



# Design review

How CABE evaluates quality  
in architecture and urban design



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for Architecture and the Built Environment.

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# Foreword

What makes buildings succeed or fail? Why do people love them or hate them? And why do some buildings enhance their surroundings and raise the spirits while others are depressing blots on the landscape?

CABE is the public body that advises government on design quality on architecture and the built environment. When we first published *Design review* in 2001, we set out to explain how our panel of experts assesses 'good design'. This second edition reflects both the popularity of the original *Design review* and changes in legislation since then.

Since our design review panel was established in 1999, it has offered advice on almost every major strategic project to come forward in England, and the concept of design review has found increasingly wide acceptance. There are now many design review panels at local and regional level and in particular sectors, such as healthcare.



The ultimate aim of the design review process is to improve the quality of our built environment, and the principles discussed here hold true for any project, large or small. This second edition of *Design review* is aimed at everyone involved in the planning of major schemes, from local authorities to architects and clients.

I would like to thank two CABE commissioners: Paul Finch, who has contributed invaluable to this document and Les Sparks, who will be stepping down as chair of CABE's design review panel in August 2006 after having played such an important role in its success.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "John Sorrell." The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

**John Sorrell CBE**  
Chair, CABE





# Introduction

**CABE starts from the belief that architecture affects everyone, every hour of every day. The appearance of our built environment is important, but good design is about much more than how things look. It is about uplifting communities and transforming how people feel and behave. It is also about using resources effectively and imaginatively. In short, good design improves the quality of life for everyone.**

CABE considers projects of all types and sizes, from urban masterplans to individual buildings, as well as engineering structures, landscaping and public realm schemes and projects in other categories such as proposals for tall buildings in city centres and plans for major retail developments. Not all of what follows will be relevant to every project or every type of project. But the majority of the principles set out will have some relevance to most projects.

Although the principal purpose of this publication is to provide insight into how CABE's design review service works, it will also be useful to other organisations, including funding agencies and planning authorities, involved in appraising design quality. This second edition of *Design review* updates CABE's guidance on how its design review panel offers expert advice on the quality of designs for selected projects.

Design is a creative activity, and definitions of quality in design are elusive. It cannot be reduced to codes and prescriptions. Some quality indicators, such as the design quality indicator (DQI), have been codified, although even in those areas where there appear to be codes – such as classical architecture – the best examples often break or transcend the rules.

However, it is possible to distinguish good design from bad design. By good design we mean design that is fit for purpose, sustainable, efficient, coherent, flexible, responsive to context, good looking and a clear expression of the requirements of the brief. We believe that assessing quality is to a large extent an objective process. Ultimately, of course, some questions come down to matters of individual taste and preference. It is not often, however, that questions of this kind are important in deciding whether a project, judged in the round, is a good one. What matters is quality, not style.

A building project matters to everyone who comes into contact with it or who is affected by it. This is a group much larger than the building's users. Failure to recognise this may result in a design that is 'fit for purpose' as the client sees it, but inadequate as a piece of urban design or a piece of architecture. That is why CABE supports and encourages the pursuit of high quality standards within the statutory planning system, and why CABE supports the recent changes to planning policy.

**By good design we mean design that is fit for purpose, sustainable, efficient, coherent, flexible, responsive to context, good looking and a clear expression of the requirements of the brief**

CABE believes that high standards in architecture and urban design should be promoted everywhere. People who live in low-quality environments should be as entitled as anyone else to demand high standards in new projects that affect them. Poor designs are unacceptable wherever they may be proposed.

# Project framework

## Client, design team and procurement

When we evaluate a project, we need to understand the nature of the client and the design team, and how the project is being organised.

A successful project will be the result of teamwork as much as of individual effort. The role of the client as a member of the team is important; a good client is a patron whose defining characteristic is a commitment to excellence. A successful project will owe as much to this commitment as to the skill and ingenuity of the design team.

The appointment of the design team is, nevertheless, a key moment for a project. CABE believes strongly that there is no substitute for the skills of the architect and the other members of the design team. They are the people who, after careful analysis of the opportunities, will bring to the project the creativity which produces great designs, transforming the quality of the environment and bringing rewards over the long term to the user. In this light, CABE will consider, as part of its assessment, whether the design team appears well suited to the demands of a project.

Where design teams are appointed through competition, it is important that the skills and abilities of the designers should be given adequate weight in the selection process, and this in turn may mean that the client needs expert advice when choosing consultants.

The role of the client will come under particular scrutiny in the case of public private partnership (PPP) projects. A direct relationship and good communication between the client and the design team are essential for a successful project. The government's better public buildings policy has set high quality standards for public projects. Great care needs to be taken in structuring the organisation of PPP projects so that everyone involved is committed to these standards.

CABE is interested in projects in the round. The way a project is procured is important to achieving a high-quality result. A commitment to excellence needs to be carried through to the construction stage of a project if the result is to be a success.

## Key questions about client, design team and procurement

- Is there evidence of a commitment to excellence on the part of the client?
- Has the client succeeded in communicating a commitment to excellence? What measures are in place to ensure this commitment is realised?
- Is the client committed to sustainable development, both in the long and short term?
- Is the budget realistic?
- Is the project programme realistic?
- How was the professional team chosen? Where appropriate, was there a competitive process?
- Does the professional team have the appropriate range and level of skills for the demands of the project?
- Is the client's management structure for the project able to support a commitment to excellence?
- Is the client committed to value rather than lowest cost, to the importance of whole-life costs, and to taking into account the needs of all the building's users?
- Does the client recognise that good design can contribute to efficiency for the building's users?
- How will the building be procured? Will the procurement process ensure that the design intentions are carried through to the finished project?



## The brief

A clear brief is an essential component of a successful project. A good brief will set objectives for the project against which proposals can be tested. These will include the functional requirements of the project but will also address the client's aspirations. The briefing material will signal to the design team the quality of the client organisation and will establish the level of service expected. It is important for clients to take the time to prepare the brief and to set the programme and budget and to make them as comprehensive as possible. Proceeding without such a set of clear objectives as a foundation for the project team's work is a recipe for delay, changes, disillusionment and, potentially, failure.

Setting a clear brief and appointing the design team involves taking decisions of crucial importance to the success of a project at an early stage, sometimes before adequate professional advice is available to the client. CABE's enabling service is able to offer useful advice to clients, particularly but not exclusively in the public sector, about the development of the brief, the appointment of consultants and other related matters. As with the design review service, CABE's enabling service operates most effectively when consulted as early as possible.

### Key questions about the brief

- Is there a clear brief for the project?
- Does the brief set clear aims and objectives for the project?
- Have a budget and a programme been established?
- Is the brief realistic in relation to the budget available?
- Is the brief realistic in relation to the site?





## The role of the planning system

One of the roles of the statutory planning system is to ensure that a new project, considered in the round, is in the public interest. It is now recognised (in *Planning policy statement 1, By design* and elsewhere) that achieving high-quality architecture and urban design is a primary objective of the statutory planning system; indeed design is a material consideration. CABI's advice is intended to be helpful to local authorities in 'negotiating' planning applications on significant projects.

It is increasingly common for applicants for planning permission, especially for major projects or sensitive sites, to organise extensive pre-application

discussions and consultations. CABI supports this trend; it is important where relevant to involve all parties before a planning application is submitted, including local authorities, local community and amenity groups, English Heritage, regional government offices and other agencies.

CABI strongly believes that clients should be given credit for engaging a skilled and thoughtful design team. This should give confidence to local authorities. Having the right team in place is likely to improve the chances of a constructive planning negotiation, which in turn should lead to an early consent – a positive outcome for both client and planning authority alike.



# Evaluating designs

## Understanding the context

One of the keys to a successful project is to achieve an understanding of its physical context through an urban design analysis and a historic analysis; it is unwise to try to change a place without first understanding it. This analysis should go beyond the view from the site boundary. The site's context includes the neighbourhood and the town or city as well as the street.

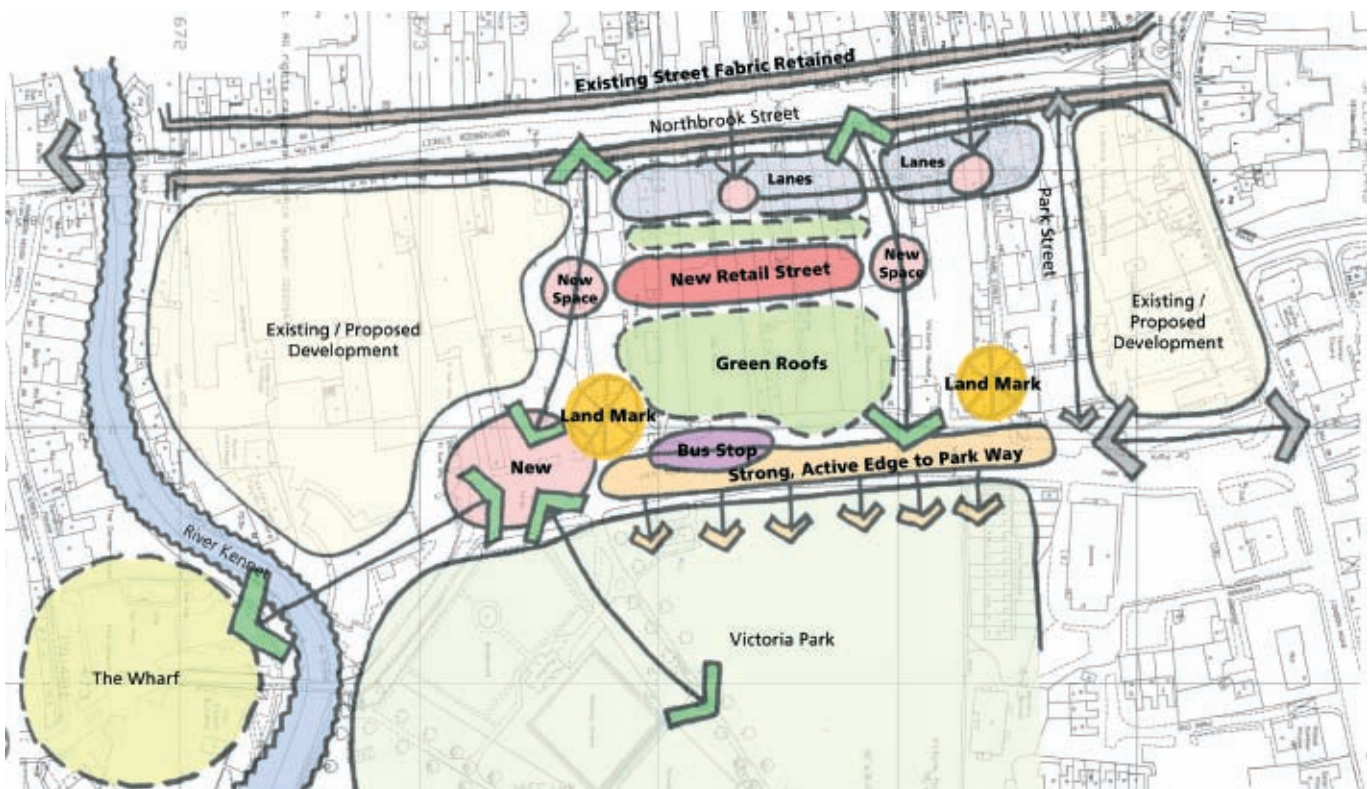
*By design* (by CABI and the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister, now the Department for Communities and Local Government) contains useful information on urban design issues in general and on how to analyse context. *By design* suggests that the following aspects of form should be considered in carrying out an urban design analysis:

- **Urban structure** the framework of routes and spaces
- **Urban grain** the pattern of blocks, plots and buildings
- **Landscape** shape, form, ecology and natural features
- **Density and mix** the amount of development and the range of uses
- **Scale** height and massing
- **Appearance** details and material.

These aspects, taken together, create the physical character of an area. It is important for the analysis to deal with dynamic as well as static aspects of character, with patterns of movement of people and vehicles, with routes and linkages, as much as the physical characteristics of the project's setting. It will also be necessary to understand the local planning policies, for example area action plans, listed buildings and conservation areas.

### Key questions about understanding the context

- Is there an urban design analysis?
- Is there evidence that the nature of the site's context has been investigated and understood?
- Does this deal with patterns of movement as well as physical characteristics?





## The project in its context

The urban design and historic analysis should inform the thinking about the relationship between the project and its context. This applies equally to place-making and to the architecture.

*By design* suggests the following as the objectives of urban design:

- **Character** a place with its own identity
- **Continuity and enclosure** a place where public and private spaces are clearly distinguished
- **Quality of the public realm** a place with attractive and successful outdoor areas (that is, areas which are valued by people who use them or pass through them)
- **Ease of movement** a place that is easy to get to and move through
- **Legibility** a place that has a clear image and is easy to understand
- **Adaptability** a place that can change easily
- **Diversity** a place with variety and choice.

In addition to these objectives, any urban design study for projects or masterplans that include tall buildings should also consider their visual impact on a much wider area.

All of these objectives should be thought of in relation to people and their activities as much as to built form. Built form helps shape the life of a place, but it is people who will add liveliness and fun.

## Key questions about the project in its context

- Have the important characteristics of the site been identified? Has the urban design analysis informed the design?
- Does the design have a considered relationship with the character of the context?
- Does the project make a positive contribution to the public realm? What effect will it have on people's lives? Will it participate in the life of the city?
- Is there a clear distinction between public and private spaces and is it clear how each functions?
- Does the project make a positive contribution to the way people move around a place and the way they are able to understand it? Does it provide inclusive access for all to the site and buildings? Does it open up options for moving through the wider area?
- Is there good access to public transport? Can the project contribute to improving public transport links?

## Planning the site

It is increasingly common for major projects on large sites to be developed by way of a masterplan. It may well be appropriate to appoint a masterplan architect with specialist skills separately from the appointment of architects for individual buildings. In such cases, collaboration and teamwork are essential.

Masterplans are successful when they strike the difficult balance between providing a coherent framework for planning the site while allowing for the design of individual buildings, perhaps by different architects, and perhaps responding to changes in needs, uses and technologies which may occur over the period of building out a masterplan. They should allow for the possibility that only part of a masterplan may be executed and that future redevelopment may take place on a piecemeal basis. Section 6 of the *Urban design compendium*, implementation and delivery, contains useful advice on all of the above issues.

On larger sites, whether or not there is a masterplan, the question of planning the site is an aspect of urban design. The pattern of the site planning, and the scale of the pieces of which it is composed, should show an understanding of the nature of the context. If a project or masterplan includes tall buildings, the visual impact on a much wider area should be considered. The joint CABE/English Heritage *Guidance on tall buildings* provides more detailed advice.

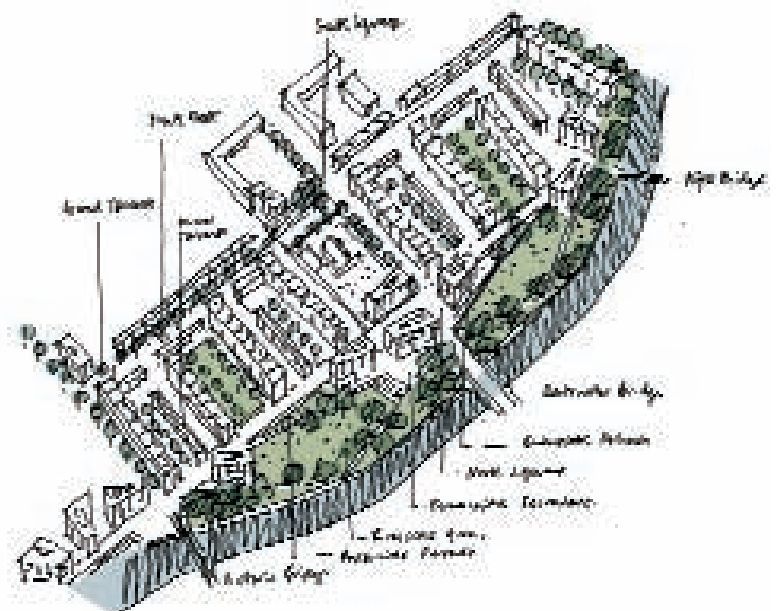
The relationships with the differing site boundary conditions and with adjoining sites need to be considered carefully. Developments allow for satisfactory redevelopment of adjoining sites.

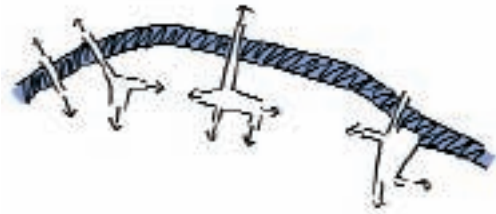
The implications of future adjoining redevelopment on the amount of sunlight and daylight reaching new buildings should also be considered. In some situations, a useful test may be: if the same pattern of development were applied to adjoining or nearby sites, would this be an acceptable way of developing a neighbourhood?

Site planning cannot be considered separately from landscape design, and it is a characteristic of good projects that landscape has been an integral part of the design thinking from the start of the project. The planning of the buildings on the site, the arrangements for roads, pedestrian and vehicle movements and car parks, and for elements of hard and soft landscaping, will all be seen to be part of a coherent strategy for the site. Early consideration of landscape design will also allow relationships to be developed between internal and external spaces.

These other aspects of site planning also need to be considered:

- **Movement hierarchy** people first, cars second
- **Parking provision** is it well planned and convenient to use, for pedestrians as well as drivers?
- **Service access** is it carefully considered so that it does not cause conflict with other functions and is not visually intrusive? Have refuse storage and collection been dealt with satisfactorily?
- **Control of vehicle movements** and service provisions so that they do not cause inconvenience
- **Sustainable development** these principals should be integrated into the masterplan as well as individual buildings
- **Boundary treatment.**





## Key questions about planning the site

- Is the chosen site appropriate for the aspirations of the project? Is it suitable for the size, intensity and nature of the uses proposed?
- In the case of masterplans for large projects, does the plan work if only part of it is executed? Does the design allow for piecemeal redevelopment in the future?
- Does the site planning make sense in relation to future development nearby? Does it leave options open or close them down?
- Does the project occupy the site in a way which makes sense in relation to neighbouring sites? Does it propose more development than the site can reasonably take?
- Does the layout take account of solar orientation so that internal and external spaces benefit?
- Is landscape design recognised as an important and integral part of the project, and at an early enough stage?
- Does the landscape design make sense as a response to the nature of the site and its context?
- Are the maintenance implications of planting schemes plausible?
- Are roads, parking areas and so on dealt with as part of an overall vision for landscape design?
- If a project or masterplan includes tall buildings, individually or in clusters, has the extent of their impact on the wider environment been fully considered, including their effect on the skyline and important views?

## What makes a good project?

The Roman architect Vitruvius suggested that the principal qualities of well-designed buildings are 'commodity, firmness and delight'.

- **Commodity:** buildings should work – they should be fit for the purpose for which they are designed
- **Firmness:** buildings should be soundly built and durable
- **Delight:** buildings should be good looking – their design should please the eye and the mind.

These three criteria remain as sound a basis for judging architecture now as when they were conceived.

Just as each design decision affects many others, so the three criteria are intertwined within the design process. Many of the aspects of a project which need to be taken into account when evaluating it will touch on all three. These include:

**Clarity of organisation, from site planning to building planning.** If the organisation of the plan and section are clear, then much else about a project will fall into place.

**Order.** Order helps us comprehend and interpret the built environment; it can manifest itself through symmetry (or asymmetry) and balance, through repetition of organisational or structural elements such as the grid, the frame or the bay; and through resonance between elements of different scales.

**Expression and representation.** A building's appearance can tell us something about what purpose it serves; about its place in the order of the town or city; about what sort of spaces it contains; about how it is organised and put together.

**Appropriateness of architectural ambition.** Architecture can be too noisy or too quiet. There are places for fireworks and places for modesty within the built environment – in relation both to a project's context and to its purpose and status.

**Integrity and honesty.** Is what you see what you get? If so, the plans, sections, elevations and details will all visibly relate to each other and build up to a coherent picture of the design.

**Architectural language.** The design of building will involve choices about matters such as whether to represent it primarily as a wall or as a frame structure, about patterns of solid and void and light and shade, and so on. In a good design, such choices will seem compelling and inevitable, with a recognisable

relationship to the broad conception of the project and its setting; in a poor project such choices will often seem arbitrary.

**Scale.** Scale is relative: a good project resolves issues of scale at all stages from masterplan to detail.

**Conformity and contrast.** A good designer will consider the relationship of a design to its context. This is not to imply that one of the aims of a design should necessarily be to 'fit in'. At its worst, this can be little more than an excuse for mediocrity. Difference and variety can be virtues in new proposals as much as sameness and conformity and of course different contexts themselves may be more, or less, uniform in their nature.

**Orientation, prospect and aspect.** A building's orientation should take into account the implications for energy use as well as urban design issues. In relation to prospect and aspect, the design should consider what happens at different times of day and night and at different times of year. The view from the window, and opportunities to see the sky and weather, are as important in buildings such as offices and hospitals as they are in homes.

**Detailing and materials.** The quality of the plans, sections and elevations should be carried through to the level of detail; it is disappointing to see a promising project fail because of a lack of refinement in the detailing. The choice of materials is equally important and relates to an understanding of context as well as to questions of maintenance, durability, sustainability and the way the building can be expected to age.

**Structure, environmental services and energy use.** In a building of any complexity, these aspects of the project need to be taken forward as an integral part of the design from the beginning. In a well-designed project, it is likely that the strategies for dealing with these aspects of the design will be apparent from the plans, sections and elevations. Consideration should be given to opportunities for designing in energy and water efficiency measures, and for minimising waste and pollution wherever possible.

**Flexibility and adaptability.** The ways in which a building and the parts of a building are used are likely to change over its lifetime. The technologies it contains will change as well. A good design will be flexible – able to accommodate changing requirements without major alterations where possible – and adaptable, capable of being altered or extended conveniently when necessary.



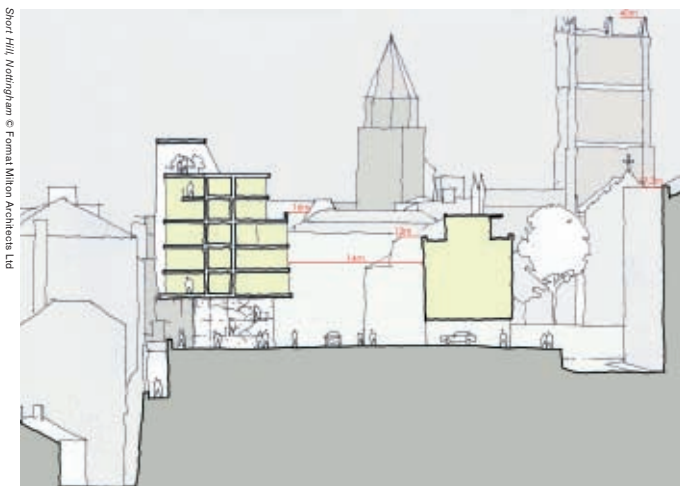
**Sustainability.** For a masterplan, building or urban space to be truly well-designed it should be economically, environmentally and socially sustainable. This means thinking about whole-life costs rather than short-term economic returns; using building materials, natural resources and energy more efficiently and responsibly; reducing waste and emissions to land, air and water during construction and use, and effectively engaging with and recognising the needs of stakeholders throughout the planning, design and construction process. These stakeholders include the project team, the contractors, suppliers and workforce, local communities and businesses. A well-designed scheme should also ensure the appropriate management of sustainable design features so that they are used effectively.

**Inclusive design.** Projects should provide equality of access for all. This means ensuring intellectual, emotional and physical access is considered at the outset of any project and remains integral throughout to prevent costly remedial work. Creative and lateral thinking should be employed to find innovative and individual solutions, designing for real people with all the different needs they may have. A well-designed scheme should also ensure the appropriate management of inclusive design features so that a barrier-free environment is maintained.

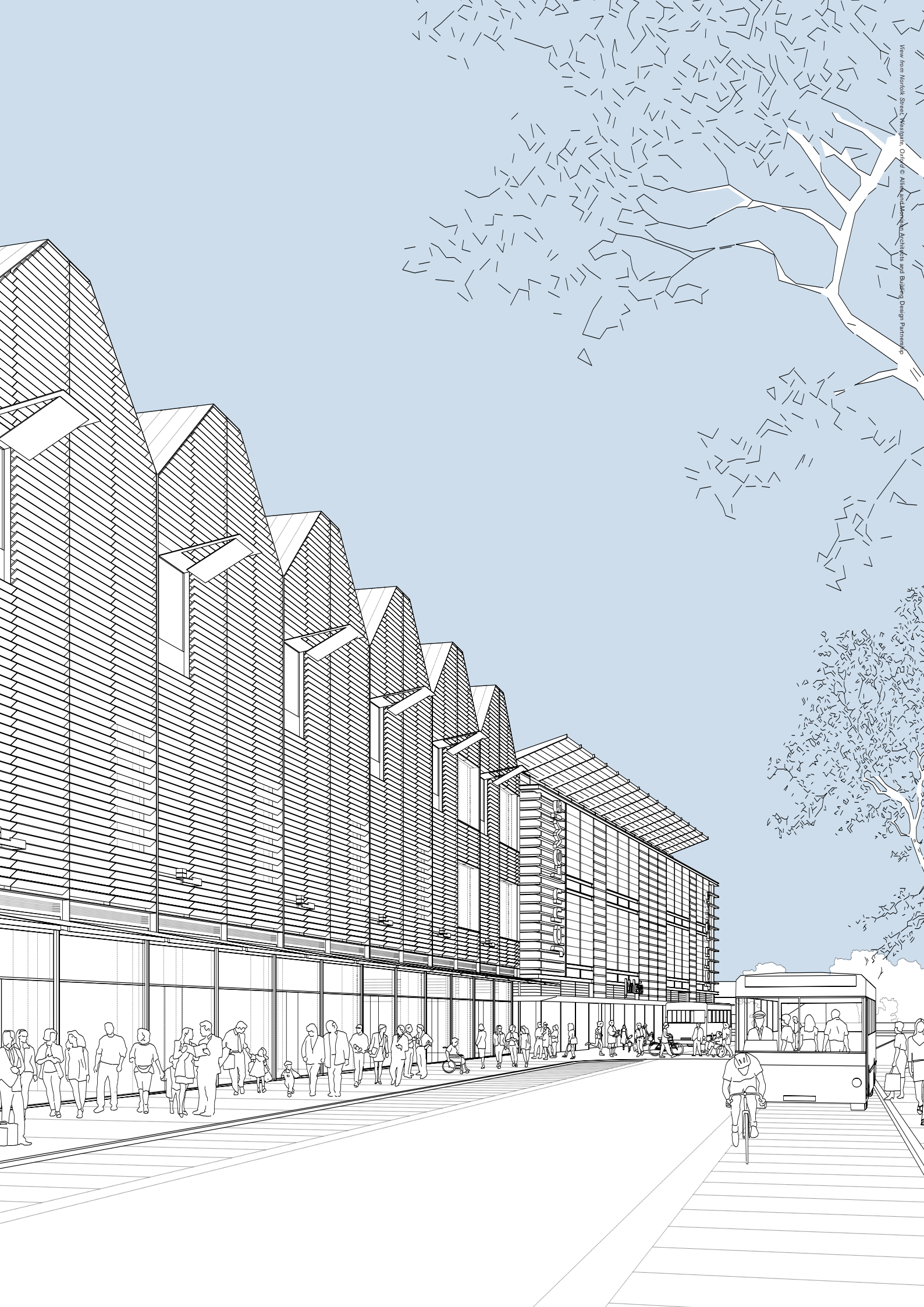
**Aesthetics.** We should not be afraid to ask about a building: is it beautiful? If it is, then the resulting lifting of the spirits will be as valuable a contribution to public well-being as dealing successfully with the functional requirements of the building's programme.

## Key questions about what makes a good project

- Will the accommodation proposed meet the functional requirements of the brief?
- Is it likely that the building's users – of all kinds – will be satisfied with the design?
- Is the design likely to enhance the efficiency of the operations to be contained in the building?
- Can a stranger or visitor find the entrance and then find their way around the building? Is orientation clear enough not to need signs or maps?
- Are the plans, sections, elevations and details of a building all of a piece, visibly related to each other and to underlying design ideas?
- Does the design demonstrate that thinking about the requirements of building structure and construction and environmental services has been an integral part of the design process? Is there evidence that the different design disciplines are working as a team?
- Will the building be easy to adapt or extend when the requirements of the building's users change? Are the floor plates suitable for other uses in the future?
- Does the design take into account whole-life costs?
- What will the project look like in different conditions: in sun and rain; at night; over the seasons? Will it age gracefully?
- Can one imagine the building becoming a cherished part of its setting?



Short Hill, Nottingham © Fennell Milton Architects Ltd



## The project in the round

Designing buildings is difficult, and no design is perfect. Usually, a number of different design approaches will work in response to a given set of circumstances – the great variety of entries submitted for most architectural competitions provides good evidence for this. Designing buildings is not about finding the perfect answer, but about finding a good answer.

### Key questions about the project in the round

- **Commodity:** does the building work? Does it answer the brief, is it convenient and efficient for all to use, is it accessible?
- **Firmness:** is the building physically sound? Is it durable and sustainable, does it use materials and energy wisely and responsibly?
- **Delight:** is the building good looking? Is the design more than just an organisation of all the challenges of the brief and the context to become a physical and intellectual structure which pleases the eye and the mind?
- Is the project based on a clear and coherent set of aspirations and intentions, and does the design match up to these?
- Are these aspirations and intentions realistic, and does the project appear to be viable?
- Are the design skills available, and the amount and quality of thought that have been applied, adequate for the demands of the project?
- Is there evidence of thought: does the project probe the propositions of the brief and the building type?
- Does the design appear to offer good value both in the short and long term?
- In the case of a publicly funded project, is the project a realistic contender for the Prime Minister's annual Public Building Award?
- Is the design grounded in a clear set of ideas about how the project will be procured and delivered?
- Are the budget and the programme realistic?
- Where appropriate, does the project take advantage of opportunities to innovate? Is there a willingness to take risks?
- Is there a genuine understanding of sustainability issues, and a commitment to a project which is sustainable when taken in the round?
- Will the project result in an improvement of the quality of the environment of which it is a part?
- Does the project make a generous contribution to the public realm, to benefit people in general as well as the building users?
- Is the design all of a piece, so that the parts relate to the whole? Do the design approaches at different scales, from site planning and landscape design to building detail, recognisably form part of the same project?
- In the round, does the project raise the spirits or depress them? Does it bring more to the world than it takes away?



## Architecture and the historic environment

CABE believes high standards of design should be demanded everywhere. The standards to be applied to projects set in sensitive historic environments do not, therefore, differ significantly in principle from those applied to projects elsewhere. The need to understand and respond to the context is the same. Nevertheless, designing in the context of a sensitive historic environment does introduce additional challenges. The more sensitive the site, the greater these challenges can be expected to be, and the higher the expectations of everyone involved.

Some historic contexts are capable of assimilating dramatic architectural contrasts, and an unashamedly modern building will often be preferable to a pale imitation of what has gone before. Equally, there are places for ingenious contextual solutions and, on occasion, for thorough and scholarly reproductions of architecture of the past. There are no prescriptions for success; there is no substitute for wide and deep analysis of the context to inform the design process; nor, most importantly of all, is there any substitute for design skill.

Many of the projects about which CABE is consulted involve new architecture in conservation areas, or new buildings which affect listed buildings or their settings, or which affect world heritage sites or their settings. Such statutory designations bring with them a requirement for a high standard of design, but questions of what is appropriate to a historic setting are often complex. Projects of this kind may be controversial, and sometimes turn into *causes célèbres* at a local or a national level. Decision makers need access to expert advice. Detached and dispassionate, CABE's design review service

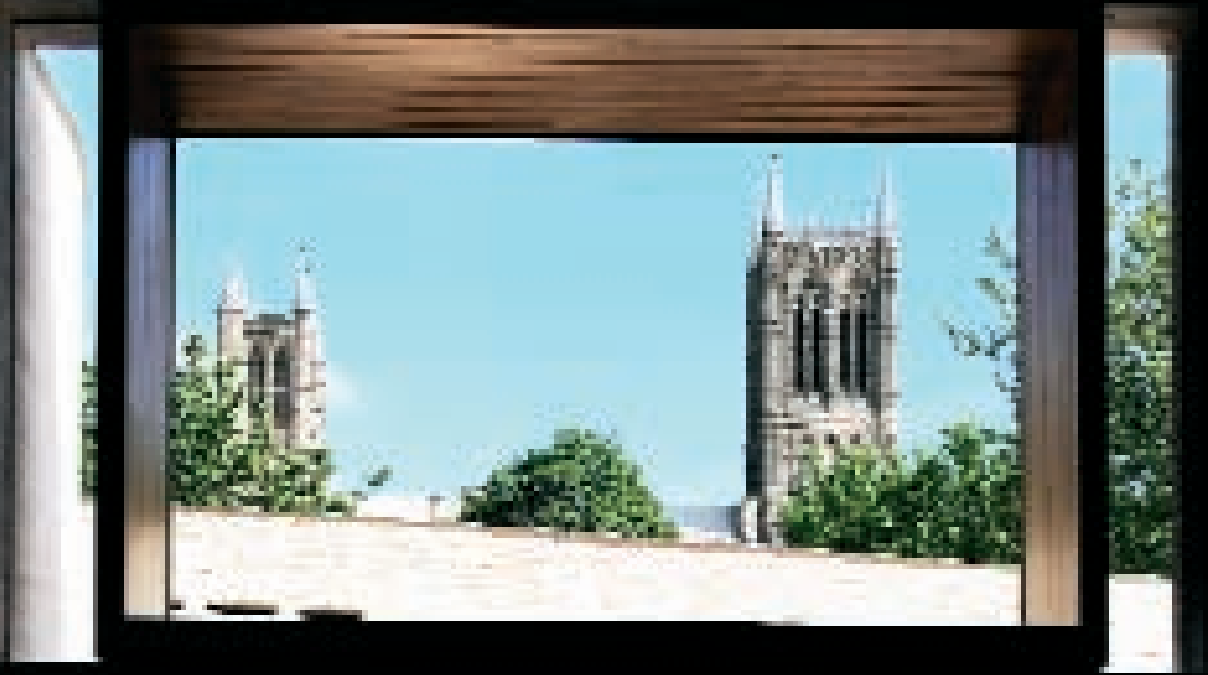
is well placed to advise in such situations, reviewing as it does most of the high profile projects of this nature in England.

By definition, world heritage sites in particular are of more than local significance, and projects affecting such sites or their settings are singled out in government advice to local authorities. This advice sets out the range of projects on which CABE's advice should be sought. Here more than anywhere, close scrutiny by people with the right range of skills is needed to inform the development of designs and the decision-making process.

CABE works closely with English Heritage on projects involving the historic environment, and the two bodies take into account each other's views when evaluating projects. The joint CABE/English Heritage publication *Building in context*, which is based on case studies of a range of recent projects, gives further guidance on the subject of designing new buildings in historic contexts.

### Key questions about architecture and the historic environment

- Has the design taken into account the challenges set by the nature of the historic context?
- Has it succeeded in rising to these challenges?
- Does the design measure up to the quality of its context?



# Some alarm bells

Each unhappy project is unhappy in its own way, but there are some common threads which can be drawn from those projects which CABE has found reason to criticise. Obviously in many cases these are simply the lack of, or the opposite of, the qualities set out above as desirable. Some of these problem areas are listed here.

Discover more by reading the reports on individual projects on CABE's website, [www.cabe.org.uk/designreview](http://www.cabe.org.uk/designreview).

- Lack of evidence of client commitment to a quality outcome
- Lack of evidence of clear, intelligent thinking in the design team
- Lack of a clear brief
- Contradictory aims and objectives
- Lack of viability; projects may promise more than anyone believes they can realistically deliver
- No evidence of understanding the nature of the site
- Adequate context analysis, but no evidence of it informing the design
- Projects which appear mean, pinching, obstructive in their approach to the public realm
- Lack of clarity about what is private and what is public
- Projects where it is hard to work out from the drawings what is actually proposed: confusion on paper is likely to correspond to confusion in reality
- No effort to give clear and realistic illustrations of what the project will look like
- No effort to illustrate the project in context
- No effort to show an approach to landscape design where this is important.



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# About design review

## Consulting CABE

CABE is a statutory body, but a non-statutory consultee within the planning process. This means that you should consult CABE under certain circumstances. A letter from (the then) Department of Environment Transport and the Regions (DETR) to local planning authorities of 15 May 2001 (and published on the Department for Communities and Local Government website, [www.dclg.gov.uk](http://www.dclg.gov.uk)) sets out the circumstances in which CABE should be consulted about planning applications. The criteria for consultation are as follows (a fuller description of each category is contained in the letter):



1. Proposals that are significant because of their size or the uses they contain. This category includes large buildings or groups of buildings such as courts, large religious buildings, museums or art galleries, hospitals, shopping and leisure complexes, and office or commercial buildings, infrastructure projects and major changes in the public realm.
2. Proposals that are significant because of their site: those which affect important views – into or from a world heritage site, for example – or are sited in such a way that they give rise to exceptional effects on their locality. This can include relatively modest proposals if situated at a significant location.
3. Proposals with an importance greater than their size, use or site would suggest. This includes proposals which are likely to establish the planning, form or architectural quality for future large-scale development or re-development; proposals which are out of the ordinary in their context or setting because of their scale, form or materials; and proposals which are particularly relevant to the quality of everyday life.

CABE encourages consultation at the earliest possible opportunity, before a planning application has been submitted. This is when its advice is most likely to be useful. At this stage projects are dealt with on a confidential basis (see also next section). CABE encourages designers and promoters of projects to approach it directly. It is not necessary to go through the local authority, although CABE will always aim to involve the local authority in discussions about a project.

The design review service offers advice in two ways. A number of projects – usually those of greatest significance – are considered at meetings of CABE's design review panel, which take place about every two weeks either with or without the client and design team present. CABE professional staff deal with other projects in consultation with a chair of the design review panel.

Further information about the design review service is also available from CABE's website, [www.cabe.org.uk/designreview](http://www.cabe.org.uk/designreview).

## The design review panel

CABE's design review panel is made up of a diverse range of individuals with an equally diverse range of professional skills and opinions. As well as architects, members are recruited from related fields such as planning, urban design, landscape design, the historic environment, sustainability and environmental services, inclusive environments, civil and structural engineering, transport, public art and development. Panel members are selected and appointed annually through public recruitment. Panel members serve a minimum of three years, at which point their membership is reviewed and occasionally extended.

## Conflicts of interest

Panel members attending design review sessions are required to register any conflicts of interest or interest in the projects being reviewed. All CABE commissioners register any interest in schemes the panel reviews.



## Regional design review panels

CABE promotes the establishment of regional design review panels and liaises closely with each panel on significant proposals. For more information see *How to do design review: creating and running a successful panel*, available through CABE's website, [www.cabe.org.uk/publications](http://www.cabe.org.uk/publications).

## Presenting a project to CABE

Most projects are allocated a one-hour slot in the panel meeting. The architect or designer, client, local authority and, where relevant, English Heritage are all invited to attend.

The presentation should be preceded by an introduction by the client, to last no more than two to three minutes. The architect or designer should then present the project in about 15 minutes to allow adequate time for questions and comments from the panel members, and responses from the architects and others. The presentation should concentrate on essentials. Points of detail can emerge in discussion.

It is usually best to explain a project to the panel by first outlining the brief and the nature of the site, and then describing the design proposals by proceeding from the general to the particular. The presentation material to be used will depend on the stage the project is at, its size and nature, but the following may serve as a general guide:





- Analytical context plans, showing relation of site to surrounding settlement(s) and to public transport and road networks
- If relevant, context plans showing development of urban form through history
- If relevant, site plans showing clearly existing buildings to be retained, existing buildings to be demolished, and new buildings
- Aerial photograph of site and surroundings
- Site plan, to show enough of the surrounding context to understand relation of site to adjoining sites all round. The site plan, or versions of it, should show clearly the following: which parts of the site are built on and which are not; what land is in the client's ownership; which parts belong to the public and private realm; the location and extent of listed buildings and conservation areas; and how people and vehicles move to and through the site
- Plans, sections and elevations of proposed buildings
- Site sections and elevations to show relation to context
- Views, including views of the project in context
- Detail drawings – to give flavour of architecture, details and materials – for example, 1:20 bay studies
- Drawings should be annotated sufficiently to explain purpose of rooms and spaces, orientation and scale
- The use of a model or models to explain projects, where available, is strongly encouraged. At the early stages of a project, even rough sketch models can be invaluable.

## Visual aids

It is best to present using hard-copy material rather than transparencies or powerpoint. It is difficult to understand a project fully without being able to compare freely the various plans, sections and elevations that will form the heart of any presentation.

## The role of design analysis

Once built, a project will succeed or fail without the benefit of explanation or analysis. No amount of explanation will turn a bad project into a good one. Nevertheless good design is a result of intent, not chance, and it is helpful when evaluating projects to have an explanation of the designers' intentions. In our experience, such analysis and explanation is usually most successful in the form of annotated drawings, diagrams and models rather than in writing – a picture really is worth a thousand words.

## Image boards

It is common practice to use 'image boards' showing successful projects by other designers to give a flavour of the design aspirations of the project. We have nothing against these, but at the same time it is rare for them to serve any useful purpose in persuading the panel of the merits of the project under consideration.

## The user experience

It is sometimes useful to think about projects, and to explain them, in terms of how they are experienced by the different groups of people who will come into contact with them. In particular, how will those different groups move to and around the project? In the case of a hospital, for example: what is it like to approach (by different modes of transport), to enter, to find one's way around inside – as a member of staff, as an in- or an out-patient, or as a visitor?

## After the meeting

After the meeting, the panel's view of the project is put in writing by CABE staff and agreed with the panel chair. A letter setting out the panel's views is issued within a month after the meeting. It is usually addressed to the party which first consulted CABE about the project, and copied to others who attended the meeting.

## Confidentiality and publicity

CABE's views are made available to the public via its website, [www.cabe.org.uk/designreview](http://www.cabe.org.uk/designreview), and by other means. All our views on projects that are presented to CABE and are the subject of a planning application, or which are otherwise in the public domain, will be made public.

Where a scheme that is not in the public domain has been submitted to CABE (for example, before a planning application is submitted), the applicant can request that CABE's views are given in confidence. In such cases, CABE's views are not released, although typically they will be shared with the local authority and, if appropriate, English Heritage. Should the applicant subsequently publicise the scheme, CABE reserves the right to publish its views. And, as soon as a planning application is made, CABE's views will be made public, either on its website or on request. Where a project has been modified, our published comments will be modified to take account of the changes.

CABE is subject to the Freedom of Information Act (2000). All requests made to CABE for information are handled according to the provisions of the Act.



## CABE publications

As well as advising on significant projects, CABE publishes a range of guidance and best-practice documents, which include case studies of schemes that were presented to the panel. Those published so far focus on urban housing, town centre and masterplans.

You can access these and other publications through CABE's website, [www.cabe.org.uk/publications](http://www.cabe.org.uk/publications). Alternatively, you can order by phone on 020 7070 6722.

# Further reading

***By design: urban design in the planning system: towards better practice***

(Department for Environment, Transport and the Regions/CABE, Thomas Telford, 2000)

***Planning policy statement 1: delivering sustainable development***

(Office of the Deputy Prime Minister, 2005)

***Better places to live by design: a companion guide to PPG3***

(Department for Transport, Local Government and the Regions/CABE, Thomas Telford, 2001)

***Building in context***

(CABE/English Heritage, 2002)

***Guidance on tall buildings***

(CABE/English Heritage, 2001)

***Protecting design quality in planning***

(CABE, 2003)

***Design review-ed: masterplans: lessons learnt from projects reviewed by CABE's expert design panel***

(CABE, 2004)

***Design review-ed: town centre retail: lessons learnt from projects reviewed by CABE's expert design panel***

(CABE, 2004)

***Design review-ed urban housing: lessons learnt from projects reviewed by CABE's expert design panel***

(CABE, 2004)

***How to do design review: creating and running a successful panel***

(CABE, 2006)

***Creating excellent buildings***

(CABE, 2003)

***Creating excellent masterplans***

(CABE, 2004)

***Urban design compendium***

English Partnerships/Housing Corporation, 2000

*Design review* explains how CABE's design review panel of industry experts assesses good design in architecture, urban design and public space. It provides guidance on how we evaluate schemes, from site planning through to the final project, and considers such issues as procurement and the role of the planning system. First published in 2001, this second edition reflects both the popularity of the original publication and changes in legislation. It builds on existing guidance by drawing on CABE's experience in reviewing schemes across England.

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