



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



Figure-ground, Braintree town centre (today)



Market Place, Braintree (Feb 2008)

Building in Context: Market Towns

This event was one of three held in the East of England for Design and Historic Environment Champions, as well as other councillors and planning / historic environment officers in the region. The other events, organised by Shape East, covered high density housing and retail development.

Braintree was selected as a location for the event due to its long history as a market town, extensive changes in the town's economic and social make-up which may typify the experiences of other market towns in the region, and the pressures Braintree has faced in recent years to provide high density accommodation, community facilities and an improved retail offer while retaining its historic character.

Programme

Following an introduction to *Building in Context* by the Chair Barry Shaw discussed the importance of principles of design for the location, layout, uses and 'look' of new development. This combined *Building in Context* guidelines (grey panel on page 3) with key points for successful design methodology as described by the new 'Exemplar Programme for Essex' (see www.the-edi.co.uk for more details on this initiative).

A local case study of high density housing in a market town was delivered by David De Vries (Hart Street, Brentwood). Following a presentation on the development of Braintree over time, the group toured the historic heart of the town looking for signs of the influence of the old and the new. They drew figure-grounds on a chronological series of maps of Braintree (see left, today) and undertook a site appraisal.

About the Speakers

Nigel Barker (Chair) has a background of working as an Historic Buildings Advisor in local government, before joining English Heritage in 2002 where he is now a regional Planning and Development Team Leader (Berks, Oxon and Bucks). Nigel has been instrumental in setting up the Building in Context toolkit training, and has recently been working on community based methods for preparing Conservation Area Appraisals.

Barry Shaw recently joined Essex County Council as Head of Built Environment after 10 years as founding Chief Executive of the Architecture Centre (Kent). He has now crossed the Thames and leads the Essex Design Initiative, as well as guiding a design team of 25 professionals advising on varied housing, landscape and mixed-use schemes across the county. He is a qualified architect and town planner and was awarded an MBE in 2000 for his services to architecture.

David De Vries has 40 years' experience as a designer in the development industry. He has been at Countryside Properties for 16 years, and is currently Planning and Design Director. David was closely involved in the design of the very successful Hart Street development in Brentwood, which he talked about at the event. Countryside take pride in core values including 'individual character and lasting quality' as is clear at Hart Street.



Quorum group work

About Quorum

Quorum is a collaborative facilitation tool used in Essex Design Initiative training and consultation events to stimulate discussion.

The system can be used to display a series of photographs, sketches and plans that the delegates (working in groups) can annotate.

Quorum captures the results which can then be presented back to the whole group, and later retained for wider dissemination.

Quorum accesses a mixed group's visual, verbal and problem solving skills, making workshops more physical, novel and fun!

Results of the Braintree *Building in Context* theoretical site appraisal using Quorum:



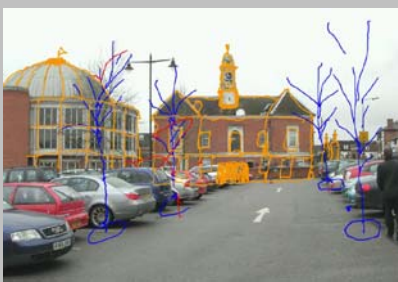
New housing next to existing buildings, Braintree (Feb 2008)



Group A



Group B



Group E

The Site Visit

The group visited a town centre site currently used as a small bus station and long stay car park, bordered by a large community centre and also occupied by a ceramics café and public conveniences. In a theoretical site appraisal, each group was asked to ascertain the main opportunities and constraints of the site, highlighting access and functional use issues, as well as key architectural and other visual influences. They then used the 'Quorum' facilitation tool to discuss their ideas for suitable uses for the site (see left). The visit led to some lively discussion, and a vast array of proposals were put forward, ranging from a theatre to complement two existing civic buildings backing onto the site, to a community park and historic interpretation centre.

The importance of context in market towns

In towns that reveal their heritage through the historic fabric and character of their buildings, materials and spaces, it is particularly important to get design decisions right in new development. Poor decisions can often end up having a negative impact on the overall character of a place, eroding its individuality through insensitive or lackadaisical design. On the other hand, new development also provides an excellent opportunity to enhance, refresh and celebrate.

East of England Design & Historic Champions Network

The network is for allocated Design or Historic Environment Champions in local authorities or other bodies in the region. Facilitated by Inspire East, English Heritage, Shape East, and the Essex Design Initiative with support from others, it provides training and encourages sharing of best practice.

The EDI Exemplar Programme

The EDI and EPOA (Essex Planning Officers Association) have launched an Exemplar Programme for Essex.

The programme will focus on a series of high profile projects around Essex being delivered according to key best practice principles. They include:

- ✓ Site brief
- ✓ Analysis of site context
- ✓ Masterplan / vision
- ✓ Community engagement
- ✓ Land disposal
- ✓ Design Review
- ✓ Feedback and dissemination



www.the-edi.co.uk

Building in Context: Appraising a proposal

...It is possible to arrive at opinions about design quality that are based on objective criteria. There are many ways of doing this, but any such process is likely to include asking the following questions. They encompass both the quality of the building itself and its quality as a contribution to the urban design of the neighbourhood in which it is situated:

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?

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?

From Building in Context, pg 37

To Design and Historic Environment Champions:

Organising Your Building in Context TOOLKIT training event

We hope you enjoyed this event that showcased for Design and Historic Environment Champions the Building in Context TOOLKIT.

The TOOLKIT is a travelling training package that is available to authorities across England that can be tailored to meet specific local requirements. As Champion for your authority you may wish to organise one in your own workplace.

For more information on holding a BiC TOOLKIT training event please contact Jenny Ruder, The EDI, tel. (01245) 437162; Rebecca Simpson, CABE, tel. (020) 7070 6800; or Natalie Tobutt, English Heritage, tel. (01223) 582700.

The table below shows how the BiC Toolkit team can put together an event tailored for your particular requirements:

The Building in Context TOOLKIT

