Historic environment and new development: Negotiating design quality

25 members of the Berkshire, Oxfordshire, Buckinghamshire and Milton Keynes network (BOB-MK) participated in this rural Building in Context event. Members included planners, conservation, urban design and regeneration officers, and design and historic environment champions on 7th July 2009.

The focus of the day was on negotiating design quality where participants worked through particular aspects of the range of planning applications the local planning had received on the case study site, a vacant rural brownfield site at the edge of the village of Medmenham in rural Buckinghamshire. The site was formerly a water research establishment developed at the turn of the 20th century on land that belonged to the adjacent abbey. The site and buildings had been the subject of piecemeal extensions over many years. It adjoins Medmenham Conservation Area.
About the Speakers (continued)

GRAHAM STEAGGLES. MRPTI. DIPCONSAA. IHBC. HND.
Historic Areas Advisor at English Heritage South East Region. Graham is a Chartered Town Planner specialising in Conservation and urban design. Previously with various Local Planning Authorities, he joined English Heritage in 2000. He is a member of the English Heritage project team for the Streets for All (SFA) initiative, leading for the South-East Region. He also sits on English Heritage Industrial Archaeology Strategy Panel. Following on a series of seminars throughout the Region over the past few years, he was part of the EH team producing the recent best practice case studies for street management and design in the historic environment. www.HELM.org.uk

Ed Hayden, BArch (Hons), Dipl Arch
Architect
Ed was made Associate of Scott Brownrigg in 2002. He leads a team of architects and technicians within the business space and industrial sectors in the Guildford office. He is charged with moving forward the design and quality of the practice’s projects. Ed has experience in the development of sectors including business space, residential, defence, transport and education. His appreciation of his clients commercial aspirations balanced against an emphasis on creative design solutions enables him to deliver the development brief from concept to completion. He has a particular interest in using innovative ideas to resolve design issues, and takes advantage of a variety of presentation techniques including 3d modelling, sketching and animation to present these ideas clearly and with enthusiasm. Ed was part of the design team that produced the final, approved scheme, for the Medmenham case study. www.scottbrownrigg.com

CHRIS LAMB BA Dip Arch MSc
Chief Executive of the Kent Architecture Centre.
Chris worked in practice for several years as project architect on a range of arts, housing and education projects. Interestingly increased in urban design he explored the use of computer-based generative modelling and urban form, which led to the founding of a digital design company, specialising in the development of 3D worlds and interactive media. His work also led to Chris becoming a visiting lecturer/tutor to many universities including the AA.

Chris was formerly the Executive Director of the Architecture Centre for the Humber. He established the organisation through a number of programmes to respond to the challenges of the region. During this period, he became a Director of the Architecture Centre Network. www.architecturecentre.org

GEOFF NOBLE BA Dip UD DiplConsAA MRPTI IHBC
Geoff is Head of Design Review at the Architecture Centre and manages the South East Regional Design Panel.

A planner and urban designer, Geoff is particularly interested in managing change in the historic environment. After working in local government he joined English Heritage in 1985, becoming Deputy Director for London, 2000. During this time working closely with CABE in producing the Building in Context report and contributed to English Heritage’s publications on the public realm, Streets for All. Geoff has strong international links and has presented papers at conferences and seminars in Italy, Germany, the USA and Japan. In addition to his role at the Architecture Centre, Geoff is an Associate at Urban Practitioners.

MARTIN ANDREW
Conservation Manager, Wycombe District Council
Martin was case officer for the study site.

Facilitator Clare Wright, MA MRPTI, Kent Architecture Centre

With additional thanks to Rebecca Hoy, Urban Design Officer, Wycombe District Council for putting the materials together for the event and Helen Jeffries, BOB-MK network co-ordinator.

Kent Architecture Centre developed the event in partnership with English Heritage, Wycombe District Council and BOB-MK network. English Heritage South East Region funded the event.

The primary aim of the day was to provide briefing from leading practitioners in arguably one of the most challenging areas, that of negotiating improvements to a mediocore scheme. Workshop participants worked through a series of exercises highlighted from the site’s application history, culminating in the much improved revised scheme, extract below from designers Scott Brownrigg design and access statement.

Another difficulty is establishing consistency of approach within an authority. The key message from the event was that getting good people around the table from the beginning was a key component for a successful scheme. Other supporting work within local authorities to secure consistency of approach is regular inhouse training and briefing, either in its own right or round table discussions of current applications. This would be supported by up-to-date design guidance.

Charles Mynors presentation was very rich indeed and clearly had far more to say on design in Conservation Areas. His pre-event notes can be forwarded on request to Clare.wright@kentarchitecture.co.uk.

Of the most pertinent, he gave blunt advice on selecting cases to negotiate. He said time is important. If a scheme is good- negotiate. If a scheme is bad just refuse - why waste time? Delay is always an issue and means different things to different people. Delay to client/ architect means money. If it is a bad scheme why delay - just refuse. However if the scheme can be improved then delay is useful as it is positive negotiating time. It takes time to negotiate for a better scheme and will lead to permission. Delay, then, is useful time. Appeal is a sign of failure. The case should have gone that far and means everyone has failed all around.

Workshop participants were briefed on the site and surroundings by Martin Andrew before visiting the site to appraise its context. Presentations from Graham Steaggles, Area Adviser for English Heritage and Geoff Noble, Head of South East Regional Design Panel were on the background and transferable approaches to achieving good design.

Graham drew key points from his case study examples and said another way of looking at the same problem is to consider how to get it wrong. This could be in assuming too much from the interest, rather than what the drawings really show. Decision makers need to thoroughly interrogate a scheme he said. Building in Context questions (shown over the page) can help begin this process and start a dialogue with understanding a scheme.

Geoff gave examples of schemes that have been assisted through the Regional Design Panel where the developers, designers and local authority were advised on a major retail scheme and the need for supporting drawings to demonstrate impact on the historic area. The designers and developers track record was also important he said to give confidence that the quality of the scheme would match the intent.

The workshop participants, primed with this background, reviewed previous schemes brought forward on the case study site and produced points for negotiation, using their understanding of the context of the site as their evidence base. A member of the design team for the final scheme, Ed Hayden, Scott Brownrigg, took the workshop through their approach in their a radical departure from the previous schemes. From the detailed site analysis, shown below, through to the most recent scheme to date that received local authority approval.

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To potential event partners:

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 and a leading designer.

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 Rebecca Simpson, CABE, tel. 0207 0706800, Owain Lloyd-Jones, English Heritage, tel. 0207 973 3841, or Clare Wright, Kent Architecture Centre, tel. 01634 401166

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

The Building in Context TOOLKIT

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

2. Event
   - Visual display
     - Seminar
   - Workshop
   - Walkabout/study tour

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

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