Lewes

Background

The Building in Context workshop was attended by over 40 people, including Lewes District Council elected members, officers, members of the local architect panel, Lewes Town Council and for part of the day, the design team for the Lewes House proposal. The purpose of the day was to identify key ingredients of successful places that are historic, high density and popular that can be replicated elsewhere, throughout the District.

Opened by Lindsay Frost, Lewes District Council, the event was led by Mansell Jagger, SERDP member and BfC facilitator, with presentations from Nigel Barker, English Heritage; Carlton Roberts-James, CABE; John Pounder, SEERA and Mike Lea, Lewes District Council.

The event was set against a backdrop of increasing numbers of planning applications for housing and the Council’s wish to improve the level of quality of development taking place within the District. Other issues arising from new developments are the need, expressed in the Local Plan, for mixed use developments in the right locations and to match or complement the quality of the surrounding environment. The Council had recently undertaken a review of schemes built within the District. Encouraged by the outcomes, the Council recognises greater improvements are needed to maintain the momentum of positive change in the District.

Lewes and other historic towns raise particular issues of density which is an integral part of their undoubted character and charm, yet pose particular challenges for new development, as outlined below, in the day’s discussions.

Lewes District

Mike Lea’s virtual tour of the origins and buildings of Lewes District gave an account of why and how the area become settled and resulted in the town and surroundings we know today.

Largely determined by defensible needs and lie of the land, the area was intensively developed along the main commercial High Street with important buildings including administration, defensive, religious, commercial buildings, quality residences and supporting functions. The early street grid was established at plot widths of around 18 ft. Back lanes behind and between were called ‘Twittens’ and the rear service yards were gradually developed into other uses, such as the printing works, at Baxter’s Yard. Elements such as these set the framework that identifies the town, within which new development and attendant modern living requirements will need to be accommodated.

Expectations of higher density from national guidance and the local character need to be set within the context of what the town and surrounding settlements can support within their infrastructure. Further development pressures were identified as Lewes House, Baxters, Riverside.
Levies

Case Study: Canterbury and Whitstable
Mansell Jagger presented a study of how Canterbury City Council has managed the redevelopment of key areas in Canterbury and Whitstable, both fine historic environments with similar issues to Levies. District Delegates requested details of the layout for Whitstable’s Horsebridge development: this is reproduced below with kind permission from the designers, Cague Architects.

"It is the character of the place that should be reflected in contextual design. Since one place is different from the next, it is vital that the designer understands the local character... Canterbury (City Council) has adopted a philosophy of repair for the damaged fabric of a city which is not just repairing and restoring historic buildings, but it extends to replacing the historic townscape - for example filling gaps in streets caused by wartime bombing or post-war clearance, or where there is an opportunity to replace poor quality modern buildings with traditionally designed buildings that fit the historic streets and plot boundaries. Historical research is encouraged in order to establish the context of the proposal, and to understand the continuity of development that will guide the new construction on the site..."


Why study building corners? The success or otherwise of a development can be determined by how corners are treated. They can help us find our way around and help form an area’s identity. A building at the corner of a street block can turn and close a view. Defining streets and public spaces, they play a major role in new development.
Lewes

Councillor's Toolbox
John Pounder ran through the ‘Councillor’s Toolbox: Making the best use of land’ recently published by SEERA. It was created to inform decision-makers about findings of recent research into attitudes towards higher density and mixed use development. The Toolbox suggests how councillors can address concerns about higher density developments; refers to useful policy documents, and good practice guidance and provides examples from across the South East of good practice in higher density development. The exercise in guessing the density of development from photographs demonstrated that appearance doesn’t always tell the whole story.

New development in historic areas
Providing a brief tour of research findings and government guidance, Nigel Baker drew out key points to help inform decisions on new development in historic areas. Government advice is to seek out alternatives to continuing as we are, as already evidenced in SEERA’s explorations of what constitutes better development in the South East. The message in draft PPS1: Creating sustainable communities, sets out the four aims of sustainable development: Economic development; Social inclusion; Environmental protection and; Prudent use of resources. In this context is critical: The late twentieth century model of development with new ambitions and materials to accompany them challenges the organically derived context. We have a new process of development, a different social context and intense development pressure. We have to find a new model to take us forward and that model is based on informed character appraisal. Contemporary responses are Abbot’s Cottages, Cork Castle. Nine cottages to provide social housing, it is a careful exercise in local vernacular that manages to unite current requirements within a traditional plan. Another case 4,000m2 retail building in York was achieved after patient negotiation, imagination.

Advice and good practice
The systems we’ve used were perfectly designed for delivering the results we’ve seen: Carlton Roberts-James’ message was to test and challenge assumptions because ‘if we keep on doing what we’ve always done, the places we’ll have will be exactly like the places we’ve got’. Ingredients of more successful developments will include better inter-disciplinary team-working; challenging “rules” and taking responsibility; finding and promoting good examples; more education with good urban design (GUD) as an objective advocacy – to champion GUD; and to; FOCUS ON PLACES, NOT PROBLEMS.

A choice for us all
Lewes case study: Summary

Delegates focused on strategic lessons from the Lewes House site that could inform decision-making on new developments elsewhere in the District.

Dividing into themed groups to study character and permeability delegates and local facilitators walked to and around the site to assess the main characteristics, how it is used and to consider how the site might function and fit within existing development. To aid discussion, delegates produced figureground drawings from historic maps, see image below right, to understand the structure and historic development of the area.

Discussions on site context, facilitated by Mansell Jagger with contributions from speakers and delegates drew on lessons from earlier case studies and observations from the walkabout including the importance of continuity and identifying the historic context and pattern of development. Some features, such as the characteristic flint and brick walls, could be viewed both as opportunities to be exploited, but also as barriers to progress. The workshop uncovered a positive step to incorporate historic walls into new buildings to overlook some of the twittens and so turn around lack of surveillance into a positive gain in perceptions of safety and the streetscape. Likewise the analysis revealed an earlier historic precedent that might usefully create access across contoured twitten routes to help pedestrian circulation.

The workshop was concerned about harmful effects on the quality of development where standard solutions are forced by statutory services and resolved to challenge and negotiate alternative solutions more intensively.

A universal problem

The workshop voiced a universal problem experienced by decision-makers that of more energy spent in managing conflict rather than in achieving better design. A key outcome of the event was the resolve to increase the number of earlier negotiations, facilitate greater public involvement on important schemes, and encourage greater involvement of decision-makers in the Architects Panel to augment understanding of design.