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.

Over 30 participants from South Downs Joint Committee, Natural England, local authority councillors and staff across Sussex attended the Building In Context TOOLKIT Workshop at the Weald and Downland Open Air Museum, Chichester on 13th March 2009.

This event was organised by Kent Architecture Centre in partnership with South Downs Joint Committee with contributions from West Sussex Design Commission and Chichester District Council and funded by English Heritage, South East Region.

The practical workshop introduced ways to assess the quality of new developments in historic areas, particularly rural areas such as the South Downs.

Participants focussed on Singleton as a specific area to study and were encouraged to use their analytical skills and observation through visits and drawings to create a better understanding of the site in context. The workshop introduced practical tools that can be used in participant’s day to day work to help set development briefs for future sites and how to assess development proposals in their areas.

Paul Millmore, Chairman of South Downs Joint Committee chaired the event that was introduced by Richard Harris, Director of the Weald and Downland Museum.

Paul and Richard set the scene for the day by giving an outline of the opportunities as well as constraints to new developments in historic and rural settings. The workshop also included presentations from Nigel Barker, David Kirkland, Richard Meynell and Clare Wright.

Participants greatly enjoyed the day and said:
- Informative and interesting content. Thank you
- Excellent day! Thank you so much for all your efforts!
- Enjoyed workshops/ site visits interactive sessions
- Could look at post occupancy reviews with planning committees and Building for Life/DQI’s
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ABOUT THE WORKSHOP

Presentations
Richard Harris highlighted the importance of getting the balance right between new developments and the historic environment as any development now will one day be part of a future historic context itself. He highlighted how the Weald and Downland Open Air Museum is now an integral part of the community, part of the context of Singleton.

Paul Millimore, chair of the event, also underpinned the importance of context and how it is influenced by the local geology that determines the landscape and generates local distinctiveness. He highlighted that the South Downs has a wonderful local distinctiveness with unique uses of materials and textures. His concerns are that architects don’t maximise these potentials and use local materials in an interesting and distinctive way. Paul suggests we should challenge designers and local decisionmakers to be more creative.

Clare Wright, Kent Architecture Centre, led the practical workshops and site visit and summary of the event.

Nigel Barker, English Heritage
Nigel Barker began with why design matters for us all and why this agenda is important for English Heritage (EH). He described how Building in Context rose out of the increasing concern of new design in context especially historic context. There was a lack of understanding, confidence and skills to deal with this. Building in Context was developed in partnership with Kent Architecture Centre (KAC) to start the conversation for change.

English Heritage is involved in new design because we need to understand and make sure we maximise the quality of design for now and future generations. Design done badly can erode or degrade a place. EH want people to enjoy places and care about the historic values. Design done well can be part of this.

English Heritage’s starting point is that “If you understand the importance of historic environment, you will value it and if you value it you will make better decision to sustain it. Design is central remit.” The historic environment is important because of the complexity. It is different to manage, different from pattern of change, different from the past. If the historic environment is not used it will be in peril. The best way is to draw out the quality of the historic environment and use it to inform design of new developments.

The Urban Design Compendium describes Context as “the character and setting of an area within which a projected scheme will sit. It is its natural as well as its human history; the forms of the settlements, buildings and spaces: its ecology and archaeology, its location and the routes that pass through it.”

When looking at new developments in the historic environment people fall into two categories; tradition or innovation. People either want new developments to be in keeping with tradition or be innovation of our age.

Nigel discussed the innovation or tradition of various schemes, including Zara Hadid’s St Anthony’s College Oxford and Brighton Jubilee Library by Bennetts Associates and Lomax Cassidy & Edwards. Nigel also discussed Alexandra Park, Hastings, a park not initially managed well with the usual anti-social problems in run down areas. Now with a new committee it is a vibrant park that people are proud of and want to go and spend their time there. It is an example how design can have positive impact in a historic area.

About the Speakers

Nigel Barker BA(Hons) PhD Dip Bizng Cons AA IHBC
Historic Areas Advisor, English Heritage
www.english-heritage.org.uk

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. Currently Nigel is involved in design training for local authority members (in collaboration with CABE) to help with building in historic areas and has developed a community based method of preparing Conservation Area Appraisals with a local authority partner that it is hoped will become used across the SE region.

Clare Wright MA, PGDip (BRS) MRTPI
The Kent Architecture Centre
www.architecturecentre.org

Clare is Programme Manager with the Kent Architecture Centre. She specialises in the sustainable regeneration of areas and buildings, in urban, rural and coastal areas, and developing and delivering practice-in-use training programmes to bridge the gap between policy and delivery for planning professionals and elected members across the region. Clare is Hon. Secretary for the South East Region Royal Town Planning Institute and Chair of the Regional Planning Awards for 2008 - 2009. For Building in Context, Clare led the Kent Architecture Centre team that worked with English Heritage and CABE on developing the TOOLKIT training programme. Building in Context TOOLKIT is now in the second year of a nationwide programme and was shortlisted for the national Royal Town Planning Institute Awards 2008.

The Kent Architecture Centre is part of a national network of over 20 architecture centres that deliver public/private projects, including the national programme of Building in Context TOOLKIT. http://www.architecturecentre.net

An Architecture Centre works for the creation of better quality neighbourhoods, buildings and public spaces across the UK. They achieve this through:
- Participation: enabling real public engagement in architecture, the built environment and the public realm;
- Advocacy: promoting the case for architecture and design of the highest quality;
- Education: developing a greater public understanding of architecture, the built environment and the public space.

The Kent Architecture Centre seeks to help achieve quality improvements to the built environment in the South East by working with public/private sectors, decision-makers and the wider community.

The Centre works on a not-for-profit basis, receiving regular funding from Kent County Council, Medway Council (in the area we are based), CABE and SEEDA, in addition to carrying out project commissions mainly for local authorities. For the last two years it has worked with the West Sussex Design Commission and partner local authorities in East and West Sussex.
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David Kirkland, Kirkland Fraser Moor

Nigel’s presentation was followed by David Kirkland, Kirkland Fraser Moor. David explained that he is an architect by background and not a historic specialist. He is an architect trying to make places better. He believes that places are all about people and people are all about creating communities. It’s about creating heritage for future generations.

David highlighted the front cover by Steve Connor, science editor, in the independent 19th June 2007:

“The Earth today stands in imminent peril and nothing short of a planetary rescue will save it from the environmental cataclysm of dangerous climate change. Those are not the words of eco-warriors but the considered opinion of a group of eminent scientists writing in a peer-reviewed scientific journal.”

Design needs to consider the wider environment impact, he said. Context in a wider scale. There is a need to change so that there will be a heritage for the future.

David highlighted that the built environment sector accounts for:
- 45% of global CO2 emissions and energy consumption
- 40% of all freshwater consumption
- 70% of global timber consumption
- 40% of all human-produced wastes, and
- 50% of the world’s material.

David showed an article titled “Architects out of step with public” by Charlie Gates. A survey conducted that “policy makers and designers need to consider people’s behaviour as it really is and not as how we would like it to be… More than half of those polled (52%) wanted to live in detached house, 22% chose a bungalow, 14% a semi-detached house and a 7% a terraced house. “We have always had a top down approach and in fact we need to be bottom up. Are we out of step with what the community wants? In fact should we be building communities, thinking about context as the wider locality?”

David recounted a challenge to his students where they had to design an igloo with only ice as a material and 6 hours to build what they could. It was interesting to see the results and if they would have survived if it had been built in a real setting! It’s about understanding the elements, using local materials and making the best use of the two. He also gave the example of the windmill - practical, efficient, tied to the land and beautiful and robust enough to be reused. Why don’t we reuse things rather than knocking them down?

He recommended using using local materials, local people, and utilising local skills to benefit the community. He gave the example of multi-coloured bricks where the beautiful mixture of colour was a result of local clays and firing materials and clearly contributing to local distinctiveness of an area.

David showed a streetscene of old and new mixing successfully together in his home town of Berkhamstead. He said the Georgian house was all about scale, proportion and simple details. But what works in one place does not ensure it will work in another. He said architects have divorced themselves in housing and we need to be engaged again. He contrasted the historic example with the modern interpretation of the Georgian house. He described how elements are taken from a Georgian house but serve no useful purpose, for example, the middle section might look like an entrance but is not and there is often unnecessary bling such as fake cupolas that age badly. David challenged how we can put life back into housing. We need to respond. It’s not just about details but also the spaces in between buildings. We are a nation of gardeners but once we step out of our front gate there is nothing.

David in his designs looks at appropriateness and local materials. He showed examples of his work where he used tiling to create more organic shape that respond well to the topography and orientation. He also created rooftop gardens and made the use of this to provide communal amenity space. He discussed that design should evolve and respond to its locality and the need of the community. His design philosophy is evolutionary design from a holistic approach for a building that lasts.

Richard Meynell, Meynell Hoolahan Architects

Richard Meynell, Meynell Hoolahan Architects, has been in private practice for the last 26 years. He is responsible for the Cathedral Close buildings and St Mary’s Hospital almshouse in the north east part of the city. His work includes modern one-off houses and several awards have been won for both new and conservation work in the area.

Richard described some of his work in when working alongside historic buildings. He gave an example how new development can sit with the historic environment. One of his projects, Cloisters Restaurant and Cathedral shop, winner of the West Sussex County Council Heritage Award 2006, the existing grade I listed Cathedral featured in part of the new extension through using skylights and windows to frame views of the Cathedral tower. He also refurbished some of the Cathedral rooms and adapted them for modern uses. He unearthed the original fireplace in one of the rooms which was hidden by 6 different fireplaces and whilst the function of the room is a shop, not a living room, the original historic fireplace sits well in its modern setting and as a reminder of the room’s past history. Sometimes historic buildings need to be adapted in a modern setting to give it more longevity.

Amongst other examples he explained his approach in reusing materials. The St Mary’s Hospital scheme benefited from reusing tiles from one side of the building to match the other side, reducing impact of the new build. On another project materials were used from a demolished house of the same period as the development he was working on. Recycling materials for use within the development or for others to use on theirs via established channels is not only sustainable but makes efficient use of resources.
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ABOUT THE WORKSHOP
The facilitators took participants through the process of analysing, understanding and responding to context using a study site in Singleton, near Chichester. The site was between a listed Anglican church St Mary’s and a newly built housing development with a backdrop of open countryside. The site was chosen as it provided an opportunity to study how new developments might be successfully incorporated into a historic rural area.

The aim of the workshop was to provide participants with the practical tools that can be used to set briefs for new developments in a historic or rural area and assess development proposals and design and access statements. These practical tools may be taken by practitioners to apply elsewhere in the planning process.

Singleton is a village and civil parish in the Chichester district of West Sussex, England. It lies in the Lavant valley, north of Chichester on the A286 road to Midhurst. The Buildings of England Sussex by Ian Nairn and Nikolaus Pevsner, describes Singleton as “...Sober, beautiful kept village ... The simple flint houses around a tangle of lanes have nothing worth special notice and no special group; yet Singleton is extraordinary satisfying to walk around.”

The Village has a fantastic form. There hasn’t been much new development in Singleton but the recent additions to Singleton has been under much criticism as some residents believe the quality of the sites 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?
• Are there any problems and constraints?
• Is there a positive and imaginative response to existing views and vistas 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 there changes in height between the existing and new development and if so how are they managed?
• Will the quality 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
• Ease the building 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 it either weak or overpowering?
• Does it respect the scale and rhythm of its neighbours?

Composition
• How does the architecture present itself to the viewer? Is there a strong composition in the pattern of solid to opening in the landscape?
• Does the detail 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 - if so does it provide something better to look at?

Although there was little change between 1874-1912, from 1912 onwards showed an increase of development on the village edge. The reasons for the changing patterns of development were considered to be based on the change in the economic structure of the village with a decline in agriculture and increase in commuting, prompted firstly by a new rail station in a nearby village and increasing use of cars.

From the figureground drawings and participants observations from their visit they developed a series of key characteristics. These were then developed further into an outline site brief. Reviewing what they said previously prompted debate over the origins of certain characteristics of the village and the changes that have occurred over time.