

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 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, wide 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 a local and regional case study, 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 for our cultural heritage

Yarm: 23 January 2008 Practical Design Skills Workshop for Design Champions



This was the second of two events for local authority design champions in the North East; this one in the South of the region and one in the North of the region in Morpeth.

The study site is next to the river in an outstanding conservation area in a market town which has a very special character of historic burgage plots and a hierarchy of building style and form as the buildings move away from the High Street.



The case study presented by Kevin is a completed mixed development scheme (including some flats) incorporating new and original listed buildings in the heart of the market town of Hexham, Northumberland. Kevin described the setting as it has developed from mediaeval times and how key pedestrian routes through the site have been lost but now reinstated. He talked about slightly different approaches from two clients, the scheme as built being smaller than original intentions – and much better for it. The play of new materials against original stone is one key to the success of the project.



About the Speakers

David Farrington

English Heritage NE: Historic Areas Adviser

David started the afternoon by explaining the history and intent of the events setting this in relation to local examples. David was trained with Tina Gough to deliver BIC Toolkit events. He also acted as a group facilitator on the day.

Kevin Doonan

Kevin runs his own small rural practice and has many years experience in producing high quality architecture, mainly in sensitive rural locations.

Tina Gough (main facilitator)

Tina is a partner in a small practice, Spence and Dower, which mainly works with historic buildings but also designs contemporary and sustainable projects in historic areas. She also has wide experience of running workshops for communities and was asked by **Andrew Guest** of **Northern Architecture** to run these events in collaboration with him.

Our other facilitators

Thank you to our facilitators on the day who encouraged, cajoled and generally kept the workshops focused:

Catherine Dewar
English Heritage NE

David Carruthers
Conservation Officer, Middlesbrough

Fiona Short
Conservation Officer, Stockton

Seven councils were represented. There were senior planning/conservation officers and councillors in approximately equal numbers; 18 in total.

BUILDING IN CONTEXT TOOLKIT

New development in historic areas

Building in Context: appraising a proposal

It is possible to arrive at options 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 EH/CABE document Building in Context sets out steps to assist with assessing a project. It covers the following topics:

The site
Wider setting
Impact on close views
Materials
Architecture suitable to its use
Composition
Public Realm
Vistas and views

The site used for the study has recently been redeveloped with housing. Unlike the Morpeth event, where we were in the business of starting to write a brief for a site, we were analysing how a new development had responded to context.

Before breaking into workshop groups, in setting out the preliminary context of this site, the above general topics were highlighted along with other specific issues which might need to be discussed.



Workshop 1 and 2

Four groups were asked to analyse significant characteristics through looking at maps showing how Yarm has developed from 1891 to the present day. Then photographs were introduced to allow further discussion of 3D form.

They were then presented with photographs of other recent housing development in the areas behind the High Street and asked to discuss their merits in relation to context. They had 'crib sheets' to refer to reminding them of the key topics.

Everyone shared their initial thoughts. These workshops were deliberately kept short in order that everyone had time to fully appreciate the site in real context.

Site Visit

Everyone was asked not only to look at the development on our site but to find the other developments seen in the last workshop. They agreed on their return that there is absolutely no substitute for a site visit; many had changed or clarified their thoughts from merely looking at paper documents.

Workshop 3 and 4

Groups discussed how successful they thought the development was and were asked to sketch suggestions of any improvements they felt could have been made. They were given the approved application drawings and detailed photographs to act as reminders. Tracing paper and pens were available as well as the material from the first workshops.

Photographs were handed out showing projects where traditional materials have been used in contemporary ways, and also some images from the BIC website of contemporary schemes in similar small town settings.

After combining group reflections on the development, and how it fared in comparison to the other housing schemes they were shown, a previous scheme for the site was presented and they were asked to analyse why they thought it had been rejected.

Finally Catherine Dewar gave English Heritage's response to both schemes when they were consulted at planning stage.



Most people agreed that, whilst there were some minor 'improvements' that they would have liked to have seen, the response to context on our site was far superior to other housing schemes in the area.

All agreed that the finding on site that the effective looking timber boarding was in fact plastic was a disappointment – and an area where development control should carefully condition choice of materials in future approvals.



Some Reflections on the Day

Generally a really good afternoon.
Very useful – we need to reach more practicing DC officers and other members.

I do not feel any more confident about "knowing what I like". It is all so subjective and seems to depend on some people knowing how to talk the talk.

What aspects were most helpful?

- Councillors particularly noted: site visit, workshops, on-site evaluation
- Officers said: group discussion with officers and councillors, site visit
- The Hexham case study was useful

What aspects were least helpful?

There were no comments

What would change in working practice as a result?

- Try to have a better understanding of design issues
- Look at design more sensitively
- Take more notice of the area surrounding the development
(All noted from councillors)

Future topics which need to be addressed

- All this type of training is useful
- I think case studies are very helpful
- Design of housing estates and wider member training in good practice