Generally we all prefer to rush onto the next job – commission, design, building – rather than stop and learn from what we have just done; buildings are better at learning as the occupiers continuously modify them over time. Most buildings, especially housing, don’t work very well; often they are too small but most importantly the environmental conditions are poor and energy guzzling, with controls than no one understands. Air-conditioning is comforting but largely unnecessary if the building is well-designed and unaffordable in terms of carbon.

Of course housing is much more than just the house. In Cambridge we review all new housing schemes in terms of:

- Community – to what extent does the development create a sense of community?
- Connectivity – how well connected is any new housing development to the existing communities, health and education services and job opportunities?
- Climate change – how resilient will the new development be as the temperature rises?
- Character – does the development ‘belong’ in that place?

In the UK we have a whole raft of checks and balances on the quality of our housing including Design Review (for major schemes), Planning Permission, Zero Carbon targets, building regulations and standards for 10-year build quality warranties for home-owners. The UK is legally committed to reducing our energy consumption by 34% by 2020 (that’s just 7 years away!) and all new homes have to be ‘zero carbon’ by 2016 (in 3 years time!). We have a huge housing shortage but its as nothing compared with Brazil’s. So:

1. How do you persuade your Government, mayors, funders, developers and residents that housing design quality pays dividends?
2. Global temperature will rise by more than 2°C, so how do we design better houses/communities to be zero carbon?
3. Given the limited amount of material resources left globally, how do we design for much longer life?
4. And how do you create a demand for these changes?
Economic Issues

Housing is overwhelming a private market activity and prime source of national wealth and well-being. Housing markets suffered badly as a result of the 2007/8 global financial crisis. This highlighted once again the highly cyclical nature of market activity and the limits to government interventions in relation to direct subsidies, regulation, and attempts to steer the market. It has taken over 5 years for a sustained recovery to begin but it now seems underway. However, the long term prospects for market activity, mortgage finance, new supply and affordability remain uncertain.

A sea-change is currently underway in policy towards housing in the UK - and throughout Europe - with less focus on spending and tax breaks and more emphasis on incentives and achieving appropriate regulatory regimes. Economic policy issues in relation to housing in consequence have risen up the political agenda in the UK. They relate to:

• Growing restraints on the ability of governments to provide and subsidise housing
• Chronic housing shortages, that are currently exacerbated by high population growth and regional migration, worsen affordability and threaten market stability
• The need to relax strict land use planning controls to increase the price responsiveness of housing supply
• Appropriate engagement with a booming private rental sector and avoidance of the investment disincentives generated by poorly-thought out regulation
• Barriers to the funding of house purchase in the new world of finance
• The relationships between housing, infrastructure, labour markets and national and urban economic growth.

This context has many interesting parallels for housing policy in Brazil and raises interesting questions. Four key ones are:

1. How can government avoid the trap of ‘throwing money’ at the housing problem, yet effectively help to mobilise private resources to improve housing conditions and affordability?
2. How do government regulations impact on the housing market? What regulatory reforms would help to increase housing supply?
3. How does government encourage and support expansion of the private rented sector?
4. What new economic policies are required to optimise the relationship between housing, infrastructure, labour markets and economic growth?