Accordia, Cambridge: Regional Design and Historic Environment Champion’s event

Analyzing successful high density housing

This scheme has won a number of Awards including Building for Life: Gold 2006 and What House Awards: 2006. It is just over two miles from the Centre of Cambridge and is uncompromisingly contemporary in style. It is fitted densely into a site, which formerly housed government offices and prefabricated WWII buildings. The surrounding neighbourhood is a conservation area containing individual villas and denser Victorian housing and provided the inspiration for the design of Accordia, although there is little connectivity between the new scheme and its neighbourhood.

Housing numbers are limited by restrictive covenants and planning requirements define distances from neighbouring roads. There are over 700 trees on site including protected mature trees. There is also a neighbouring Grade II listed building and landscape corridor of Hobson’s Brook and footpath defining the edge of the site.

The scheme design was led by Feilden Clegg Bradley Architects who involved both Maccreanor Lavington and Alison Brooks Architects, giving a wider variety of design.

Dwellings use the entire plot depth with private garden space being created through courtyards and terraces at different levels. Thirty percent of the homes are affordable and have mono-pitch roofs and projecting windows. There is a mix of high quality materials, which helps to connect the site. A common Cambridge-style yellow brick creates coherence across the scheme with contrast from external green oak timber framed and copper clad apartment buildings. Offices have been reprovided through a new multi-storey building onsite. The development features shared communal areas and the scheme provides a greater amount of open green spaces and play spaces, than neighbouring developments.

A grid road layout is used which creates street enclosure, and a legible layout. There is a single entrance/exit to the north. Slow speed ‘Home-zone’ style streets provide access to garages and mews style ‘live/work’ rooms above garages in the plot space of the larger houses. Although a number of the mews streets look attractive with a space for planting which softens the street scene, the affordable housing layout has created some blank walls to parking courts and has no spaces provided for residents to personalise the footway outside front doors. Garage doors in mews sometimes present blank façades and railings reduce social contact but upper floor windows provide overlooking for security.

Visitor parking and public spaces are adopted by the Highway Authority and appear not to be sufficient for the number of cars regularly using the site. Secure bicycle parking has been provided for residents and visitors.

Although all of the homes are built through Modern Methods of Construction and the scheme features high SAP ratings, the sustainability agenda has moved forward rapidly since the masterplan was put in place. There are few new renewable energy technologies, however flat roofs are planted with sedum to insulate and minimise run off and high thermal mass provides cooler dwellings in summer. Other drainage measures include permeable surfaces, and reed beds to manage rainwater on site.

About the Speakers

Rob Cowan of Urban Design Skills is the author of some of the most influential urban design guidance (including as joint author of the CABE/DCLG By Design) and of The Dictionary of Urbanism. A member of the Royal Town Planning Institute and a former special advisor to the House of Commons ODPM Committee, he is probably Britain’s most experienced urban design trainer.

David Kirkland, RIBA of Kirkland, Fraser, Moor Architects is an architect and designer focusing on finding sustainable solutions for 21st century problems, not only within products of the built environment but within communities and the wider agenda of economic, social and ecological balance. As an ex-senior member of Grimshaw practice in London was responsible for a number of high profile projects including The Eden Project and Waterloo International Terminal Roof.

We would also like to thank our expert facilitators from Cambridge City Council and East of England Planning Aid Service.
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The Workshop

A mixed group of Members and officers from across the Eastern region considered this development. Participants had strong reactions to the scheme. The morning was spent analysing the case study site through the use of historic maps and figure grounds. Participants then considered the information provided at the detailed planning stage of the scheme. A tour of the site then enabled Members and officers to visualise what they had been studying in theory. Please find a summary of participants views below:

General

- The experience of walking around the development was different from on plan where the scheme appeared overwhelmingly dense. On site it was comfortable to walk around although it felt like a high density scheme
- The use of materials is good and so is the detail. It was interesting to note that you could not tell the proportions of the different materials that were going to be used from the planning application information and yet this affected the final design considerably
- It is an experimental scheme, a great good practice example and very useful to see and build on the positives elsewhere in the region
- Is it character suitable for Cambridge?
- It would be good to complete a post occupancy survey to gauge the success of the development

The Design

- The site has a good relationship with the surrounding Victorian villas and it is good that there is no parking at the front of the development
- There was a lack of integration of the site with neighbouring communities and features i.e. more use could have been made of the river
- There is a lack of integration of the affordable and luxury housing. There is a difference in the quality of the materials
- The public and private zoning is confusing – front and back doors face the same street, which can create difficulty in legibility
- Participants had differing views regarding the ‘friendliness’ of the streets, some felt the garage door shutters and steel gates made visitors feel unwelcome, others felt that there was good natural surveillance and like the design
- Car parking is clearly an issue – on plan it did not appear sufficient and on site this was clearly the case
- The groups liked the use of gabions with viewing holes at ground floor level in the flats, which provided discrete
- Mews – there was a lot of debate around these innovative areas; an annex over the garage faced by a row of three storey town houses. The group’s reactions ranged from considering the design as too severe, to feeling that the mix of accommodation was great and echoed the concept of a historic city
- There is a lack of privacy / overlooking in the design; some members of the group felt this was acceptable in a city environment
- Orientation – could have used the natural light better
- The design was adaptable: could be some commercial use, but there was no scope for extensions
- The group was undecided as to whether the design would attract and help to retain a real community on the site

Landscaping

- The use of mature trees was universally liked although it was felt that the scheme needed to mature/be completed to see how the shared areas/play spaces are used

Details

- The group liked the signage placed on buildings, few gutters visible, large garden balconies, chimneys adding character and suggested the development had a very European feel.
To Design and Historic Environment champions:

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. 020 7070 6800, Nigel Barker English Heritage, tel. 01483 252000, or Shape East, tel. 01223 462 606, admin@shape-east.org.uk

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
   - Develop event, background, establish no-go areas
   - Designer’s case study matched to site, issues, audience and availability
   - Invite other speakers where required, audience, pre-event questionnaire, venue and catering

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

3. Post-event
   - Post event feedback questionnaire and report
   - Post event response
   - Typical materials provided in facilitator pack to tailor to suit the event

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