Lancaster Council hosted this workshop in partnership with English Heritage and managed by Design:South East.

Speakers
- Karl Creaser, Historic Buildings Adviser, English Heritage (Chair)
- Matt Brook, Director, Broadway Malayan
- Malcolm Edge, Development Manager, Waitrose
- Charlotte Myhrum, Design Review Manager, English Heritage (Chair)
- Clare Wright, Building in Context Toolkit, D:SE

With thanks to Stephen Gardner, Principal Conservation Officer, Lancaster Council

**Workshop: Making development sites in historic areas work for you, Lancaster**

A damp day on 20th February 2014 turned much brighter in time for the workshop and site visit in Lancaster.

The workshop brought together public and private sector Conservation practitioners across the north west to explore opportunities from redeveloping historic urban sites to raise the quality of schemes and achieving their effective and efficient delivery.

The sketch, above, highlights the common message from all the speakers, in that an understanding of context will inform successful design solutions. The process, as shown, is not necessarily linear! As perhaps might be expected from the audience, the clear outcome is of heritage providing an obvious dividend, also promoted by retail developer, Malcolm Edge.

Matt Brook emphasised that, to be successful, a major development needs to be driven by a rationale or ‘Big Idea’ that will come out of its context.

Workshop participants, briefed by these precedents and other tools from the Building in Context Toolkit, reviewed a site adjacent to Lancaster town centre, chosen for its potential in raising common issues, practical transferrable solutions and opportunities for historic areas.
In dialogue with the audience, Matt Brook, designer; Malcolm Edge, retail developer and; Charlotte Myhrum Design Review, discussed the process from site purchase to design. They illustrated their discussion using the case study of Chester’s Shot Towers and adjacent Waitrose supermarket, shown above.

Some of the key lessons were the understanding of how these major developments fitted into every aspect of the local and wider fabric, as per Matt’s diagram. How the proposals responded to fundamental considerations of retaining and creating a use for a major landmark in the area, befitting its historic significance. How the sites could re-connect with the town considering the road network and availability of canalside cycle routes that could be improved and extended. Economic viability and understanding of potential uses and, for the supermarket, adding revenue income and longevity of business plan into the equation. Clear benefits were in designing the scheme so that it could deliver – and be seen to deliver - the Council’s strategic policies and political wishes.

Other key transferrable lessons are the usefulness of the developer and designer adopting a questioning, rather than adversarial, role. This has led to understanding the heart of a particular problem and making suggestions that are more fit for purpose. Design Review can have a useful independent, facilitatory, role at all stages in the process from testing the very earliest design brief through to a fully resolved scheme. Speakers stated the importance of a major development being shaped in partnership with developer, local authority and the community as a team.

The richness of the discussions around the workshop activities provided a very intense and enjoyable day which could have continued for much longer.
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?

Architectural suitable to its use
Is the architecture of the building suitable for the use 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 a 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?

From Building in Context, pg 37