



About the TOOLKIT

The Building in Context toolkit has been developed by EH, CABE and the Kent Architecture Centre. It grew out of the publication 'Building in Context' published by EH and CABE in 2001. The purpose of the publication was to stimulate a high standard of design when development takes place in historically sensitive contexts. The founding principle is that all successful design solutions depend on allowing time for a thorough site analysis and character appraisal of context. Building in Context TOOLKIT training aims to help those making decisions to reach effective and balanced design decisions.

It is proven to be useful in communicating issues of development in complex situations; helping convey the depth of expertise required in adopting a holistic approach to site development and reduced 'silo mentality'. Through the analysis of a case study, wider design issues than 'how it looks' are explored.

Each workshop consists of a presentation looking at the key issues covered in Building in Context, followed by local and regional case studies, a practical, hands-on drawing activity, and an opportunity to discuss the complex issues associated with successfully incorporating contemporary design in sensitive locations.

The Building in Context Toolkit Programme aims to:

Enable wider understanding of the principles of developing appropriate contemporary design in historic areas to a range of professional and community groups

Enable those involved in making decisions affecting historic areas in their attainment of a more effective, balanced and efficient service resulting in improvement of those decisions affecting the quality of the historic environment for future generations.

Promote sustainable new and re-used development that doesn't sacrifice what future generations will value for the sake of short-term and often illusory gains so that we use already developed areas in the most efficient way, while making them more attractive places in which to live and work and conserving our cultural heritage



Above: 3D section through residential site, Berkhamsted.
Architect: Kirkland Fraser Moore.

The **Building in Context** workshop for Councillors and Officers at Aylesbury Vale District Council was delivered by Kent Architecture Centre and English Heritage at an event on 12th September.

The workshop started with an introduction and presentation by David Kirkland on the work of Kirkland Fraser Moore architects. David drew participants attention to the demands of designing in sensitive contexts. The following discussion focused especially on two key aspects: the demands of sustainability at all levels of design from site selection and orientation to choice of materials; and the use of 3D computing technology in the design, development and communication of architecture in its context. The conclusion of the discussions focused on the fact that a building's context is as much natural as it is built.

The workshop took as its case study the village of Haddenham. Haddenham is located in the Aylesbury Vale between Thame and Aylesbury. The village has a fantastic form as seen in the figure-ground on the following page. It has experienced recent growth and like all popular towns and villages, is likely to be subject to new development pressures and demands to intensify development within its boundaries that needs to respond to its historic context.

Right: Private residential project, Berkhamsted, presented by David Kirkland, and discussed by participants as part of the introduction to thinking about building in context. Architect: Kirkland Fraser Moore.

Below: Participants discuss principles for building in historic environments.



About the Speakers

About The Architect

David Kirkland

David is a founding practice principal of Kirkland Fraser Moor. He studied architecture at the Royal College of Art, London and at the Illinois Institute of Technology in Chicago. For 15 years he was a Project Leader and Associate of Grimshaw. Amongst the projects he was responsible for were the Waterloo International Terminal station roof and the Eden Project, Cornwall. His designs include buildings, bridges, exhibitions, furniture and products.

David has taught architecture, lectured widely in Europe and the US and contributed to numerous books, television and radio programmes. He has a deep interest in technology as well as nature and its design process and is currently working on a documentary program aimed at communicating this to a wider audience. David currently serves as an Editorial Board Member for the International Journal of Design and Nature.

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Facilitators:

Dr. Nigel Barker,
Historic Areas Advisor, English Heritage
Nigel leads the Planning and Development Team and is Historic Areas Advisor for the Counties of Berkshire, Oxfordshire and Buckinghamshire. Currently he is involved in English Heritage's design training programme for local authority members in collaboration with CABE and the Architecture Centre, the Building in Context TOOLKIT.

Clare Wright

The Kent Architecture Centre
Clare is planning programme manager with KAC and worked with Nigel Barker to develop the BiC TOOLKIT. Clare is member of the Executive Committee for the Royal Town Planning Institute South East Branch, a member of Planning Aid and current Chair the South East Regional Planning Awards.

Appraising a Proposal

It is possible to arrive at opinions about design that are based on objective criteria. There are many ways of doing this, but it is made easier by asking the following questions. They encompass both the quality of the building itself and its contribution to the urban design of the neighbourhood.

The questions which participants found particularly helpful to understanding Haddenham are highlighted below:

THE SITE

- How does the proposed building relate to the site?
- **Is there a positive and imaginative response to any problems and constraints?**
- Have the physical aspects of the site been considered, such as any changes in level within or beyond it?
- Are access arrangements convenient and existing routes respected?
- Can the amount of accommodation required be fitted on the site in an elegant way?

THE WIDER SETTING

- How does the proposal relate to its wider setting?
- **Are the street pattern and grain of the surroundings respected?**
- Are there changes in height between the existing and new development and if so how are they managed?
- Will the result enhance or damage the quality of the townscape?

DENSITY

- How is the density of the proposal related to that of existing and neighbouring uses?
- If there are differences, are they acceptable?

IMPACT ON CLOSE VIEWS

- Has the impact of the building in close views been assessed?
- Is it either weak or overpowering?
- Does it respect the scale and rhythm of its neighbours?

MATERIALS

- What materials are used?
- How do they relate to those of the surrounding buildings?
- Is the quality as high?
- Are there interesting comparisons or contrasts in the use of materials?
- How will the colours work together?

ARCHITECTURE SUITABLE TO ITS USE

- Is the architecture of the building suitable for the uses it contains?
- Is it trying to be too grand or pretending to be more modest than it really is?

COMPOSITION

- How does the architecture present itself to the viewer?
- Is there a strong composition in the pattern of solid to opening in the façade?
- **Does the detailing of the materials show signs of careful thought or originality in the way the building is put together?**

PUBLIC REALM

- What contribution, if any, does the proposal make to the public realm?
- If new open space is created, is it clear that it will provide a positive benefit and have a genuine use?

VISTAS AND VIEWS

- In the wider setting, has the impact of the building in views and vistas been considered?
- Does it make a positive or negative impact?
- Does it form a harmonious group or composition with existing buildings or features in the landscape?
- Does it distract the eye from the focus of the view and if so does it provide something better to look at?

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The intention of the workshop was to establish a series of principles to which new development in Haddenham should accord. The workshop then continued with work in smaller groups to investigate what the characteristics of the study village of Haddenham were. The participants each produced a figure-ground map of the village from a different time period of its development. These drawings were used to investigate the historic origins of the village and prompt debate about the changes that have occurred over time and to consider the shape of future changes. The reasons for the changing patterns of development were considered to be based on the increased use of and need to accommodate the car, the change in the economic structure of the town with a decline in agriculture and increase in commuting, and the shift in the production of homes from individuals building or extending their homes to the government or private companies developing many similar houses over a very short period of time.

The participants developed a series of key good characteristics from the figure-ground drawings and their local knowledge of the village. These included the importance of landscape, the intimate and consistent scale of buildings and streets, the location of buildings within their plots and the inward focused courtyard formation; as well as the unique wychert walls! Where these characteristics were missing the village seemed to lose its identity and distinctiveness.



Figure ground drawing of Haddenham, 1920. produced by participants.

The three workshop groups then each focused on a different site within the village which had been developed in the last 40 years where opportunities for positive development were devised. The content of the original planning application drawings were then discussed. Participants universally concluded that there was too little information provided on the detail and context of the proposals to make an informed decision.



Study group on site in Haddenham discussing building details

Following a site visit the key questions by which planning applications should be tested with regard to design in historic environments were considered, some of the more applicable are highlighted in the column on the left.

Participants stated that the key question to ask when considering future proposals for development in Haddenham was:

“is there a positive and imaginative response to any constraints on the site, while respecting the street pattern of the village and neighbouring properties?”

