

Managing Design in Historic Areas: Lessons from Elsewhere

Christina Duckett BA DipArch RIBA MRTPI SFHEA

Principal Conservation Officer, Basingstoke and Deane (and former Principal Conservation and Design Officer, West Berkshire Council)

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In many places, in the southeast of England and elsewhere, development is largely driven by commercial interests. There are significant pressures to accommodate new housing and other forms of development, often in locations which are sensitive in landscape and/or heritage terms.

The workload of a local authority conservation officer relates to proposals at various scales. The officer may act as consultee and/or as case officer for planning applications and pre-application enquiries. Typically the officer's workload relates to small or medium scale interventions such as extensions and alterations and new buildings; to housing development; and to town centre redevelopment schemes. This workload is often complemented by input to planning policy.

A morphological approach to design involves deconstructing a place to identify key qualities which determine its 'character' to inform the design of interventions. This approach, as noted in the Stratford-on-Avon District Design Guide of 2001, involves consideration of not only 'objects' but also 'the way they are arranged.' It is an approach that can be applied to evaluation of places at various scales, and so it is useful whether it is the type and location of settlements or the details of individual buildings which are under consideration. An hierarchical approach, it provides a structure for comment, and assists officers and others in achieving some consistency in their assessments. Once the character of an existing place has been identified, the next challenges are to determine which characteristics contribute positively to the character of that place, and then to decide which of those characteristics should be referenced or reinforced in the design of new development. Such decision-making inevitably involves subjective judgement.

Complementary to this approach are tools such as the Building in Context (BiC) Toolkit, 2006, which was developed by English Heritage, CABE and the Kent Architecture Centre to 'encourage high quality and inclusive design of new development particularly in historically sensitive locations to ensure it responds to its context.' The toolkit includes a set of principles and criteria which provide a framework for local authorities, developers and communities to consider various factors involved in the design of new development in historic areas.

It can be useful to expand on the BiC principles using layman's terms. For example, *Principle 3: A successful project will be informed by its own significance so that its character and identity will be appropriate to its use and context* may more readily understood if one asks the question 'Should the design shout, speak politely or whisper?' Thomas Heatherwick's sculptural glasshouses at Laverstoke Mill in Hampshire for Bombay Sapphire contrast with the massive industrial historic mill buildings and draw attention, providing an appropriate focus for this flagship complex for the brand. A very different, and arguably equally successful, approach has been taken in Hampshire County Council's design of proposals for Whitchurch Silk Mill, intended to improve the viability of the mill as a tourist attraction and to improve access for visitors. Officers have worked with the architects to ensure that interventions, in a minimalist modern style, are carefully detailed, adding interest to the

street scene on a prominent site within a conservation area whilst allowing the principal building on the site to remain the focus of attention.

Currently officers deal with a high volume of enquiries and applications relating to proposed housing development in or adjacent to conservation areas. Positive interaction with developers has secured improvements in proposed layouts, such as ensuring that development fronting a village street shares characteristics of existing properties which are considered important, allowing buildings rather than parking areas to dominate and important views to be preserved.

Parkway in Newbury, West Berkshire is a completed large mixed-use scheme. Here officers worked with the developers to ensure that a large area of retail floorspace and a significant number of dwellings were accommodated within a design which responds sensitively to the character of the historic market town. A key design concept was to create a new shopping street parallel to existing streets and connecting with secondary streets and lanes, referencing the historic street pattern of the town. Particular consideration was given to how pedestrian access to the scheme should be afforded from the historic main street (Northbrook Street). One access to the new development is via a narrow and previously little-used passage (Marsh Lane), which is adjacent to and allows appreciation of one of the most important historic buildings in Newbury (Jack of Newbury's House, which dates to C16th). Another access features a new curved building, which draws on the design of an existing building to the north and is positioned at the junction of the main street and a new secondary pedestrian street, such that views are afforded to one of the new anchor stores.

The political context, the culture within a local planning authority (LPA), the LPA's resources in terms of staff, and the attitude of the client/ developer/ consultant/contractor team all affect the likelihood of achieving a high quality of design in historic areas. Dedicated permanent local authority staff need to be both skilled and experienced in design and conservation, and their opinions must be valued by decision-makers. Well-written Local Plan Policies and Supplementary Planning Guidance, including up to date Conservation Area Appraisals, increase the likelihood of positive outcomes. It is also helpful if policy and development control activities are integrated, such that experience of development control informs formulation of policy. Early and ongoing LPA engagement in projects maximises potential influence, helping to ensure continuity and consistency of approach. Engagement of other stakeholders can be also have a positive influence on the quality of design. Perhaps most important of all is that a spirit of everyone - developers, consultants, local authority officers and others – working together is engendered, as at Parkway, and that a pragmatic approach is taken throughout the process of managing design.

