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 reducing ‘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

About the Speakers

Helen Farrar (Chair)
Helen is a CABE regional rep and Chartered Landscape Architect and regeneration professional who has worked in the Yorkshire and Humber region for 20 years, most recently as Urban Renaissance Manager at Yorkshire Forward before commencing freelance consultancy in 2004. She now specialises as a strategic advisor to the public, voluntary and academic sectors in areas relating to urban regeneration, landscape architecture and policy – practice and skills.

Jane Field-Flett
Jane is Head of Programmes and Services at Beam, an arts, architecture and learning company based in Wakefield. She worked for 25 years in the education sector as a teacher in primary and secondary education, a lecturer in ITT and later as a manager in Higher Education. She joined Beam in 2005 and is responsible for the development and delivery of programmes related to the arts and the built environment. She is also the Renaissance Learning Programme manager for the Partnership Skills Programme.

Adrian Rose
Adrian’s working life started as a Development Control officer with Northants County Council. He then moved to Barnsley Metropolitan Borough Council. From there he moved on to Calderdale. This has involved roles in policy, development control and new regeneration. Projects he is proud to be associated with are: the restoration of the Rochdale Canal; the creation of the Lowfields Business Park; the restoration of People’s Park and the Elsie Whiteley Innovation Centre, which was the venue for the event.

Kathryn Gibson
Kathryn joined English Heritage as Historic Buildings and Areas Advisor for West Yorkshire in 2006. Her work for English Heritage involves providing specialist advice on development proposals affecting the historic environment and on schemes relating to the management of historic areas, including conservation area designation, management and the setting up and running of grant schemes.

Peter Shuttleworth
Peter is an architect director of BDP based in their Manchester office. His work involves the conservation and adaptive re-use of historic buildings and the design of projects in historic contexts. His work on the Round Foundry earned him 14 design awards.

About the Architect

Kate Dickson, Trust Director, Heritage Works
Buildings Preservation Trust, is an architect and urban designer by training who specialised in the conservation of historic buildings in heritage environments whilst in private practice. After a period working as a Grants Officer for the Millennium Commission’s 21st Century Halls for England Programme, Kate joined the then Ancoats Buildings Preservation Trust as its first paid employee, back in 1999. Since then she has spearheaded the delivery of the Trust’s two major capital projects in Ancoats – St Peter’s and Murrays’ Mills, and gone on to lead the organisation through its re-launch as Heritage Works in 2007.
...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?

Workshops
Before the practical exercises began, Helen Farrar explained what figure grounds are and their uses and showed examples so that participants understood how to use them. We were somewhat surprised to find that most participants did not use figure grounds or did not know what they were.

The workshop groups then prepared figure-ground drawings and used them to compare the differences between what was in and around the site 100 years ago and the present day. Kate Dickson was able to draw out what the plans said, and what they didn’t say. The figure-ground exercise also helped draw out some of the opportunities and constraints for future development of the site.

Kate explained how the site had evolved, illustrating it with maps and photographs from different time periods.

Participants then explored the site itself whilst taking in the surrounding context.

The general feeling was that the proposals did not fully meet the Building in Context key principles although there was a positive buzz about the potential of the site and the scheme.

The participants felt that the proposals were good in that many of the existing buildings were being preserved and asked that others would also be preserved. They felt that the materials were well chosen and respected the history of the site.

They made a lot of constructive suggestions that could further enhance the proposals including the use of alleyways to alleviate the drop in building lines and the introduction of desire lines. They also suggested that the frontages onto the street would benefit from being more active than the current proposals suggested.

The other key issue that the day raised was the importance of the social context of a site. This echoed the thoughts of the participants at the Wakefield event last year. Participants felt that account should be taken of appreciating and interpreting the ‘collective memory’ of local people as part of the analysis process so that the community will be able relate to the site.

The developers were keen to hear what the participants’ response to the site was and so this will be fed back to them to inform the development of the proposals.

Jane Field 23.10.08

Sandstone and Meadows
By Jane Field

Layer upon layer of sanded stone
Hewn from the land
That watches over the town
Changing levels replicate
The undulating landscape
In harmony with itself
And its juxtaposition
Imposing buildings stepping out
March before me
Yet spectacular green hills try to gain
Dominion over this dramatic stone landscape
A palette of sand and meadow
None dominant, balanced there
Intimate still
Clusters of almost forgotten mills
Reveal an almost remembered history
Whispers from yesterdays
Scrolled on lofty buildings
Respect their past
Spires speak with domes
While glimpses of green
Try to shout from their distance
Yet each sings with the other
Maintaining balance and harmony
Wrenching the landscape into the streets
Catching it there
Keeping it safe
Keeping its history safe

Jane is a creative writer, and wrote ‘Sandstone and Meadows’ on the training day. Jane is also the Head of Programmes and Services for beam and is the Yorkshire co-ordinator for the Building in Context Programme.