



urbaninitiatives

Architecture+DesignScotland
Aitheasrachd is Dealbhadh na h-Alba

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north bridge studios

New Design in Historic Settings

Report of workshop held 1st October 2008,
at the McDonald Rooms Conference Centre, Edinburgh.

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1 Executive Summary

This workshop invited stakeholders to comment on the initial findings of a research project being undertaken on behalf of the Scottish Government and Architecture + Design Scotland, which will develop guidance on achieving good design in historic settings. The guidance will identify overarching principles, a toolkit, and exemplar case studies to help all practitioners and commentators apply the proposed methodology in evaluating proposals. Attended by circa forty practitioners and commentators – delegates welcomed the opportunity to comment, and welcomed the focus on this area. Key points arising in discussion included: the toolkit will provide a useful framework so long as it is not perceived to be overly formulaic and/or cumbersome to administer; capacity amongst local authority staff to be able to apply this process is quite limited; the toolkit has potential to accommodate a broad range of values and language; the case studies need to illustrate how the toolkit should be applied and could usefully cover a broad range of ‘typologies of place’.

2 Introduction

Andrew Leslie, Director of Practice at the RIAS and Director of BEFS, welcomed everyone to the workshop. The purpose of the event was to seek stakeholder views on the initial research findings of a study being undertaken on new design in the historic setting. Commissioned by the Scottish Government (the Directorate of the Built Environment and Historic Scotland) and Architecture + Design Scotland, the research is being undertaken by consultants Urban Initiatives working in partnership with Malcolm Fraser Architects and Andrew PK Wright Architect. The research will develop the content of a guidance document on this topic, geared for use by designers and any practitioner or commentator with a role in this area. The guidance document will cover overarching principles, propose a methodology or toolkit for evaluating proposals, and describe a range of case studies including, in more detail, some exemplar case studies that illustrate how the toolkit can be applied. The workshop was attended by a range of practitioners, including many local authority representatives, with an interest in the subject of new design in the historic setting.

3 Presentation on approach and key principles

- 3.1 Roisin Barrett, Associate Director at Urban Initiatives introduced the research, presented their approach in responding to the client brief and proposed a set of key principles for discussion. The idea behind the proposed guidance is to raise the standard of new design in historic settings. It will provide a toolkit that will help practitioners communicate on the rationale behind a proposal and will seek to inspire good design through the use of exemplar case studies. Drivers for mediocre design in the historic setting were identified as being volume house builders, high street retailers and the car – these factors serve to reduce local distinctiveness and the competitive element between places. There are many professions involved in managing new design in the historic setting, all using different methodologies and languages. The aim behind the guidance is to create a ‘framework for thinking’ where policy guidance is missing. The consultants and client team are keen to hear feedback on the proposed approach.
- 3.2 Malcolm Fraser of Malcolm Fraser Architects went on to give an overview of the characteristics of forty case studies that demonstrate a good response to an historic context. Key points made included the importance of a good architect and client in supporting the process; the danger of ‘over-contextualising’; the importance of thinking about buildings from the inside out as well as external appearance only. The idea of ‘joyful’ pastiche was put forward, while participants were encouraged to be wary of ‘dry’ pastiche, ie proposals that are overly literal and sometimes inaccurate (reference was made to the UNESCO requirement that there be no pastiche in World Heritage Sites). A creative approach must be argued for; it is not the intention that this guidance should in any way inhibit creativity.
- 3.3 Principles: Roisin Barrett presented a set of principles for new design in the historic setting – the idea being that these may be applied at all scales. Good new design in the historic setting should:
 - Respond to significant views including landmarks

- Respond to the geography and history - what has made that place?
- Respond to scale of the surroundings
- Respond to the urban grain – arrangement, pattern, plot size and depth (the response may be to contrast – or to replicate)
- Use high quality, locally distinctive, and sustainable materials and detailing
- Aim to add value to the setting

3.4 The Approach: the approach taken in formulating the guidance is that design must be based on an understanding of the context. The context is provided by the socio-economic conditions that have lead to a place being as it is - both the setting (current character) and historic context (time line). The proposed framework is based on the following process:

Analyse – evaluate – translate – communicate

3.4.1 Analysis: it is proposed that this principally uses the Conservation Area Appraisal methodology.

3.4.2 Evaluate: a matrix is proposed that will help the user of the guidance evaluate character on the following dimensions:

- Urban structure
- Urban grain
- Density and mix
- Height, scale and massing
- Materials/details
- Landscape/public realm

And attach significance (major, moderate, little) to the following suggested qualities (drawn from policy guidance Designing Places):

- History
- Identity
- Safe and pleasant spaces
- Ease of movement
- Sense of welcome
- Legibility
- Sustainability

It is proposed that a range of design approaches will flow according to the degree of significance (ranging from conservative, for sites of major significance, to radical for sites of minor significance). The proposed design responses range from: replicate, reconstruct, re-use, reinterpret, to rewrite. The objective in following this process of analysis and evaluation is, overall, to enhance.

3.4.3 Translate: the range of design responses is translated into priorities for the site – which may be presented as a vision for the project and represented as a list of design principles.

3.4.4 Communicate: these are then communicated to clients via the design brief.

4 Discussion on key principles and proposed methodology

4.1 Participants were invited to discuss the proposed methodology in break out groups - comments are summarised below. Participants also made comments via index cards – these are transcribed in the appendix.

4.1.1 Comments on the purpose of document:

- There was some lack of clarity over the purpose of the document – is the intention to try to teach designers how to design? Is the purpose about creating good places, or good pieces of architecture? Greater clarity is required on the objective for the document.
- Communication of the elements of a design is very important - the breakdown of 'thought process' is good, but this must balance with not being too formulaic.
- Some commented that there is nothing new in this proposal – so who is this for? To help the client; the decision maker; and/or an education process?
- This represents: 'a tool to translate a way of thinking and mechanics for common understanding'.
- The strength of the document will be in its ability to encourage its users to interrogate a proposal. The document should not be so process driven that the result is 'average' or a compromise.

4.1.2 Comments on the approach:

- Some concern was expressed that the toolkit might stifle imaginative design; on the other hand the assessment process would be able to outline how radical or flexible things could be.
- This is a description of a design process and it would be what any good architect would do. The format was described as linear which the process is not.
- This represents a good toolkit for evaluating architect's proposals, however the matrix is still subjective and many issues remain a matter of opinion. How does this help move towards consensus?
- Blank columns should be added to enable different ideas and criteria to be integrated.
- It was queried as to whether sites of major significance should always elicit a more conservative/less radical design approach and vice versa.
- There has been much emphasis on physical attributes – what about the values that people associate with places? Can the document readily assess these?
- There is a big gap between design and end use – there needs to be a feedback loop.

- Will the document be able to address issues about authenticity (the exterior reflecting interior use)?
- It would be appropriate for a third party to assess projects post construction to see how the priorities identified by the framework had been applied.
- The significance of the rate of change/dynamic nature of an area was felt to be a very important point. Dynamic areas can accommodate more change while a small, relatively unaltered village may not be able to accommodate much at all.
- Incremental change was highlighted as being potentially very damaging – good design should be able to anticipate future uses.

4.1.3 Comments on value/use of the document:

- This document is better than the current situation where there is no guidance focusing on this issue (currently policy back up is weak) – so yes it would help.
- Relevant audience for the guidance: The process should be applicable to / usable by a range of stakeholders.
- The methodology has value as a translator.
- This does set out a framework and mechanics to talk the same language across various bodies.
- As a tool this will be useful to planners - particularly when comparing proposals or applying policy - however it will not necessarily guarantee good design.
- The document needs to help inform Local Councillors in making decisions on planning applications.
- There is a perception that it is difficult to do 'contemporary' in an historic setting – will this document be able to help explain issues of significance and context to the public?
- What about the 'afterlife' of the building post-design? The document could usefully accommodate considerations of maintenance and adaptability.
- Can this be applied to wind farm developments? Would these be covered within the scope?
- This document should be capable of being applied to Conservation Areas and streetscapes as well as to buildings. Furthermore, landscapes and natural heritage could be further incorporated into the process – it needs to be recognised that historic settings go beyond Conservation Areas.
- This document may help prevent bad design but needs teeth behind it.
- This document should help demonstrate the thinking behind the proposal.

- Are these issues best communicated in written format? Are there other types of resource that could be used to communicate these objectives?
- The social and cultural context of a design and a place needs to be understood and this could be difficult for this document to achieve.

4.1.4 Comments on resource/cost implications:

- Some concern was expressed over the required level of administration associated with the proposed process.
- We must be realistic about whether planning staff will have the time to give the level of detailed consideration proposed – the methodology is good but is it manageable with staff having big case loads? Is this a luxury?
- Training on this issue is poor.
- There will need to be a programme of training/induction when this document is launched?
- Concerns were raised about training, the time scale and cost.
- There will be cost implications for architects and clients – expertise may need to be brought in and this will drive up the cost of small projects.
- There is a lack of external lobby on design issues.

4.1.5 Comments on relationship to other documents:

- The process could usefully contribute to part of the design statement, and also act as a prompt for thinking, to integrate and to inform.
- Will these sit alongside design statements?
- What is the role of the client brief?
- Design Statements are the logical vehicle for communicating the thinking, however these are not a requirement and too often are used to simply justify the client's brief.
- Will local authorities be able to write a requirement for use of this methodology into their Local Plans?
- There was some concern over how this would dovetail with existing methods for assessing the heritage. How does this relate to existing guidance produced by Historic Scotland and the National Trust for Scotland on conservation management?

5 Presentation and discussion on four exemplar case studies

5.1 Four categories of exemplar projects were presented as follows:

- St Aloysius, Glasgow - 'urban grid'
- Scottish Poetry Library, Edinburgh – 'loose-fit urban'
- Pier Arts Centre, Stromness – 'small town'
- Lotte Globb, Caithness – 'rural'

5.2 General comments

- There is a danger of 'retrofitting' design strategies to justify 'intuitive' design process.
- The 'process' that the case studies went through must be explained; how the development was viewed by planners, the local community, the users, to enable the whole story to be told.
- How do we learn from exemplars with no audit trail? An audit trail of decisions and approach would provide good opportunity for learning. We need to know from the exemplars about the processes involved.
- A key issue for the case studies is whether exemplar projects would in fact 'pass' the toolkit approach.

5.3 Comments on the range of case studies

Participants indicated that they would welcome case studies illustrating good practice in the following categories:

- Developments in small villages – particularly edge of settlement development (vitally important).
- Villa developments.
- Commercial developments.
- Examples of developments other than individual buildings would be very valuable. Again the place-making agenda; the guidance should reflect successful places not just 'nice' buildings in a 'nice' location.
- The guidance could also usefully include some examples of developments that are not award-winning – but nevertheless still 'good'; this would make the document more accessible for many users.

5.4 St Aloysius, Glasgow - 'urban grid'

In break out session participants indicated that since this example is quite exceptional, it would be useful to have another example in this typology to help illustrate how the toolkit can be applied.

Participants felt that for this example in particular, the use of the building – as a school in otherwise residential/tenement setting - is very relevant.

Is it the idea behind the guidance that this example would be copied for other buildings in this typology?

In discussing this example, the importance of process was highlighted – communicating the process of how this design evolved will help significantly in explaining how this can be presented as a good example. Explanation through sketch diagrams (as presented for the Poetry Library) would be valuable. As it was, the application of the framework to this example was on some elements unclear.

5.5 Scottish Poetry Library, Edinburgh - 'loose-fit urban'

Participants felt that this did well as an exemplar. It was noted that the historic context had to an extent already been articulated in the masterplan for the site. This example was perceived as a radical intervention, but one that acts positively as a catalyst.

The significance of process was raised in relation to this case study – it was felt that a process should be able to engage with all stakeholders.

5.6 Pier Arts Centre, Stromness - 'small town'

Participants felt that this was a good exemplar, not only as an award winning project but also as the urban context in Stromness contained some highly distinctive features to which it could respond; the tightly enclosed, winding street (both a spinal link for the whole town and a protected zone for citizen engagement) and the external lifeline of the waterfront with its contrasting open nature and its vital quayside working spaces. These were felt to be more significant than the compactness of Orkney farmsteads of the plenary presentation.

It was commented that this building mediates successfully between one elevation and another – the context on one side to another being different. It was questioned as to how in this project, a new piece had been introduced into the traditional street rhythm. What was behind the rationale here? The idea of an understated entrance is interesting.

This is an important public building with none of the presence of so many others, yet so successful in its discreetness and in its fitness for purpose.

5.7 Lotte Globb, Caithness - 'rural'

This project demonstrates that an exceptional client can make the difference – it is a good house. However it was questioned as to whether this design is replicable. The following comments indicate a range of responses: this is a large landscape with no human intervention, this is a unique landscape. The building is small – on a large canvas. It is 'tentative' on the landscape. It could be argued that the lack of context means that something radical can be achieved. It has a coherent identity – one that you either love or loath. Some concern was raised over the kithouse/component house design making it a potentially confusing exemplar.

Participants agreed that the setting is sensitive (is it historic?). Concern was expressed over how the values of local people, and values associated with protected areas, had been accommodated by the toolkit. It was not clear as to how this case study was an exemplar according to the proposed methodology.

6 Conclusion

The concluding themes of the day were as follows: The purpose of the document and target audience needs to be clearly articulated. The objective of breaking down the thought process behind a design is good, however the process must not become overly formulaic – this must not inhibit good design. Greater emphasis needs to be made of social values and how this will help public understanding of issues of significance. Concerns were expressed over the capacity of local authority staff to use this methodology effectively. How does this relate to other policy documents? Case studies must clearly illustrate how the framework can be applied. The document would have wider value if the range of case studies were increased – this would help practitioners apply the proposed methodology to a wider range of circumstances. Overall participants welcomed the attention being paid to this area, and are keen to see further linkage between the case studies and proposed methodology in the final document.

7 Acknowledgements

The workshop was sponsored by Architecture + Design Scotland and facilitated by Built Environment Forum Scotland (BEFS) (with support from Historic Scotland).

Thanks go to everyone that participated in the workshop, and in particular to Roisin Barrett (Urban Initiatives) and Malcolm Fraser (Malcolm Fraser Architects) for the presentations; Andrew Leslie (Royal Incorporation of Architects in Scotland) for chairing; and Robin Burley (BEFS), Andrew Leslie (Royal Incorporation of Architects in Scotland), Robin Livingstone (Malcolm Fraser Architects), Lucy Pawson (Urban Initiatives), Maria Primarolo (Urban Initiatives), Jo Robertson (BEFS), Colin Tennant (Scottish Stone Liaison Group), Graham U'ren (Royal Town Planning Institute in Scotland), Gemma Wild (Scottish Civic Trust) and Anne Wilkinson (BEFS) for administration and facilitation of the event.

8 Participants

The workshop was attended by individuals from the following organisations:

Aberdeenshire Council
Architectural Heritage Society of Scotland
Architecture + Design Scotland
Association for the Protection of Rural Scotland
Built Environment Forum Scotland
City of Edinburgh Council
David Blaikie Architect
Dundee City Council
East Lothian Council
East Renfrewshire Council
Edinburgh World Heritage
Fife Council
Garden History Society in Scotland
Historic Scotland
Loch Lomond and the Trossachs National Park Authority
Malcolm Fraser Architects
Midlothian Council
National Trust for Scotland
North Ayrshire Council
Perth and Kinross Council
Renfrewshire Council
Royal Incorporation of Architects in Scotland
Royal Town Planning Institute in Scotland
Scottish Civic Trust
Scottish Stone Liaison Group
Stirling Council
Urban Initiatives

9 Appendix: Transcript of index cards from session 1 on principles and methodology

- The value of the building is the future, needs a separate column, the future occupiers feel for their building and their willingness to maintain it properly including the design restraints on effective maintenance.
- A degree of concentration is needed on the smaller developments and their importance.
- More exemplars needed for best re-use of buildings and the importance of physical investigation influencing the future design. Contextual successful architecture is MEDIATION between various aspects of a building – front /back eg Pier Arts Centre, Stromness - streetside/waterside.
- St Andrews Square Housing, GLA – church /hinterland
- Parliament Building – Canongate/Arthur's seat
- Small towns and villages – need examples that avoid pastiche and banal 'keeping in keeping'
- How can this filter into the teaching and learning in schools of design and planning, and professional CPD?
- Retain 'weight' of buildings
- Recognition of architectural times/ materials/techniques – moving on.
- Lack of amenity groups supporting contemporary architecture means public opinion skewed towards supporters for historical approach.
- Councillors tend to support the loudest lobby which is normally the local traditionalist civic society.
- Good, but quite involved and time consuming. Will clients pay their architects to do this?
- Probably need to make the assessment a requirement of planning applications within certain historic areas/sites.
- Danger is that client requirement will result in a solution that impacts the evaluation rather than the other way round.
- Also how to persuade client to take on costs of this extra work?
- Impatience of understanding that some places are less dynamic than big cities – small rural towns/ villages – important part of evaluation that degree of 'change' historically is understood and therefore ability to accommodate change less.
- Will only work if training and experience is fed into the system and pre discussion of proposal or architects/planners/client are properly briefed beforehand.
- Danger of it becoming too complicated ie methodology – scoping evaluation need to be looked at. How is site to be assessed? Are the skills available to architect/client to do this?
- Appropriate guidance for historic environment covering gardens and designed landscapes and archaeological and natural heritage interest is required.
- Craft training and good workmanship is critical to process of getting good buildings – this is often lacking.
- In practice it is that local authorities receive planning applications from sub standard architects, but a framework would be very useful.
- Planners are very busy, massive case loads – do they really have the time to breakdown these processes, ask the questions and communicate effectively?
- A tall order teaching designers to design again.

- Process seems to miss out return step of critique - discussion and iteration – first attempt may have to be revisited.
- Allow flexibility in headings of analysis chart.
- Approach appropriate but result will vary depending on stand point of person carrying out analysis – could lead to objective results.
- For who? How will it encourage good design? How will it prevent bad design?
- Objective unclear, process description only.
- No focus on people
- What about briefing/ commissioning?
- Iterative process not linear
- Examples mostly big, urban scale
- May benefit from some additional emphasis on use as a means of reanimating historical context.
- Photos should include some text.
- There are other factors at play in determining planning application – requirements, standards (not always up to date) eg overlooking, servicing etc.
- Associated issue of training/ understanding
- This is about LANDSCAPE not principal (ie place)
- Is the proposed document not the same as CABE's, Building in Context? Why reinvent the wheel, put a Scottish context to this document.
- Narrative of place – importance of understanding
- Four dimensions – including importance of time
- Playful pastiche – to demonstrate that not all replication is helpful or in some way wrong
- Understanding context – not just what can be seen here and now, but history, climate, social economic & topography.
- Architectural significance – but what about relevance to locals and tourists?
- How do we introduce invigorative design that reinforces/ creates Scottish character – sense of place?
- What about a case study that is a bad example? Or which failed in some respect.
- Case study should be able to demonstrate a clear audit trail of information gathering – evaluation.
- No case study on conventional design for an edge of settlement eg between old building groups and countryside. Are there any such instances worth discussion?
- No case study on new design in small settlements or uninhabited countryside.
- Exemplars should display the best aspects of quality design so that so that less good design can easily be demonstrated not to measure up.
- It is slightly concerning that the case studies did not follow the procedures being advocated. It almost says, if your design is good, you don't need this process, which if we then try and assess such projects may be problematic.
- The exemplars illustrated are very good, not sure if Gokay Devici house (Lotte Globb) can be held up as modern vernacular. Perhaps an example from Dualchas demonstrates possibilities of conventional timber frame construction.

- National Park Authority – statutory aim to conserve of natural cultural heritage many contemporary designs have a palette of design approaches/ materials that are common place on content.
- Kit buildings – how adaptable can it be for new building in historic setting?
- Does not demonstrate all aspects so therefore not exemplar.
- Public identification on the site is essential.
- Planning system should include conservation area grading sub system. This can be achieved by conservation area appraisals.
- How planning system should respond to framework?
- Good design can defend itself, should the process of discussion/ negotiation on projects be limited (time factor)?
- Who should be responsible for the evaluation process? Maybe an organisation that included all establishments, local authority, public, architects etc which will establish proper public co-operation and discussion.
- Avoidance of the formal part of the system of justification (planning) is not desirable because – there are designers that design for financial benefits not for historic context/culture.
- The system of site/ project distribution should be transparent and should emphasise the competition between architects.
- Should be a part of the philosophy, which means the common ground of use and the context.
- Is it possible to describe contemporary spirit of the time?
- Projects demand raising the awareness/increased training for professionals – planners responsible for design - need for more workshops/conferences etc as well as via formal education.