Design review: saving Architecture from death by a thousand consultations
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Lots of people have opinions about architecture, and they are all entitled to them.   But how many of them do you want tinkering with your carefully considered designs?

Good design (whatever that is, but I'm coming to that) will now be embedded in planning law, thanks to effective lobbying by the RIBA on the current Planning Bill. But reactions to this in the professional press have not been welcoming. Editorials and letters have claimed that it will lead to yet more meddling in design matters by unqualified planning officers and committee members.

Well, that's not what the Bill says. If planning officers and committee members can't deliver higher design standards, then they will have to meet their new legal obligation in another way.

Design review panels will be an important part of the answer. More and more panels are being set up at regional and local levels, supplementing the CABE national programme, which has a limited capacity (it reviews about 350 projects a year, but typically there are about 15-20,000 major planning applications a year in England, and about 600,000-800,000 applications of all kinds).

The RIBA supports this expansion of design review, and is working with CABE to provide guidance and protocols on the subject. It will be essential, though, that such processes contribute to the efficiency of the planning system as well as the quality of the built environment.

An architect designing a complex project in London might have to deal with advice and comments on their developing designs from:

- A local authority design review panel
- Local authority design officers
- Local authority conservation officers
- Local authority members
- The GLA's design officers
- Design for London
- The Mayor, who has his own advisors
- English Heritage
- The CABE national panel

- quite apart from the client and the QS.

They will all be well-intentioned, and on a good day they might all have sensible things to say, but they do not have common agendas, and the chances of them all agreeing are vanishingly small.

The recent government-sponsored Killian Pretty review of the planning system[1] - which contains a great deal that is sensible - recognises this problem as a consequence of the increasing complexity of the system, observing that 'instead of the advice from statutory consultees being weighed in the balance, their objections become a series of hurdles which the developer has to overcome.'

To be clear: scrutiny of design is a good thing; but if architects have to respond to comments from all and sundry, this is almost certain to make a project worse.   There is never a single 'correct' design for a project, so just because different design advisers may pull in different directions, that doesn't (necessarily) mean that any of them is giving bad advice.   Most projects are capable of being improved in a number of possible ways.

Some architects still resent the idea of being subject to scrutiny, but surveys of design review processes consistently show a majority of all

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http://www.communities.gov.uk/publications/planningandbuilding/killianprettysummary

parties concluding that the process is worthwhile.

The requirements for an efficient system of review that allows design development to proceed in a timely manner are not complicated:

- A confident decision-maker (planning authority) with the necessary skills to understand design advice, to know when to seek it and what to do with it, and to be able to balance it with other demands;
- Engagement of design advice at the early stages of a project;
- A single authoritative independent source of design advice (design review panel or similar);
- Continuity of attention and consistency of advice flowing from that review process;
- Open and collaborative engagement, based on mutual respect, between applicant, reviewer and decision maker.

With design review available at national, regional and local levels, it should be an absolute requirement that a project is reviewed at one level only, and that this continues to be the case through the course of the development of the design.

Buildings are not generally put up for the benefit or the pleasure of architects, and in the end it is right that planning decisions are made through a democratic process - the least bad option. Quality of design is only one issue that has to be considered, and advice is no more than advice. But if it is good advice, put clearly, convincingly and concisely, it will be listened to.   When it comes to design review, a little goes a long way.