advert for what appeared to be an innovative and exciting new spatial development role: *Head of Place Shaping*. I was curious about this role, particularly as I had just advertised for an economic development officer with a background in or enthusiasm for 'place shaping', so I started to investigate a little further.

The advert for the Head of Place Shaping position, based at a district council in the English Midlands, read: 'The Council has recently restructured some of its key services involved in the Place Shaping agenda bringing together spatial and community planning and leading on the Council's response to Climate Change ... The Council is now looking to appoint a Head of Place Shaping to lead this new service and to provide strategic co-ordination to the Council's delivery on the Local Strategic Partnerships place priorities. The new role will require someone who can integrate Community Forums with the work of the Council, ensure the alignment of the Sustainable Community Strategy and the Local Development Framework, ensure that

communities are fully involved in shaping their own futures, and co-ordinate and energise the districts response to climate change’. So far so good I thought, so I read on: ‘You’ll work with local communities and external stakeholders (including government agencies and statutory authorities) to develop and deliver a vision that inspires growth across the region. If you can combine a track record of delivering substantial strategic initiatives and performance improvements, with the creativity to challenge traditional thinking, you could soon see your career blossom in this exciting role’. By this point I was intrigued, so I decided to take a look at the detailed job specification.

The job description specified 13 ‘competencies’, including collaboration, political sensitivity, strategic focus and leadership. Not bad I suppose, but nothing extraordinary for a place shaper. By this point I had begun to formulate a number of questions and I was starting to doubt whether the position was as exciting and innovative as I had first hoped. What about design competencies? Creative thinker? Spatially-minded? I decided to read on. Again the purpose of the job appeared extremely rigid, largely mirroring the key competencies. However, one of the roles stood out: ‘Leading and delivering the Council’s Place Shaping strategy in respect of the Local Development Framework, LAA [Local Area Agreement], the Local Strategic Partnership and the Sustainable Community Strategy and Climate Change’.ⁱ Providing another hook, I decided to read the final section of the information pack – the person specification. Surely here I would find something about design flair? Under ‘educational qualifications’ the job description ‘Ideally, [called for] a degree level qualification in a related discipline with supporting professional management qualifications and evidence of continued professional development’. Related to what

discipline remained unclear! Relevant and desirable experience was largely generic and the only knowledge called for was an 'understanding of the role of Local Government and the environment within which it operates'. Under skills and abilities an essential requirement for 'Vision, creativity and the confidence to challenge traditional thinking' was refreshing to see, but still no hint of design flair/skills. As I approached the end of the document I noticed one final heading, ominously titled: 'Other'. Again I thought, surely here is where there will be some mention of urban design. But no. To my horror the employee specification merely stated that a 'Good attendance record' was essential.

Now let us recap the key elements of the job. The position is for a Head of Service with responsibility for district-wide place shaping. Attractive on the surface, but unpacking the precise job functions, it appears little more than a new buzz term to sell a position charged with the unenviable task of aligning the Local Development Framework, LAA, the Local Strategic Partnership and the Sustainable Community Strategy and Climate Change. Probably easier to herd cats! National government could lend a helping hand here by swiftly doing away with some of these unnecessary bureaucratic mechanisms and overlapping strategies. Sustainable Community Strategies on the whole fail to engender distinctive community visions and have consequently transformed into little more than a paper 'box ticking' exercise for the corporate arm of local authorities. In addition, if local planning is to genuinely drive forward the place shaping agenda through a system that steers and manages spatial development activity, then would it not be simpler to not only incorporate, but also embed the community vision at the heart of the Local Development Framework Core Strategies?

Initially inquisitive about the Head of Place Shaping position in what appeared to be a cutting-edge role at a forward looking authority; upon closer inspection I am left feeling that the district council in question has latched onto what is fast becoming a new buzz term in order to sell an old fashioned corporate policy/ forward planning/ environmental type job. I therefore take it upon myself to set out some of the qualifications; experience; skills, competencies and aptitudes; and personal qualities needed for the twenty-first century local authority place shaping profession (regardless of respective job titles).

Place shaping, in my opinion, demands a robust integration of economic, social, cultural, and environmental goals. But how is this different from other overly used terminology such as the development of ‘sustainable communities’? Well, according to Northumberland County Council, place-shaping is the ‘the need not solely to manage a collection of public services but rather to pursue the well-being of geographically-defined communities’. Place shaping is about serving the needs of diverse communities, but with a spatial twist. It is about shaping local service delivery to meet the needs of spatially proximate communities as opposed to parachuting-in a one-size-fits-all brand of service delivery. I set out below my interpretation of what local authorities should be looking for from a place shaping enthusiast. I look forward to applicants that fit the bill.

Place Shaping Person Specification

	Desirable	Undesirable
Qualifications	A spatial education, qualified in the participation of everyday life and social space	Formal education in a single discipline, such as town planning or surveying, with no awareness or appreciation of the multidisciplinary nature of place shaping
Experience	<p>Community immersion and cultural understanding</p> <p>Practical and theoretical appreciation of spatial planning</p> <p>Experience of development economics and financial flows</p> <p>Promoting the broader values of design</p> <p>Connecting people and places</p> <p>Improving the opportunities and life-chances of young people</p> <p>Facilitating enterprising activity that is environmentally conscious</p> <p>Developing and managing liveable places</p> <p>Partnership working with diverse groups and organisations</p> <p>Working across multiple and interpenetrating spatial scales</p> <p>Operating in multicultural and multilingual settings</p> <p>Improving the lives of communities</p> <p>Supporting social justice and the right to the city</p>	A 'specialist' in any one of the stated desirable facets of experience, with no willingness to operate outside professional safety zone

	<p>Service integration across different domains, including education, employability and housing, to be place responsive</p> <p>Sensitively integrating a places distinct economic, social, cultural, and environmental fabric</p>	
Skills, competencies and aptitudes	<p>Excellent written, visual and verbal communication skills</p> <p>Plan, design and delivery skills</p> <p>Can read and interpret different social spaces, environmental contexts and economic landscapes</p> <p>Knowledge of the functionality of place, urban-rural dynamics, capital flows and the social aspects of urban systems</p> <p>Sound knowledge of different ontological outlooks, epistemological frameworks and methodological approaches</p> <p>Comfortable with qualitative and quantitative information</p> <p>Participatory community engagement</p> <p>Contextual underpinning and appreciation of distinct time-space development trajectories</p>	Highly adept at hitting output targets that miss the point of place shaping
Personal qualities	<p>Visionary</p> <p>Spatial awareness and socially conscious</p> <p>Design flair and innovative nature</p> <p>Values local knowledge and situational perspectives</p> <p>Motivation to improve the lives of the present and future generations</p>	Driven by profits over value and short term outlook

	Prepared to make a positive difference	
Travel	Willing to travel to the communities which you serve	Happy to sit at a desk, disconnected from everyday social realit(ies)

ⁱ For readers less familiar with the English bureaucratic-policy architecture, the Local Development Framework is a suite of documents that collectively provides the statutory land-use planning requirements for a local area, Local Area Agreements are three-year targetry plans for achieving better outcomes, developed by councils with their partners in Local Strategic Partnerships and agreed with central government. Local authorities are required by central government to work with partners, typically through the Local Strategic Partnership, to produce a Sustainable Community Strategy. These strategies are intended to demonstrate how local agencies will work together to improve the economic, social and environmental well-being of their area while safeguarding the prospects of future generations. In addition, they set the community vision to inform the spatial priorities of Local Development Frameworks.