

What does a townscape consultant do?

Peter Stewart

The backbone of our workload at Peter Stewart Consultancy consists of commissions to act as 'townscape consultant', as a member of the consultant team for large complex projects on sensitive sites.

The precise nature of the role varies according to the demands of individual projects, but there are elements that are common to most.

Set out here is an example of the full service that might be provided by a townscape consultant (a term that fails to convey the full scope of what is usually involved – but I haven't thought of a better phrase), together with an explanation of why we are so well placed to carry out this specialist role.

Design development

From the outset of the design development process, the townscape consultant is able to act as a 'critical friend', offering independent scrutiny of the design, but as part of the project team.

Planning authorities and consultees are interested in the relationship between a project and its surroundings, looking outside the red line of the site boundary – but a client and architect can lose sight of the importance of this when a design is under development, as they focus on the demands of the project brief and the world inside the red line.

The townscape consultant's job is to see the project in relation to the bigger picture – how it will relate to its surroundings, to the public realm, and how will it interact with its setting – not just in how it looks, but in how it works as well.

For some sites, these considerations will include questions to do with the impact of a project on conservation areas and listed buildings – and there are very few major projects in big cities which do not affect the historic environment in some way.

Designing new buildings with these sensitivities in mind can be critical to gaining planning consent. An important part of the townscape consultant's role is to identify these sensitivities at an early stage, so that they can inform design development, avoiding abortive and time-wasting design iterations.

Consultations with CABE and English Heritage

A large number of significant projects are reviewed by CABE and English Heritage, and their views are influential in the planning process. In London, the Greater London Authority are important as well.

With extensive experience of all these organisations, we are able to offer valuable advice from an early stage in a project. Advice will identify what issues are likely to be of interest to those bodies, how designs are likely to be received, and how best to present the project.

Visual impact assessments and design appraisals

We have carried out visual impact assessments for a variety of large and complex projects which affect sensitive settings. An authoritative independent assessment, supported by accurate before and after photomontage images of the proposed development, is an important part of a robust Environmental Statement. The practice has established good collaborative relationships with the leading environmental and visualisation consultancies.

Where an Environmental Statement is not required, it may still be of benefit to submit a visual impact assessment to support the planning application; or for smaller projects, a simpler form of independent design appraisal can make the case that a project is well-designed and suitable to be granted planning permission.

Design and Access Statements

A Design and Access Statement is now required as part of any significant planning application. A well-written and well-illustrated statement is an important part of the advocacy for a project. It should be started in draft at the beginning of the design process, so that developing the design and communicating it go hand in hand. This will help it make a convincing case for the design solution as the result of a considered process.

We have considerable experience of advising on how to make best use of these documents to support a planning application.

Design at appeal

An independent expert witness, able to comment authoritatively on design and townscape matters, is often a key figure at planning appeals. I have experience of giving evidence at a number of high profile planning appeals, first while working for CABE, and subsequently on behalf of clients of Peter Stewart Consultancy.

Townscape consultancy - more than the sum of the parts

Each of the above elements of the role improves the chances of a planning consent which achieves the client's objectives.

A project that has been thought through from the outset in relation to its context, and is a convincing design in its own right, will command the support of CABE, English Heritage and local authority officers.

A well designed project will result in a positive and persuasive townscape assessment. While the words in these documents are important, the images are more telling – a badly designed project can't be explained away in the text.

It is an unfortunate reality that sound, well-designed projects can be refused planning consent for reasons that are capricious, politically

motivated, contrary to what policy suggests – or all of these.

The more robust and well-integrated the set of planning application and environmental statement documentation, demonstrating that a project is well-designed, the less likely it is that this will happen, and the more likely that planning officers will be able to persuade members that a project should be approved. And if a project does proceed to a planning appeal, then that same set of application documentation will stand an applicant in good stead in winning their case.

The townscape consultant – how Peter Stewart Consultancy adds value

In providing professional advice, we are mindful of the need to understand the aims and objectives of our clients, and to ensure that our contributions add value to the projects we work on.

We believe that townscape advice should be provided holistically in the manner set out above, from the early stages of a project through to the granting of planning consent, and with the townscape consultant as an integral part of the consultant team.

As Director of CABE's national design review programme for a number of years, I saw at first hand how the independent review of designs, done in a positive spirit and at the right time, can improve projects significantly.

Developing a good scheme is only half the battle. Communicating the scheme convincingly to consultees and decision makers is equally important.

Our advice and our input, informed by experience of many major projects with complex planning histories, are always framed with both of these objectives in mind.

Achieving planning consent is, of course, just a stage in a process. Our work is governed by the belief that in the long run, what really matters is the quality of the finished project, and of the contribution that it makes to its setting.