

BUILDING in **context**

New development in historic areas





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Foreword



Sir Stuart Lipton



Sir Neil Cossons

English Heritage and CABE are asked to advise on many development proposals in historic areas. We have commissioned this report to show the diversity of interesting recent projects, and to promote the lessons that can be drawn from them.

Thoughtless haste on the one hand and ill-considered imitation on the other have both over the years damaged the fabric of our historic towns and cities. But there is another way, in the form of buildings that are recognisably of our age while understanding and respecting history and context. The buildings shown here belong in that category. While firmly of today, they draw intelligent inspiration from what surrounds them and in that sense are rooted in the past. That is true confidence and assurance.

We have in Britain today an abundance of architectural skill and every reason to believe in our ability to add inspirationally to the built fabric we have inherited. As this book shows, that skill is not exclusively vested in household names. There is a wide variety of practices capable of responding imaginatively to the challenges posed by building anew in historic contexts.

To release those skills, we need vision and commitment on the part of clients and planners. Some of the schemes shown here came about only because the planning authority had the courage and conviction to reject inferior schemes and demand something better. Sometimes this brought delay and difficulty; but producing solutions that are lastingly satisfying does mean investing in time, effort and imagination. One of the heartening lessons of this book is that such an investment is, in the end, almost always thought to be worthwhile, even by those who started off as critics.

The examples here are not all perfect. But they do represent the kind of intelligent and imaginative approach that can enrich historic environments. We can pay respect to those places best by continuing the tradition of pace-setting and innovation that they themselves represent. As always, this is a question not of style but of quality. And quality, whatever its stylistic guise, can bring a whole range of benefits – not only aesthetic but economic, social and environmental. The regenerative capacity of good new design is apparent in many of the examples chosen here.

Sir Neil Cossons
Chairman, English Heritage

Sir Stuart Lipton
Chairman, CABE



Introduction

This publication has been commissioned by the Commission for Architecture and the Built Environment (CABE) and English Heritage. Its purpose is to stimulate a high standard of design when development takes place in historically sensitive contexts. It aims to do this by example, showing a series of case studies in which achievement is far above the ordinary and trying to draw some lessons both about design and about the development and planning process. As a result, it is hoped that people will be encouraged to emulate the commitment and dedication shown by the clients, architects, planning officers and committee members involved in the projects illustrated and be able to learn from their experience.

The Need for Advice

What lies behind the decision to undertake this publication is a belief that conservation areas and other sensitive sites are not being well served by the development which is taking place within them and that there is a widespread misunderstanding about how to determine what is appropriate for such sites. In order to understand how this situation has arisen it is necessary to consider the history of development in towns and cities. In some places this happened over a brief period as a result of some profound economic or social change, but more often, until the 19th century, the typical story is of gradual development with occasional spurts of activity. This organic model of development produced a harmonious result, in which buildings of different periods co-existed happily because building methods, materials and scales remained consistent over the centuries and change was gradual. As the 20th century progressed, the increasing volume of motor traffic placed the infrastructure under ever greater strain. Together with the arrival of late 20th-century ambitions and the materials and methods that accompany them, this presented a considerable challenge to the organic model. The whole process of development has altered out of all recognition and is surrounded by a panoply of rules and controls

governing every aspect, from the siting of buildings and the design of roads and other infrastructure, through the design of details, to the use of materials.

Faced with this change, responses to the challenge of developing in historic areas have been variable. On the one hand there have been those who have wanted to mark a complete break with the past in terms of scale, materials and methods. On the other there have been those who have wanted to preserve at all costs. These two basic positions have existed for many years, the balance between them shifting from time to time in response to changing fashion and opinion and the gradual accumulation of experience.

In response to the perception that too much urban fabric of value was being lost, planning policy has developed in a way which has identified areas of architectural and historic interest and established special protection for them. In the present context it is enough to say that the law provides that development in such areas must preserve or enhance their character. The courts have decided that this means that they must not be made worse as a result of the development. The areas which have been protected by designation as conservation areas vary widely in character

and importance. They include not only the classic high streets of country towns which have grown organically over the centuries, but also areas with a strongly defined unitary character as a result of having been developed all in one go, often to the design of a single architect.

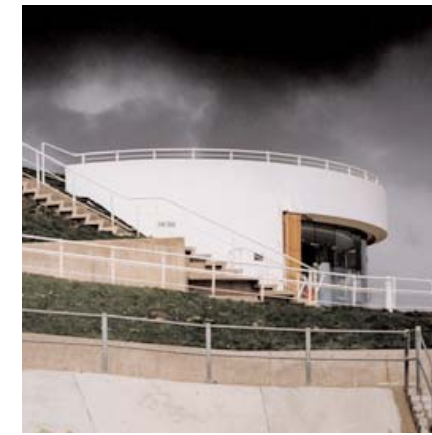
In all these areas, whatever their history, the design question raised by new development proposals relates to the architectural character which is now appropriate to the place concerned. The different attitudes to modern methods and materials mentioned above have led to two simplified positions and both these positions have led to unsatisfactory outcomes in many cases. On the one hand are those who believe that new development should simply 'reflect its own time' and that if it does this it is absolved from the need to defer or pay heed to its setting in any way. The argument often used in support of this position is that what shocks today no longer does so in twenty years' time and that past radical innovations now seem part of an organic whole. On the other hand there are those who believe that what is important is to preserve the character of the conservation area at all costs, and that this is best done by opposing all development and insisting that when it does take place it copies the architecture of existing buildings. They argue that it is the maintenance of historic character that is the reason for the designation of conservation areas and that their sole purpose should be that of preservation.

The former argument often leads to proposals or developments which show no regard for the context in which they sit and erode, rather than enrich, the character of the area as a result. The latter (a very different matter from authentic reconstruction) leads to a superficial echoing of historic features in new building, which itself erodes the character just as much.



Particularly unfortunate results often occur when the two opinions are forced to compromise, often as a result of an attempt to change the architecture of a proposal into a more contextual form. Signs that this has taken place include

- stepping down, when a tall building meets its lower neighbour at more or less the same height and then gets higher in steps as it moves away along the facade. Unless the change in height arises out of the requirements of the brief, this can produce a lop-sided appearance in the new building and merely emphasises the difference in height between the two. Unless it is done with great finesse it does the older building no favours at all;
- random application of historic elements. Triangular pediments unrelated to the rest of the front of the building are a common example of this, as are string courses or cornices out of scale with the building. Sometimes described as 'the lipstick on the gorilla', such embellishments are quite often seen in conjunction with stepping down;
- matching materials which don't match. If cheap, modern, machine-made bricks are not used structurally but in panels, complete with mastic expansion joints, they do not match hand-made historic brick-work. They simply emphasise the difference in materials and methods. The same is true with stone and render;
- scaling up. Detailing large modern buildings with models taken from small historic ones or attempting to sub-divide large volumes visually while retaining big floor-plates often does no more than emphasise just how large the new building is instead of making it look smaller, as is hoped.



A word often used to describe projects including elements of this kind is pastiche, which, when used correctly, implies the assembly of stylistic elements from different sources. Frequently, however, the term has come to be a generalised way of abusing architecture with any historic elements regardless of the skill or accuracy with which they are employed, and it is rarely of any use in reaching a decision on the merits of a particular proposal.

The Right Approach

The belief underlying this publication is that the right approach is to be found in examining the context for any proposed development in great detail and relating the new building to its surroundings through an informed character appraisal. This does not imply that any one architectural approach is, by its nature, more likely to succeed than any other. On the contrary, it means that as soon as the application of a simple formula is attempted a project is likely to fail, whether that formula consists of 'fitting in' or 'contrasting the new with the old'. A successful project will

- relate well to the geography and history of the place and the lie of the land
- sit happily in the pattern of existing development and routes through and around it
- respect important views
- respect the scale of neighbouring buildings
- use materials and building methods which are as high in quality as those used in existing buildings
- create new views and juxtapositions which add to the variety and texture of the setting.



The right approach involves a whole process in addition to the work of design, from deciding what is needed, through appointing the architect, to early discussions with and eventual approval by the planning authority. It may involve the preparation of a formal planning or development brief for the site in question and will certainly involve discussing the matters usually dealt with in such documents and coming to an agreement. Collaboration, mutual respect and a shared commitment to the vision embodied in the project will be needed if the outcome is to be successful. The best buildings arise from a creative dialogue between the planning authority, the client, the architect and the other key professionals involved.

The Case Studies

The case studies have been chosen to illuminate a number of different themes and aspects of development:

- a wide range of different uses;
- a wide range of locations;
- different architectural approaches;
- different processes by which success was achieved.

In every case the result achieved is far beyond the average quality for developments of the kind, though it is not suggested that they are beyond criticism.

An attempt has been made to avoid glamorous settings or uses. The hope is that all those who have responsibility for some aspect of development in conservation areas and other sensitive sites will find something here with which they can identify and which will help them to achieve excellence in their work, whether it is an aspect of the design, the development or the planning process. The lessons of each project are brought together at the end of the publication.