

Building in context: the CABE casebook

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Imagine a parallel universe in which a new consent regime based on one simple principle would do away with conservation areas, listed buildings and scheduled ancient monuments...

The issue of new architecture in historic contexts is a staple of CABE's design review programme. The cases are diverse, interesting, sometimes frustrating and controversial. Readers will know that this is a subject more likely to spell trouble in the working life of the conservation officer – more likely, for example, to hit the front page of the local paper – than some of the others picked over in the pages of Context.

The areas of debate and the lines of argument are familiar: good manners in townscape versus the desire to represent the spirit of the age; all of that which is now old and cherished was once new; was achieved without the advice of planning officers; some of it was hated when new; and so on. The debate itself is, of course, an old one (possibly listable by now). In 1869 the architect Charles Garnier, reacting to the greyness and uniformity of the recently Haussmannised Paris, dreamed of the day when 'a man will be able to build his house as he pleases, without worrying about whether or not it fits in with his neighbour's. Cornices will shine with the colours of eternity; gold friezes will sparkle on facades.'

Planning and development control are, one hopes, about managing change, not preventing it; conservation is not preservation. The 1992 version of PPG1 set out the general aim that any development should result 'in a "benefit" in environmental and landscape terms'. I find this an attractive principle, but it was dropped in the 1997 edition.

In a parallel universe, a simplified or 'unified' consent regime based on this simple principle could do away with conservation areas, listed buildings and scheduled ancient monuments. In this fantasy planning system, any development or demolition of any kind would be allowed as long as it was a 'benefit' in environmental terms, and disallowed if it was not. Less protection for listed buildings? Hardly, because applicants would have to show they were improving on them. For conservation areas? No, because it would be very similar to what happens in practice now. And what about those not lucky enough to live within the sheltering mantle of the conservation area? Things would be better for them. The quality of what was on offer would be judged against proper standards, and the dross of the worst of the volume housebuilders would not get a look in. Those in grotty areas would benefit from the discretion exercised now on behalf of (usually) the well-off in fancy areas.

All too subjective, perhaps. Who would judge? The same people who make judgements about new architecture in conservation areas now. A better world? Certainly, as long as those making the judgements had the soundest possible basis for doing so.

Sorry, I was daydreaming. CABE, like you, lives in this sublunary world of PPG15, nimbyism and the vagaries of the planning committee. Our design review programme offers advice to planning authorities and to developers and architects on projects which are significant in themselves or because of their sites. Many of the cases referred to us concern questions of new architecture in historic contexts. A selection of recent cases seen by our design review committee will give a flavour of the issues which arise.

Last year CABE appeared at a public inquiry to oppose the Coppergate scheme in York (architects Chapman Taylor). The architect had faced the unusually demanding challenge of designing a new retail development next to one of York's finest medieval and Georgian set

pieces, Clifford's Tower and the Eye of York. The scheme was not a bad one, but CABA maintained that what was needed was architecture which could be described as excellent, and the scheme clearly was not that either. (The city's own planning brief had demanded 'inspired architectural design' and the 'highest architectural quality'). The government's decision, expected soon, will be an interesting test of whether the planning system is up to the job of insisting on the good, as opposed to rejecting the poor, when it really matters.

The proposed Heron Tower in the City of London (architects KPF) was welcomed by CABA as a serious and interesting piece of architecture, a great improvement on some of the less carefully considered towers of the previous generation. It was challenged, however, by English Heritage because of its appearance in some views of St Paul's Cathedral. As the building was nearly a mile from the cathedral, and outside protected viewing corridors, this argument was never very likely to win the day, and so it proved. The view at CABA was that people enjoy looking at old buildings and at well-designed new ones. Both contribute to the life of the city, and it need not be upsetting to see both at once.

A large extension to the Grade I listed Pallant House gallery in Chichester (architects Long and Kentish with Colin St John Wilson) provided a classic example of how modest and well thought out schemes can nevertheless prove highly controversial in historic contexts which have seen little development for a century or two. Although the proposed new street frontage next to the main façade of the existing building is only one aspect of the architecture, it was always going to be the lightning conductor as far as discussing the merits of the project was concerned. Should it be 'in keeping' with a streetscape which features a variety of building styles, heights and materials? Which bit exactly should it be 'in keeping' with?

For the reconstruction of Broadcasting House in Westminster, the BBC appointed an architect, Sir Richard MacCormac of MacCormac Jamieson Prichard, who can already be seen to be of greater importance to the history of English architecture than the architect of the original (listed) building, Val Myers. But the planning system recognises no equivalent of the 'advanced driver'; the experienced architect may be given no credit and expected to argue his case from first principles. In my view the resulting scheme is unnecessarily compromised, but if it goes ahead it will still be one of the great projects of the next decade. At Cloth Hall Street in Leeds (architects AHMM), a new development of flats over retail units was proposed opposite Brodrick's remarkable Grade I listed Corn Exchange. The architects responded to one striking building with characterful architecture of their own, picking up in a loose way on a number of attributes of the surroundings to create something which made no attempt at genuflection.

The scheme for the new City and County Museum in Lincoln (architects Panter Hudspith) was conceived in response to explicit recognition by the local authority clients that this cathedral city had not on the whole been well served by post-war development. The brief encouraged the designers to devise something that would be a substantial piece of architecture in its own right. The architects proposed a building which was distinctive yet responsive, clearly of its time but still rooted in the specific place.

The joint CABA/EH publication *Building in Context*, written by former Royal Fine Art Commission secretary Francis Golding, discusses these issues in greater depth, through a number of case studies. It offers advice on appraising projects, and draws conclusions. One of the most important of these is: beware the simple formula, for example those concerning 'fitting in' or 'contrasting the new with the old'.

Encouragingly, many of the successful case studies have involved a genuine collaboration and creative dialogue between designer and local authority. The number of cases which can be seen by CABA's design review committee is limited, but advice is given on many more projects by CABA staff, after discussion with the committee chairman and committee members. Our experience of casework allows us to draw a number of general lessons. Seeing cases from across England, we think we provide a useful national benchmark against which local authorities who consult us can test local views. 'Modern' architecture is arguably, after nearly a hundred years, just a historical style like any other. It is about as old as manned flight; but although people no longer stare and point when an aeroplane flies overhead, modern architecture still seems to arouse strong feelings. It is sometimes unpopular, often misunderstood.

Believing as we do that what matters is quality, not style, we can find ourselves supporting the views of a conservation/design officer who seeks our help to persuade his or her colleagues in the planning department of the merits of a scheme; or our help is sought to strengthen a recommendation for approval when officers know that their committee will be sceptical; or, widening the circle, CABA's endorsement may be thought useful when the planning committee is persuaded of the merits of a project but are nervous of their voters.

When the consultation process works well, we think that both sides – local authority and CABA – have specific things to offer in the common pursuit of the best possible outcomes in these often difficult cases. The local authority conservation/design officer has the local knowledge, is tuned in to local sensitivities and is aware of the significance of things on the ground. CABA can offer a detached view from a national perspective, informed by access to a range of (free) expert advice. We know, from some of the heartfelt comments sent back in response to our survey of local authorities, that some conservation/design officers can feel beleaguered, hard

pressed, and even lonely, as a small voice in a big department.

We are alert to the dangers of 'death by consultation'. Keeping everyone happy on sensitive sites can have a normative, deadening effect which militates directly against the pursuit of excellence. In my view this problem is worse in England than elsewhere. There is a tendency, even within the broadly modernist tradition, to go for safe, polite, *noli me tangere* solutions in which 'respect' for historic fabric is paramount. Bolder, more original approaches in the spirit of, say, Carlo Scarpa's work at the Castelvecchio in Verona or Henri Ciriani's 'Historial' museum, which extends the medieval castle at Peronne in northern France, are rare in England (and rarer now than in the days of George Pace and later William Whitfield).

Projects which propose such strong meat may well now find it hard to obtain planning permission in this country. If for the sake of an easy life we avoid anything that looks risky, we deny ourselves some of the listed buildings of the future. That a building may not be liked is not a good reason to turn it down; the question is whether it is any good or not.

What comes out of CABA's design review programme is an optimistic view of the world. The sight of new architecture need not frighten the horses. It is part of life in the changing city, and more popular than is sometimes held. Conservation is, after all (as you may have heard before), an anagram of conversation. It should be possible for architecture to speak across the centuries. Quality is what matters.

I conclude with a quotation from Spiro Kostof, whose masterly books *The City Shaped* and *The City Assembled* assimilate urban design and architecture, the general and the particular, and the past and the present of cities in a spirit which I would like to think is reflected in CABA's work.

'Cities are never still; they resist efforts to make neat sense of them. We need to respect their rhythms and to recognise that the life of a city must lie loosely somewhere between total control and total freedom of action. Between conservation and process, process must have the final word. In the end, urban truth is in the flow.'