

About the TOOLKIT

A new initiative funded by English Heritage South East Regional Capacity Building Programme and managed by the **architecture centre** to help deliver better design solutions in historic areas.

The Toolkit comprises series of workshops designed to enable key decision makers, designers and developers to explore topical issues in their area and stimulate higher standards of design.

Each workshop consists of a presentation looking at the key issues covered in Building in Context, followed by local and regional case studies and an opportunity to discuss the complex issues associated with successfully incorporating contemporary design in sensitive locations.

Through this initiative we promote better practice in developing appropriate contemporary design in historic areas. Case studies are chosen for their wide interest and where they can be used to demonstrate broader themes. The events will be published as 'The Building in Context Toolkit' and will include detailed case studies from the programme. The Toolkit will support 'Building in Context' published by English Heritage and C.A.B.E.

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



Background

Key decision makers in South Oxfordshire, keen to continue improving the quality of design in their town, organised a Building in Context TOOLKIT workshop and walkabout at the end of the summer, as part of an ongoing briefing programme.

With Regional Design Panel facilitator, James Webb, elected members and officers at South Oxfordshire District Council (SODC) and members of Wallingford Town Council evaluated the success of previous schemes in Wallingford and case studies from elsewhere to help inform their future decisions.

Housing within the South Oxfordshire District is an issue, both in making space and ensuring compatibility with existing development. In particular, the District centre, Wallingford, has a high quality built and natural environment that needs to respond to change in a way that doesn't damage these assets. Issues of increased housing requirements within the District and a proposal for new housing at the edge of Wallingford's town centre, plus the possibility of release of other sites within the town provided the impetus for the location of the events.

James Webb discussed ways of assessing the quality of new development through a greater understanding of the area within which new development will sit, illustrating with examples of local buildings, public squares and views characteristic of Wallingford. Participants then walked the route, maps and photographs below, using the following Building in Context questions as a guide:

1. Relate well to the geography and history of the place and the lie of the land.
2. Sit happily in the pattern of existing development and routes through and around it.
3. Respect important views
4. Respect the scale of neighbouring buildings.
5. Use materials and building methods which are as high in quality as those used in existing buildings.
6. Create new views and juxtapositions which add to the variety and texture of the setting.



Wallingford High Street.



Domestic scale of homes



Wood Street



The walkabout



Discussing general principles



Wallingford

The Walkabout

Building in Context: Appraising a proposal

..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 an 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?



1. This wide historic approach across the River Thames into Wallingford conveys a sense of grandeur through the proportion of the bridge, use of good quality materials and detailing for the bridge parapet. Further into this view the buildings have an appropriate scale and show rhythms and variations in roof forms, storey heights and materials - all within a particular range of colour and building proportion that is characteristic of Wallingford.

2. The corner turns gracefully into St. Mary's Street that has a mediaeval street width and building proportion and is comfortable in scale.

2a and 23. Two of many burgage plots in the town, Lamb Garage and Champions, these are characterised by linear developments that follow the historic layout of the town.

2b and 3. Well turned corners on traditional buildings

6. Proximity of building wall to public footpath from the town centre attempts to work with the town's grain, but the clumsy mansard roof and detailing responds poorly to setting.

8. Pastiche development, is this the way forward?

10. Confident, well proportioned building that addresses the street well: it is one of a number of buildings in the town from the Georgian period and demonstrates authentic period details.

16. Recent building turns corner well and has a good scale. However this otherwise successful building is let down by detailing and architectural style; note distance between the first floor windows and roof of the dormers and poorly proportioned and detailed bay window. At this point it is easy to be overcritical, in an otherwise successful scheme.

17. Love it or hate it, these late 1960's mews houses work with the town's grain, give a modern take on the traditional 'jettied' building, interesting roofscape, light and airy spaces for occupants.

18. 1980's infill that tries hard and ticks boxes on design checklists but in a particularly joyless way and hasn't addressed residents' privacy.

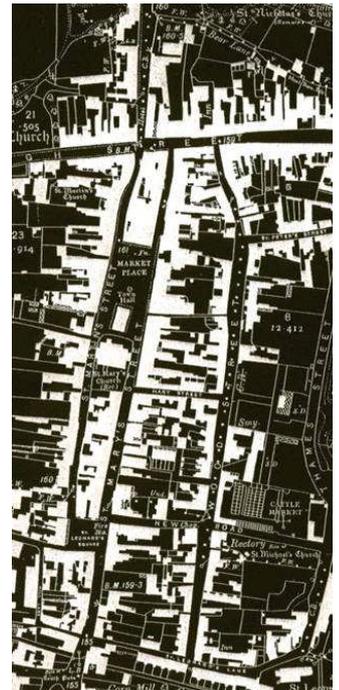
21. A recent development, located behind the Christian Centre, that provides a good use of space and uses good quality modern materials in a historic context.

After the walkabout, participants drew together key points from the event in the workshop, recorded below.

Reflections from the Walkabout and Workshop



Picture left shows the rhythm of building frontages in town that reflect ancient, burgage, plot divisions, still present in the **modern day plan, right**, that provide the scale and proportions of buildings (South Oxfordshire Design Guide December 2000). Behind the houses and shops fronting the main commercial streets, workshops and yards are still seen on these burgage plots, such as Champion and Co Ltd and Lamb Garage, see pictures 2a and 23, above.



The walkabout showed that present day Wallingford is still largely determined by its mediaeval street plan, laid down from when the town was an important Saxon *Burgh*, or fortification. Developments that worked with this grain, or pattern, of existing development, and respected the resulting rules of scale and proportion were mostly successful, shown in pictures 2b, 3, 16 and 17. Buildings that confidently addressed the grain and their context, such as picture no 10, were leading-edge for their time, well proportioned and built of appropriate local materials were also successful. Those that didn't work so well, attempted to address the underlying urban grain, but failed to respond to neighbours and setting, pictures 6 and 8. Recent developments, i.e. opposite Waitrose, that tried to create new views and variety were thought to succeed in this aim, but did this alone make them good? Otherwise well proportioned buildings can be spoilt by poor understanding of historic precedents, or 'pastiche' design, resulting in watering-down inherent character of an area.

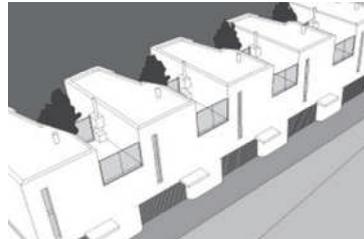
Building in Context finds successful architecture can be created: by following historic precedents closely, by adopting them closely, by adapting or by contrasting with them. Images below demonstrate outcomes of these contrasting approaches.



Left, poorly proportioned and detailed bay window, intended to be a feature and floor spacing spoil the care taken over the rest of the building.



Right, unashamedly modern well-proportioned development on an infill plot re-interprets and contrasts historic precedents. Love it, or hate it, the development relates well to its own setting and shows the importance of attention to detail and context.



The walkabout and workshop concluded all developments reviewed contained elements that are successful, such as local materials and bonding, however lack of attention to detail – which is necessary in successful copies of traditional styles – let the developments down and spoil the intention to contribute positively to the townscape. Future proposals will be carefully scrutinised to ensure details are appropriate. Whilst the 'one-size-fits-all' of design or style doesn't yet exist, fundamental questions can be universally applied to interrogate different schemes, outlined in the panel, previous page, to help assess future proposals.

Comparison and contrast of design solutions by others is a useful tool when considering new development types, such as development within burgage plots. Images left, and below left, show explorations of developing narrow plots while applying modern standards of privacy, space and daylighting. Again, whilst neither entirely appropriate for Wallingford and South Oxfordshire towns and villages, some elements might be intelligently re-cycled, such as internal balconies or single aspect solutions, into schemes designed for their particular context.

Related Guidance

Communities Plan (Sustainable Communities: Building for the future): ODPM
http://www.odpm.gov.uk/stellent/groups/odpm_communities/documents/page/odpm_comm_023261.hcsp

PPG1: General Policy and Principles

PPG1 companion guide: By Design- Urban Design in the Planning System: Towards Better Practice

PPG3: Housing

PPG 12: Development Plans

PPG15: Planning and the Historic Environment

Building in Context: New development in historic areas, CABE, English Heritage
<http://www.english-heritage.org.uk>

Making Townscape: A contextual approach to building in an urban setting: Anthony Tugnut and Mark Robertson, Batsford 1987

Context: new buildings in historic settings: John Warren, John Worthington,

Protecting Design Quality in Planning: CABE
<http://www.cabe.org.uk>

The Councillor's Guide to Urban Design: CABE

Power of Place – the future of the historic environment: English Heritage

The Heritage Dividend: English Heritage

Changing Places...: What the historic environment can do for 21st century England: English Heritage

Looking after Conservation Areas: English Heritage

Building Sustainable Communities: Developing the skills we need: CABE

Local Leadership for better public places: Building sustainable communities: CABE

Building for Life: CABE, Civic Trust, HBF
www.buildingforlife.org

Design Review: CABE

Design Reviewed: CABE

Creating Excellent Buildings: CABE 2003

But would you live there? Shaping Attitudes to Urban Living: Urban Task Force
http://www.odpm.gov.uk/stellent/groups/odpm_urbanpolicy/documents/page/odpm_urbpol_608464.hcsp

The value of housing design and layout: CABE & OPDM
www.buildingforlife.org

Sustainable Residential Quality in the South East: Llewelyn Davies for GOSE
<http://www.go-se.gov.uk/key%20business/publications/downloads/srq.pdf>