East of England: Design and Historic Environment Champions event

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 (Berk's, 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 Architect 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.
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:

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
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:

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The Building in Context TOOLKIT

1. Event build-up
   - Establish topical site, issue and audience

2. Event
   - Visual display
     - Seminar
     - Workshop
   - Walkabout/ study tour
   - Designers’ case study matched to site, issues, audience and availability
   - Invite other speakers where required, audience, pre-event questionnaire, venue and catering

3. Post-event
   - Post event feedback questionnaire and report
   - Post event response

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