

# Boring or Interesting: You Decide.

HUMANISE

A survey of UK public attitudes to  
building design by Thinks Insight.

**Thinks**  
— Insight & Strategy —



# Key Findings

The public know that buildings affect their wellbeing.

**76%** of the UK public agree that the way buildings look impacts on their mental health.

**75%** agree that interesting buildings make them smile when they walk past.

“ If when you are walking down the street and the buildings look all similar then it is quite depressing.”

- Respondent in London

The public feel intuitively that the exterior appearance of buildings is important.

**69%** of the UK public agree we need to invest more in how buildings make us feel as passers-by.

**65%** agree it is important for new buildings to look interesting on the outside.

**54%** agree that walking around an area with boring buildings affects how they feel (15% disagree).

# Key Findings

The public want buildings that can last and be loved.

**69%** agree it is better to restore an old building than tear it down and build a new one. However, this is not because older buildings are felt to be better per se, but because older buildings often are felt to have unique and interesting features – and as result they become loved. They reject the constant cycle of construction and demolition.

“Definitely much better to restore than build a new house, less disruption, less building materials used therefore less impact on the environment.”

– Respondent in Leeds

# Key Findings

The public feel disempowered and are unclear where responsibility lies.

52% express a willingness to get involved in deciding how buildings look, but only 12% think they have some control over how buildings being built in their local area look.

“ I feel I have very little control over how buildings in my area look. I understand that not everything can be done by town committees but I feel that very often the look of the area and the effect on neighbouring properties when it comes to large developments is ignored.”

– Respondent in Leeds

# Contents

Background.....	6
<b>01.</b> Methodology and Key Findings.....	7
<b>02.</b> Buildings Change the Way We Feel.....	10
<b>03.</b> Boring Buildings.....	23
<b>04.</b> Feelings and Function.....	28
<b>05.</b> Willing But Powerless.....	35
<b>06.</b> In Conclusion.....	43

# Background to This Research

The Humanise campaign has worked with a global insight and strategy company, Thinks Insight, to better understand current public sentiment around how buildings look and the impact they have on people's lives in the UK.

In the summer of 2023, Thinks Insight carried out a 10-minute online survey with a nationally representative group of 2,029 members of the UK public. This was followed by a series of week-long, in-depth, online diary exercises with 21 individuals from Blackpool, Leeds and London.

Finally, questions were added to an 'omnibus' survey: 2000 members of the UK public were asked two questions to clarify points around buildings, mood and the environment.

Any percentages quoted in this report refer to figures derived from this independent quantitative polling.

01

# Methodology and Key Findings

# Who Did We Hear From?

## Phase One

A 10-minute nationally representative online survey with 2,029 members of the UK public carried out between 23rd and 27th June 2023.

### What we did:

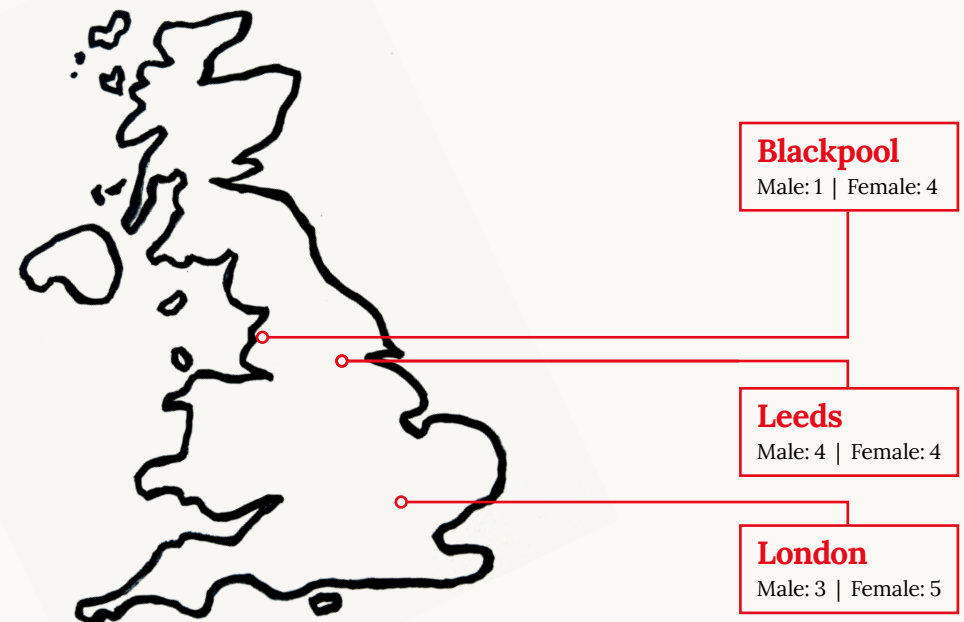
- An online questionnaire with attitudinal and behavioural questions focusing on the built environment.

### Purpose:

- To test hypotheses and provide robust statistical data.
- To identify key audience groups to target in the qualitative phase (phase 2).

## Phase Two

A one-week online ethnography exercise with 21 respondents from London, Leeds and Blackpool between 16th and 21st August 2023.





# How to Read This Report

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## %

Any percentages relate to data from the quantitative surveys.

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## Bodies of Text

Bodies of text are a combination of insights from the quantitative and qualitative stages.

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## Quotations

Quotes have been taken from videos and answers uploaded by respondents during the online ethnography.

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## Limitations

As with all research there are some limitations: this is based on stated-views and preferences, and a relatively small qualitative sample. There may be some research-effect to how strongly people agreed with some statements. However, the combination of qual/quant methods, robust sampling and design (e.g. avoiding leading questions and sequencing of questioning; inclusion of visual prompts and exercises) means that this does represent robust public opinion research using best practice in the market research field.

02

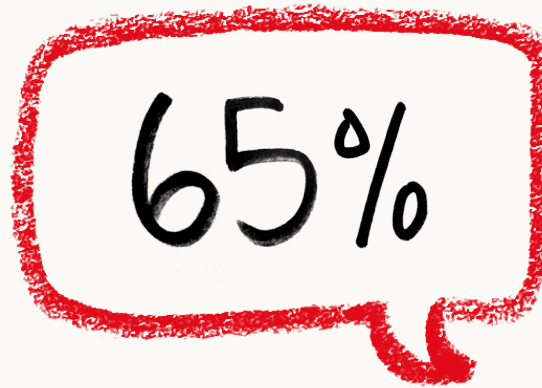
Buildings Change  
the Way We Feel

How buildings look is important  
and there is an appetite for  
investment in how they make  
people feel.



69%

69% of the public agree —  
As a society, we should invest in  
creating buildings that make us feel  
good as a passer-by on the street



65%

65% of the public agree — It is  
important that new buildings look  
interesting on the outside

57%

57% of the public agree that we  
are increasingly surrounded by  
boring soulless buildings.  
(Just 28% disagree).

75%

75% of the public agree that  
interesting buildings make them  
smile when they walk past.

“ I think that if we are surrounded by spaces that are created to feel special, or older buildings that are well cared for or well restored, it can make us feel like we are invested in as a community, that we are valued, we're cared for, we're worthy of inspiring surroundings.”

- Respondent in Blackpool

This matters in people's daily lives  
– 3 in 4 believe how buildings look  
impacts their mental health –  
for better and for worse.



76%

believe that the way buildings  
look impacts mental health

“ This building definitely has a negative effect on my mental health. It feels gloomy and dirty. It feels strange to say but it feels almost hopeless.”

– Respondent in London

// This building has a positive effect on my mental health as it is bright, modern looking and has the right amount of colour on the building and the windows... It brings joy."

- Respondent in Leeds



// I find this depressing and not good for my mental health as it's too tall for residential accommodation... It's depressing as it seems dangerous."

- Respondent in London

# People can naturally talk about the way buildings affect them and how they make an area feel.

- People naturally agree that the way buildings look is important and impacts how they feel about their local area.
- With little prompting, people easily draw on experiences as a passer by as evidence of the impact of buildings, referencing both positive and negative occurrences.
- Different types of buildings hold different meaning. Age, materials and level of maintenance all cause different responses.
- Buildings change how a whole area feels – often tied to how safe or thriving it is felt to be. This is particularly apparent in areas where buildings look run down and are in a state of disrepair.

“ I do find that if the building is in disrepair or not looked after it does affect the way I feel about my area as I feel it brings the area down.”

– Respondent in Blackpool

“ I remember thinking that the glum weather and the dark buildings made me feel quite depressed in winter. And when I walk or cycle through an area with pretty buildings, this lifts my mood.”

– Respondent in London



“ As a passer-by, I feel engaged and kind of connected with expensive buildings that are well designed and organised.”

– Respondent in Leeds



# There is a clear link between buildings having certain features and a negative emotional response.

Tall tower blocks, buildings lacking character and those left in disrepair leave people feeling unsafe, anxious and hopeless.

“( If when you are walking down the street, the buildings look all similar then it is quite depressing.”

– Respondent in London

## Size

- The height of buildings evoke a negative response from people.
- The towering structures can be imposing and increase levels of anxiety.

## Uniformity

- Buildings within an area that are generic and all look the same are “depressing”, “boring” and can lead to people feeling “unhappy”.
- Grey, beige and solid blocks of colour lead to increased feelings of boredom and unhappiness.

“ It was super tall, and it just towered above the buildings either side. My immediate reaction was I didn't like it. It made me feel really anxious.”

– Respondent in Leeds

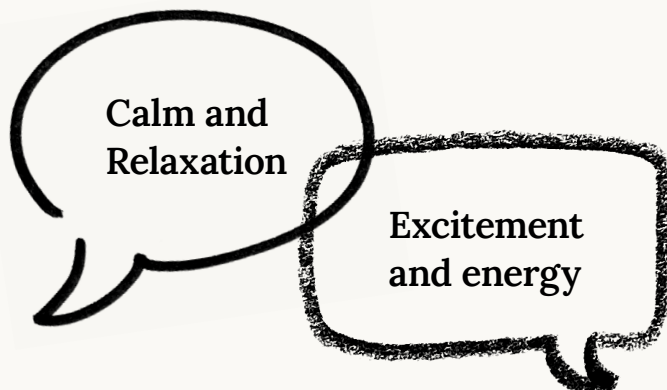


“ Modern buildings seem to have the same uniform grey or beige colour tone with very simple design elements to the point they look like offices.”

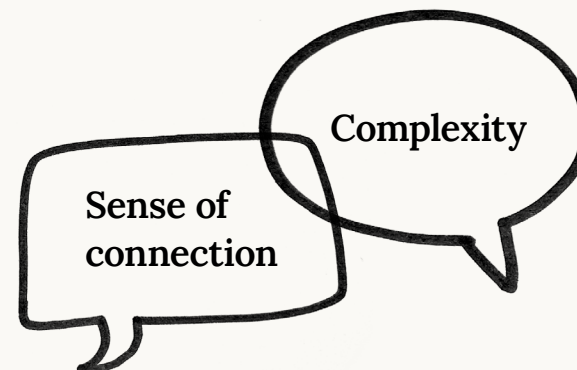
– Respondent in London

And where people have positive emotional responses, it is because buildings are felt to be unique and have interesting features.

Buildings that evoke positive emotional responses can be split into two distinct groups, those that lead to feelings of:



People have positive emotional responses to buildings that grab their attention in one way or another:



// The bright colours are warm and inviting and you can't help but feel happy and smile."

- Respondent in London



// White stones and gold features make the building stand out! I have a comforting feeling when I look at it."

- Respondent in London

# Texture, colour and shape are all factors in bringing joy, happiness and calm.

People instinctively link buildings that spark a positive emotional response to a positive impact on their mental health.

## Complexity

- Buildings that have character, texture, angles grab people's attention and foster intrigue

## Sense of Connection

- Buildings with historical or cultural significance cultivate emotional responses.
- Restored buildings and modern buildings that integrate their predecessor are viewed positively.

“ My immediate thoughts are positive emotions and connections with historical buildings renovated and adjusted to modern trends.”

– Respondent in Leeds

// Because it's such a kind of interesting shape, it's so angular, so interesting and different and unique."

- Respondent in Blackpool



// It's steeped in history. I feel connected to it, but also, it's nice to look at the architecture."

- Respondent in Leeds

03

# Boring Buildings

People intuitively know what a 'boring' building is. This language feels familiar, and it is easy to imagine what a boring building might look like in theory. It is also easy to provide examples.

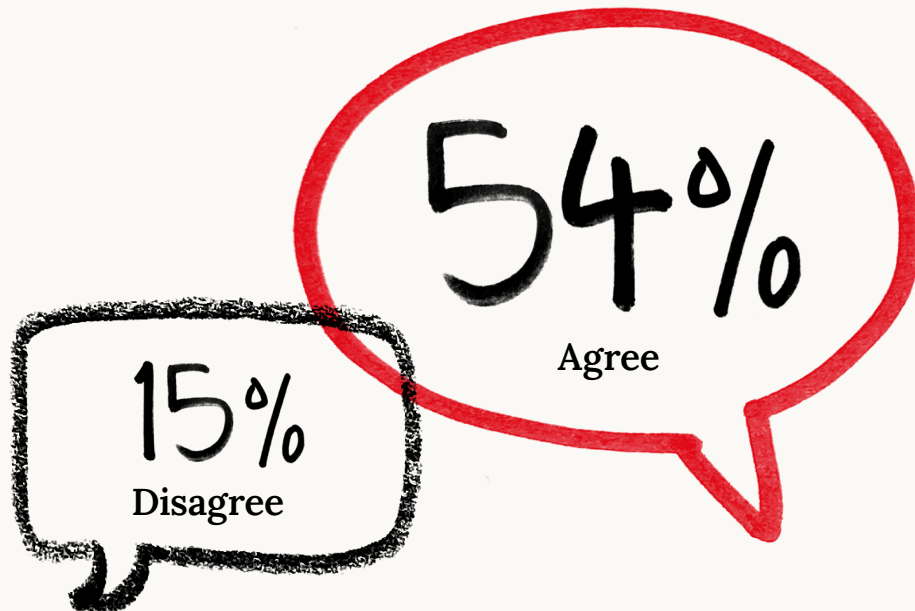


When given a list of adjectives, 86% of respondents in the quantitative research described at least one of the buildings selected for the poll as 'boring'.



# And as we have seen, the majority believe that 'boring' buildings can evoke emotional responses...

Walking around an area with boring buildings affects how I feel.



// [When I walk past a boring building], I'm just annoyed that it's there because it usually ruins the atmosphere of a place."

- Respondent in Leeds

“ Boring just passes us by and can give out negative energy, especially if you have a row of boring buildings especially if you are walking. It just dulls the walk and the area.”


– Respondent in London

And there is a significant shift in perceptions for 'human' buildings – they are interesting, but more than that – they create an emotional connection that matters.




93%

described at least one of the buildings selected for the poll as 'Interesting'



57% 'Exciting'



46% 'Beautiful'

04

# Feelings and Function

# The function of a building and people's feelings towards it are inherently linked.

## Car Park

The purpose of a car park is simple  
- to park cars. People accept that function often trumps aesthetic, prioritising cost and practicality.



// I think these buildings are also often very practical in their uses. Examples I can think of would possibly be car parks or warehouses, where their function often outweighs the creative consideration of the aesthetics of the building."

- Respondent in Blackpool

# The function of a building and people's feelings towards it are inherently linked.

## Hospital

The purpose of a hospital is to heal, to achieve its function, the building needs to emanate calm, relaxation and safety.



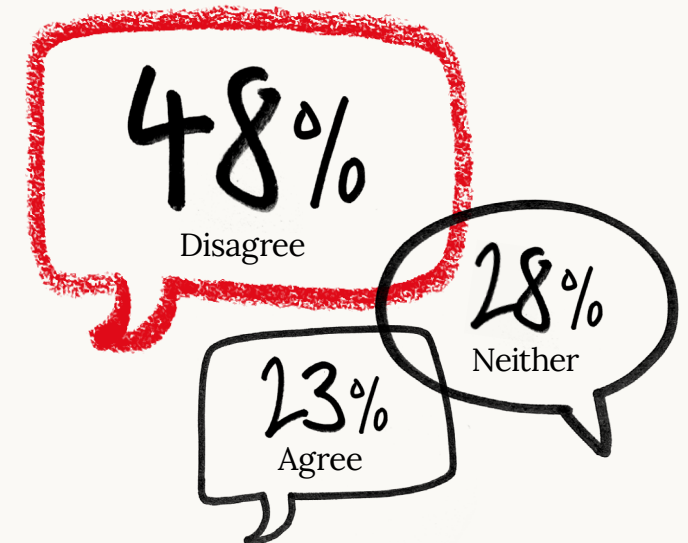
// It makes me sad that when people are at the worst points of their lives, they are sent to such a characterless, uninspiring, claustrophobic environment... I appreciate that the function of the building is probably the priority here, but feeling safe, comfortable and happy is so important for healing and good health."

- Respondent in Blackpool

While feeling matters more than function overall, the two are closely linked – buildings’ functions impact how important it is to evoke positive reactions.

- Rather than choosing one over the other, people make the connection between what a building is for and how it makes them feel.
- Function is a natural association; it fuels curiosity and part of the response to buildings is imagining the conditions inside.
- It also creates a hierarchy of the types of buildings people expect to look and feel more interesting.

As long as buildings serve a function, it does not matter how they make me feel —



The public instinctively reject  
the cycle of demolition and  
construction. They want  
buildings that last and are loved.

71%

71% of the public agree that it is morally unacceptable that the average lifespan of a commercial building is just 40 years and 50,000 buildings are knocked down every year in Britain.

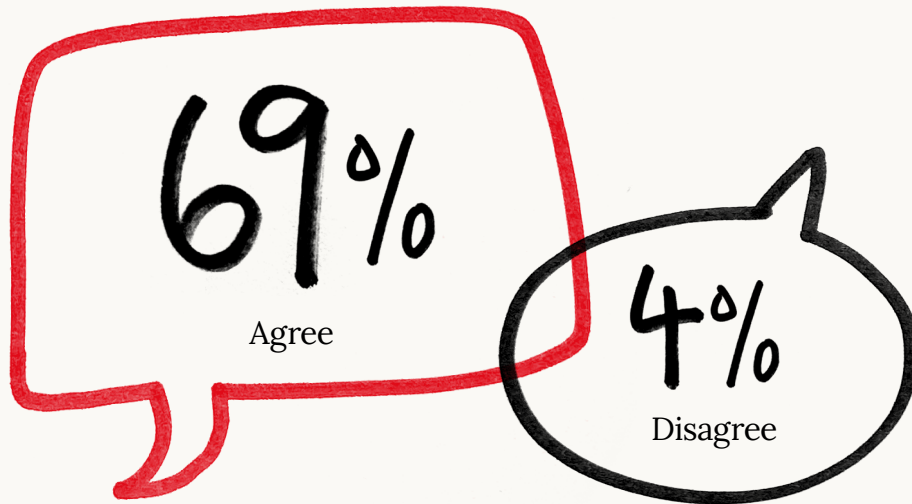
There is a surprising level of awareness and pragmatism around the cost and investment in developing buildings – people understand that newer materials and more complex designs cost more, leading to a willingness for compromise.

“ Definitely much better to restore than build a new house, less disruption, less building materials used therefore less impact on the environment.”

– Respondent in Leeds



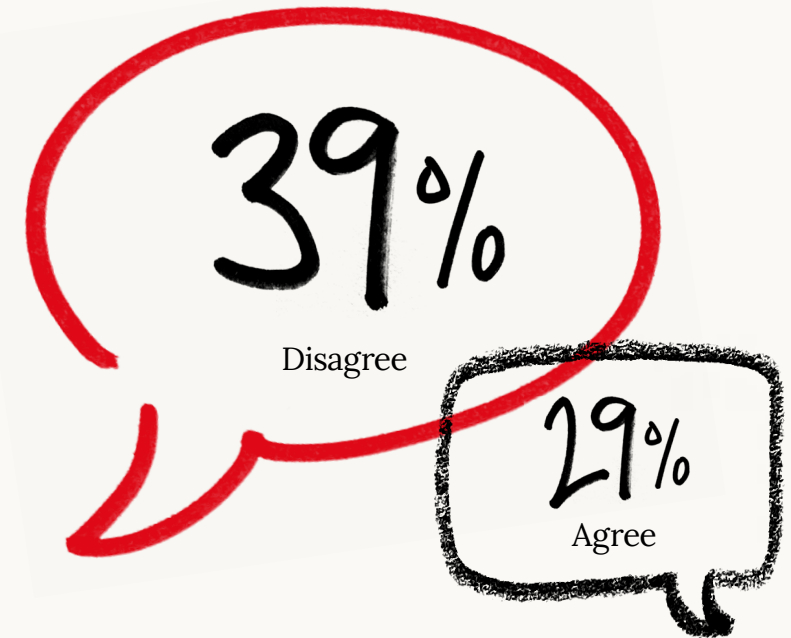
It is better to restore an old building than tear it down and build a new one —



“ Sometimes it may be cheaper to tear down a building and erect a new one, especially if there's extensive work to be done - but overall, I'd think it's 'better' to restore old buildings.”

— Respondent in Blackpool

New buildings are built to last for a long time —



# So there is an appetite to refurbish old buildings and create better new ones.

- The public strongly support restoration because new buildings have a reputation for being ‘thrown up’, cheap and ill-thought through.
- But people don’t just like old buildings for the sake of it. They are felt to be more interesting because they are unique and bring out positive emotional responses – they become loved.
- There is scope to make newer buildings loved as well and the public has a surprisingly sophisticated understanding of the cost and materials involved.
- All of this matters because it directly influences mental health and the climate crisis.

05

Willing But  
Powerless

# There is a clear (stated) appetite amongst many people for getting involved in how buildings look.

The public strongly feel they should have a say in how buildings in their local area look...

...and this is especially so when considering their immediate local areas, where they frequently have the role of 'passer-by'. But they feel powerless to act...

// I personally feel like we [the general public] have no control over how buildings look in our local area [...] People should be allowed an opinion and that opinion should be taken into consideration."

- Respondent in Leeds

“ I don't feel like I have any control over local buildings. It does bother me as I think the people who live in, work in and regularly use a space should be the ones to shape it, and not just those who happen to be in power at the time.”

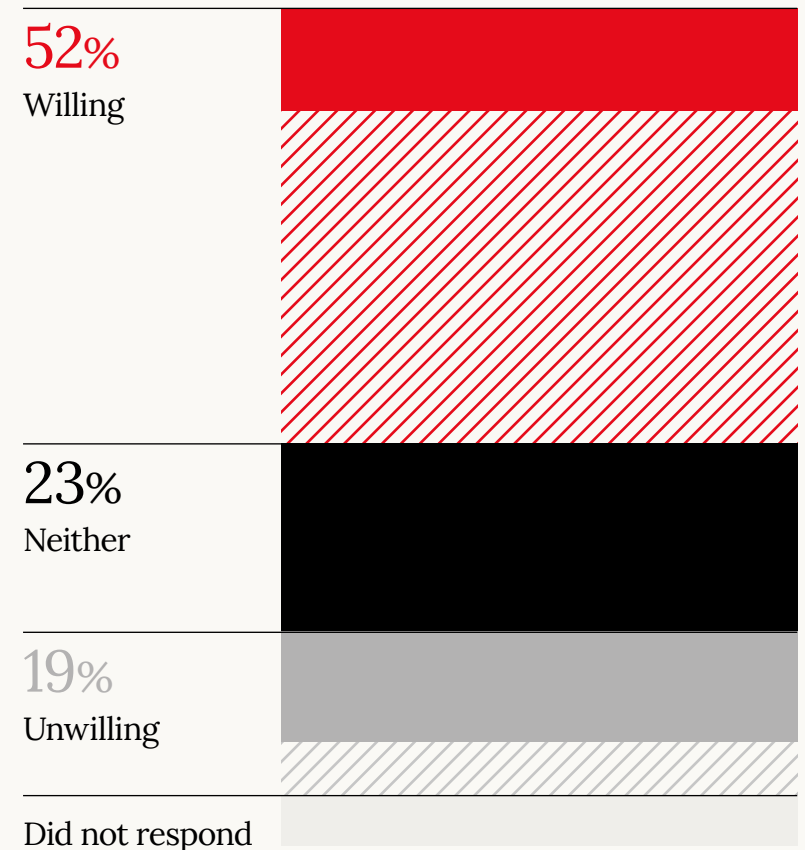
– Respondent in Blackpool

# Half are currently willing to get involved, but people need galvanising.

Despite the perceived importance of this topic, people have busy lives and competing priorities. They suggest forms of engagement that are simple, low effort and accessible.

- Very Willing
- ▨ Somewhat Willing
- Neither
- Somewhat Unwilling
- ▨ Very Unwilling

Willingness to Get Involved



“ I would be happy to be involved in surveys and consultations regarding local construction and development projects and believe all residents should have the opportunity to have their voices heard in order to shape the spaces around us, but these opportunities need to be simple, transparent, and easily accessible.”

– Respondent in Blackpool

# This is primarily driven by a perceived lack of control and influence in this area...

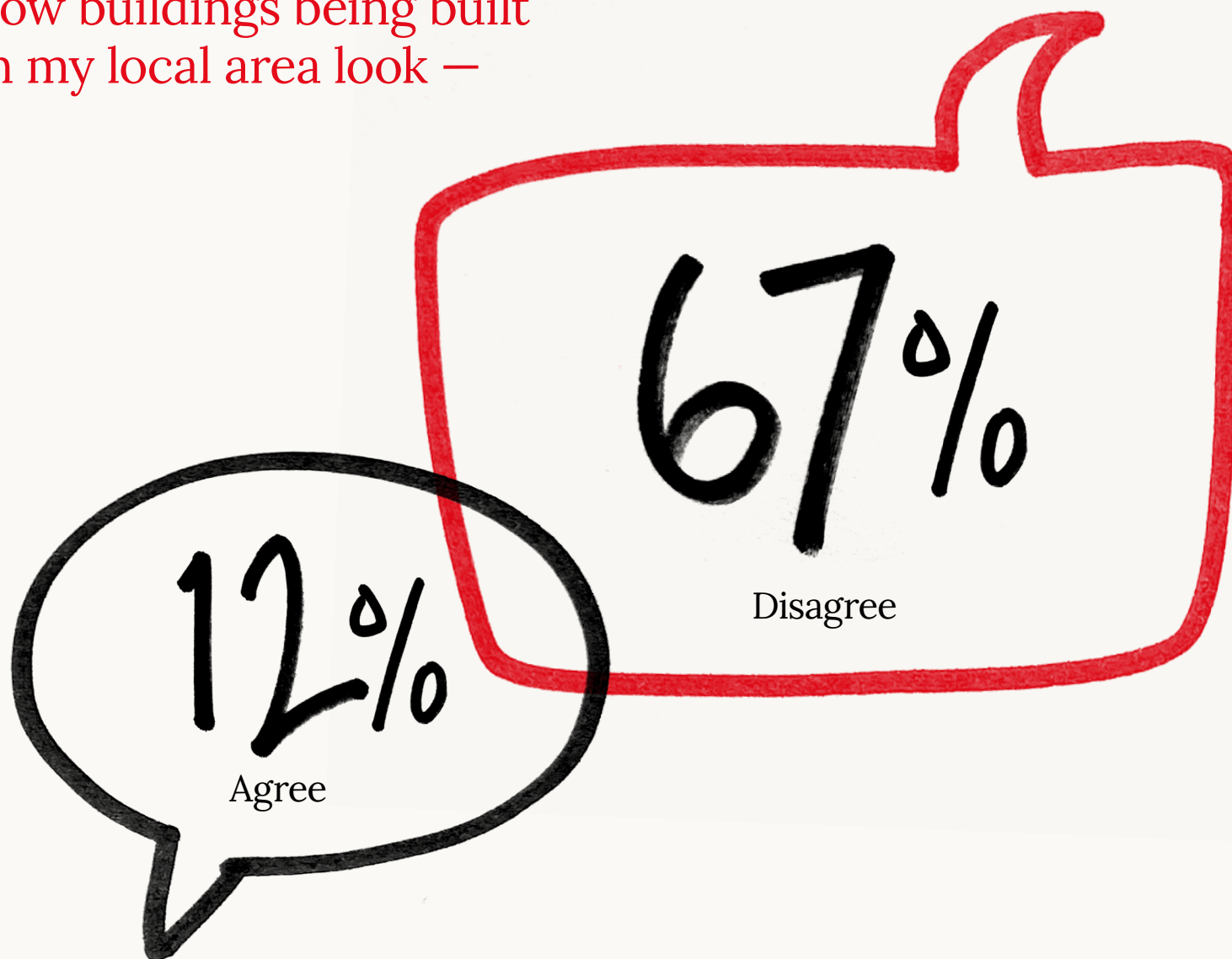
- Despite feeling like they should have a say, the public currently disagree that they have any control over how buildings in their local area look.
- There is a general sense of disempowerment. People question whether their engagement would make any difference if they did get involved.
- Some are aware of opportunities available, such as public consultations, but these often feel like tick-box exercises more than anything.

“ I think it often feels like these kinds of large projects are decided and designed by those in power and consultations seem to be more to tick a box rather than to really listen to what the people who use that space want and need.”

– Respondent in Blackpool



I have some control over  
how buildings being built  
in my local area look —



# ...and the gulf between decision makers and the public feels too wide to bridge, with clear barriers to engagement.

## **Not knowing who is responsible**

The public don't always understand who is responsible for new buildings – and there is some conflation of different bodies (e.g. government vs. council vs. private for-profit companies).

## **Awareness of housing crisis**

There is awareness and acknowledgement of an ongoing housing crisis whereby new buildings – boring or not – are seen as essential, therefore the public are unsure of what influence they could have in reality.

## **Lack of trust in institutions**

For some, lack of understanding is accompanied by a more general lack of trust in institutions, which means that even where they do have opportunity to get involved, they are unsure of the impact this would have ultimately.

## **Acknowledgement of funds needed**

Finally, there is acknowledgement that money is essential to running projects and that this isn't always in endless supply – fuelling the idea that public opinion may not always matter.

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06

# In Conclusion

# What does the research tell us?

The public feel something previously unexpressed about the buildings they pass. But they don't always know how to articulate this.

“ I've never really thought about them (buildings) in that way before, generally just thinking about whether they are appealing or not appealing in the way they look. But now I'm more focused on what that actually means.”

– Respondent in London

# Does this matter?

Interesting buildings improve how people feel. 75% of the public say they smile when they see one, suggesting a wide-reaching impact on people's wellbeing. This won't solve all our societal challenges. But the design of the outside of buildings clearly affects all our lives.

“ I think in terms of mental health, if we can create more buildings that are visually interesting and inspiring and that are fun and comfortable and welcoming, that really draws people in. Encouraging people to have human connection and engagement and interaction can really help to improve mental health and wellbeing.”

– Respondent in Blackpool

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