



### About the TOOLKIT

The Building in Context toolkit has been developed by EH, CABE and the Kent Architecture Centre. It grew out of the publication 'Building in Context' published by EH and CABE in 2001. The purpose was to stimulate a high standard of design when development takes place in historically sensitive contexts. The founding principle is that all successful design solutions depend on allowing time for a thorough site analysis and character appraisal of context. Building in Context TOOLKIT training aims to help those making decisions to reach effective and balanced design decisions.

It is proven to be useful in communicating issues of development in complex situations; helping convey the depth of expertise required in adopting a holistic approach to site development and reduced 'silo mentality'. Through the analysis of a case study, wider design issues than 'how it looks' are explored.

### Design Matters

Research has revealed that :-

- 81% of people said that they are interested in how the built environment looks and feels
- 85% of people agreed with the statement that "better quality buildings and public spaces improve the quality of people's lives"
- 95% of people think that the historic environment is important as it gives them places to visit and things to do
- 70% of all adults visited a historic environment site in 2005/06

PPS 1 from the ODPM, Delivering Sustainable Development, also has things to say about design:

"High quality and inclusive design should be the aim of all of those involved in the development process"

"Planning policies should promote high-quality inclusive design in the layout of new developments and individual buildings ... not just for the short term but over the lifetime of the development. Design which fails to take the opportunities available for improving the character and quality of an area should not be accepted."

**Appreciations.** Thanks are due to the staff at Trinity Building and The Queens Building for hosting the event and to Tony Rodgers a Design Review Panel member, Clare Wright of the Kent Architecture Centre, Janet Currie of Ogun and Michael Ritchie of Short Associates for their expert facilitation of the workshops.

## Case Study: Queen's Building, De Montfort University, Leicester

Trinity House, Leicester on 6th March 2008

### Background

This was a workshop run by Ogun, the Architecture and Built Environment Centre for the East Midlands. The purpose was to provide advice and training based on the English Heritage/CABE publication and guidance 'Building in Context; New development in historic areas'. It was aimed at Design Champions, council members, elected members and the officers who support them in development control and decision making related to buildings designed in historic areas. The workshop took place at Trinity House, close to the Queens Building in the heart of the De Montfort University campus. During the workshop the Queens Building was taken as a case study to examine issues related to development in sensitive historic areas.

Kate Lockhart, Design and Excellence Manager at Ogun, chaired the event which included presentations by Deborah Rose, The Waterside, Leicester City Council, Anthony Streeton; People and Places, Chris Twomey; Why Design Matters and Michael Ritchie; The Queens Building: a Case Study. Two facilitated group tasks and a tour of The Queens Building, site and its environs completed the day's activities.

### People and Places

The historic environment puts quality, variety and meaning into people's lives and gives them the opportunity to understand and engage with life. Time and again people are seen and heard expressing their love for the distinctiveness of the places in which they live; time and again it is to the historic environment that they point. People are increasingly defining themselves - for good or ill - by the places where they live; characterless anonymous places produce rootless unattached people however, where the historic environment is nurtured and harnessed for good, it creates real social and economic benefits. The historic environment is a shared resource; everyone should be able to participate in sustaining the historic environment.

Understanding the heritage value of places is vital; significant places should be managed to sustain their values and decisions about changing them must be reasonable, transparent and consistent.

Assessing the significance of place is achieved by:-

- understanding the fabric and its evolution
- identifying who values it and why they do so
- relating these identified values to the fabric
- considering the relative importance of those identified values
- considering the contribution of the setting and context
- comparing the place with other places sharing similar values

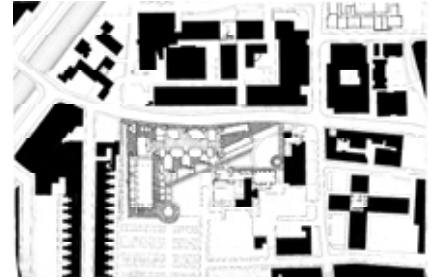
In appraising a Conservation Area the distinctiveness of a place may well derive from more than its appearance; the character and appearance of a conservation area must be considered separately. Distinctiveness may draw on other senses and experiences such as sound, smells, local environmental conditions, or historical associations. The quality of the place may also well change from daytime to night-time.

### Planning in Leicester

The context for design and development in Leicester is defined in a Supplementary Planning Document that provides a comprehensive approach and helps in the understanding of the specialities of the area; this SPD refers to the Roman and industrial heritage, the importance of the river and the canal system as well as the ecology of the area.

The waterside is particularly important to the City and the SPD has development parcels defined within an Urban Design Framework. Financial context is equally important and becoming more so along side other objectives; importantly how can viability be achieved through design.

The city has recently seen a big increase in the number of pre-application authority/developer workshops. These have been very beneficial in improving and adjusting designs to deliver good design solutions. They have also helped by using the development of different sites to deliver a collective vision and a reaction to existing and emerging contexts.



### About the Speakers

#### Anthony Streeton

Regional Director for English Heritage in the East Midlands. Formerly Assistant Regional Director, he has led English Heritage's regional team engaged in management of the historic environment since 1993. During 2003-4 he led the modernisation programme for English Heritage advisory services in the planning system. Anthony trained as an archaeologist and supervised the resurvey of listed buildings in the Midlands. He worked for seven years as Inspector of Ancient Monuments in the West Midlands.

#### Chris Twomey BA Hons Dip Arch RIBA:

Chris joined Lathams in 2003 and became a board director in 2007. He is currently leading on a range of high profile regeneration projects, including the conversion of a Grade II listed former asylum in Stafford, and the imaginative tourism vision/masterplan for the Lincolnshire Coast. Chris is an active member of the East Midlands Design Review Panel.

#### Michael Ritchie

Ritchie has been employed by Short and Associates since graduating in 2000. He has worked on a number of innovative passive and low-energy buildings including the Lichfield Garrick, Staffordshire and Judson University, Chicago. He was project architect for the UCL School of Slavonic and East European Studies and Berkhamsted Collegiate School. Current projects include two office schemes in the centre of London. Ritchie is currently a visiting tutor for the undergraduate school at Brighton University

## Building in Context: Appraising a proposal

...It is possible to arrive at opinions about design quality that are based on objective criteria. There are many ways of doing this, but any such process is likely to include asking the following questions. They encompass both the quality of the building itself and its quality as a contribution to the urban design of the neighbourhood in which it is situated:

### The site

- How does the proposed building relate to the site?
- Is there a positive and imaginative response to any problems and constraints?
- Have the physical aspects of the site been considered, such as any changes in level within or beyond it?
- Are access arrangements convenient and existing routes respected?
- Can the amount of accommodation required be fitted on the site in an elegant way?

### Wider setting

- How does the proposal relate to its wider setting?
- Are the street pattern and grain of the surroundings respected?
- Are there changes in height between the existing and new development and if so how are they managed?
- Will the result enhance or damage the quality of the townscape? Density
- How is the density of the proposal related to that of existing and neighbouring uses?
- If there are differences, are they acceptable?

### Impact on close views

- Has the impact of the building in close views been assessed?
- Is it either weak or overpowering?
- Does it respect the scale and rhythm of its neighbours?

### Materials

- What materials are used?
- How do they relate to those of the surrounding buildings?
- Is the quality as high?
- Are there interesting comparisons or contrasts in the use of materials?
- How will the colours work together?

### Architecture suitable to its use

- Is the architecture of the building suitable for the uses it contains?
- Is it trying to be too grand or pretending to be more modest than it really is?

### Composition

- How does the architecture present itself to the viewer? Is there a strong composition in the pattern of solid to opening in the façade? Does the detailing of the materials show signs of careful thought or originality in the way the building is put together?

### Public realm

- What contribution, if any, does the proposal make to the public realm? If new open space is created, is it clear that it will provide a positive benefit and have a genuine use?

### Vistas and views

- In the wider setting, has the impact of the building in views and vistas been considered?
- Does it make a positive or negative impact?
- Does it form a harmonious group or composition with existing buildings or features in the landscape?
- Does it distract the eye from the focus of the view and if so does it provide something better to look at?

From *Building in Context*, pg 37

## The Historic Context of Queens Building

The buildings in the immediate vicinity include:

- the Clepham Building, a former textile factory converted for University use
- the gateway School combining an original Victorian/Edwardian building with low-rise system built blocks
- the Fletcher University buildings, combining a high rise block with low rise system buildings in a courtyard formation
- a former textile factory which has been extended and converted into student accommodation
- the low rise Kimberlin Library
- two storey terraced housing

All of these buildings are diverse in character, scale and materials and cannot therefore be considered as having been directly influential to design context. However the scale and detail of the Victorian factories and terraced streets, both in the immediate area and the wider city areas in general, have clearly influenced the design of the Queens building in scale, massing form and materials, providing a contextual palette of wider reference.

The building location fronting Mill Lane, re-establishes the original street pattern, tight to the rear pavement edge, providing a strong sense of enclosure, together with a rich and varied façade, constructed in red brickwork, clearly acknowledging its Victorian Heritage. Unfortunately the entrance to the building is rather obscure, being located in a small, rather dark rear courtyard, rather than being celebrated on the main façade.

The buildings low energy credentials are clearly demonstrated, with small north facing façade windows, together with strongly emphasised ventilation chimneys and louvered ventilation panels. The building connects well both physically and spatially, with the adjacent Kimberlin Library and encloses a pedestrian route through to the rear car park, from a new green space formed between the buildings. The workshop block runs parallel with Grasmere Street at right angles to the main building and is broken down in scale and massing, relating well to the adjacent terraced housing.

The Queens Building does not easily comply with the usual expectations of 'Design in Context'. But there can be no doubt that it is an iconic building, central to the regeneration and development of the University Campus. The Building is located at the heart of the campus and has provided an excellent example for future development.

In conclusion, The Queens Building is designed in context, with certain elements of its immediate surroundings, but more importantly, in context to the city and its Victorian heritage.

## Design and Planning of the Queens Building

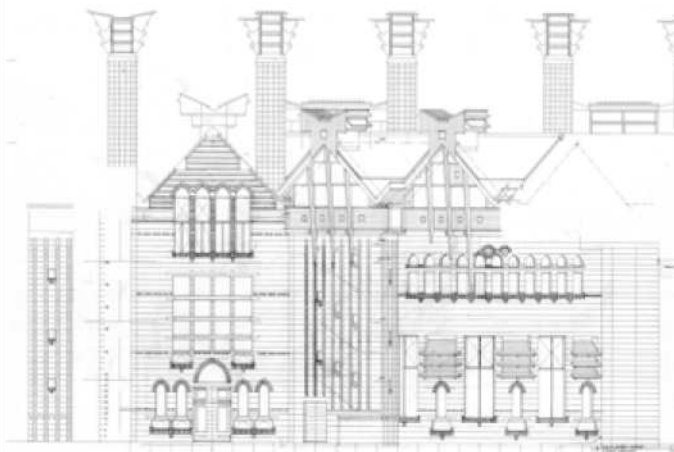
The design brief for the Queens Building included three clear criteria in addition to the functionality and the building use volumes/spaces required. These were:-

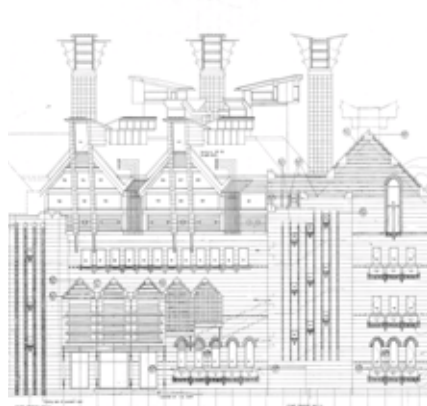
- Environmental Sensitivity – particularly passive, low energy design
- Traditional Construction – labour intensive to bring jobs to the area and 'heavy' construction to assist with the natural conditioning of the building
- Innovation – using university research in environmental areas as well as being distinctive - to challenge and capture the imagination.

The environmental context of the site was very fragmented and had been eroded through mass demolition of Victorian housing; archives indicated that Mill Lane, a boundary to the site, had existed well before the mid 18thC. The planning of the building also has a contextual approach by striking a natural rhythm within the urban landscape in which it lay. The street pattern is reinforced by the narrow and naturally ventilated buildings and the heat producing sectors of the building are sited on the northern edge of the site to remove further the solar heat gains.

'The new building for De Montfort, while setting out to be eminently practical, also understands that it has a civic role to fulfill. It is a landmark in the townscape - part of Chiddick's grand plan to use his university as a catalyst for urban renewal.'

(Hugh Pearman, Culture Magazine, Sunday Times)





### Heritage Characterisation

A methodology for Heritage Assessment Characterisation was tabled at the workshop and whilst this was based on the town of Oldham there are generic issues that can apply to any town or city. The key stages are:-

- *Research – desk based looking at archives, local studies libraries, sites and monuments records etc. or map regression.*
- *Fieldwork – a 2 person team observing, photographing and commenting. Forms of construction, materials, historic survival and key landscapes to be noted.*
- *Monitoring by a Steering Group – periodic reviews and appraisal/re-appraisal.*
- *Consultation – the general public and the commercial sector can both contribute to and reinforce the results.*
- *Assessment – understanding what is significant.*
  - *Age*
  - *Architectural and historic interest*
  - *Grouping and townscape value*
  - *Historic relationship – e.g. mills and housing*
- *Testing of assumptions through feedback and consultation.*

Attendees were encouraged to start the process of analysis as early as possible; be ever open to findings to help drive regeneration; be rigorous and consistent; engage with local people using their memories and artefacts; build a compelling case for distinctive development.

### Conclusions of the Workshop for Queens Building

The attractiveness, integration, and use of space around the fire escapes was felt to be very well handled. There was good use of landscaping although this was seen as an afterthought and is preferable to be considered as designs develop. A problem with the building was the identification of the entrance – very difficult to find. The scale of the building relative to the adjacent terrace housing is good. The style of the building amongst the chronology of the street-scape works well and there is a good 'fit'. Use of materials is very good; the polychromatic brick and craftsmanship was very much liked. It is apparent that the building works well, is suitable for its use and fit for purpose. Many attendees at the workshop found the building very engaging.

### Conclusions for the Workshop

Good design and historic environments matter to people  
Good design is fundamental to the national planning policy frameworks  
Practice is generally poor often due to lack of:  
- skilled staff in the Local Planning Authorities  
- understanding about the design process  
Resources are now available to facilitate good design ... but need a local champion  
Do not confuse design with style  
Good design emerges from a common understanding of context....responsive design

### Issues and Questions for Approving Councils to consider

Committee members find it difficult to understand scale of adjacent buildings; need 3D views or, better still, models. Views of the building in the street context are crucial for a full understanding of its impact.  
Committee members often do not have a good understanding of drawings presented and therefore at committee the discussion is disjointed and not as productive as it could be; some plan reading/understanding training would be very useful.  
There is a need to understand the distance views of tall buildings and the impact on vistas.  
Views from the top of buildings are very good for orientation and understand of an area.  
There is a need to know what the original brief asked for.  
A tendency to give attention to minor detail can detract from the big decisions required; it is easy to develop reservations and assumptions.  
It is necessary to value the importance of vegetation and large planting in respect of orientation of buildings and use of daylight.  
Developers should be encouraged to use photographs and images in Design and Access Statements to help visuality by committees – this can be requested by the planning team.  
The submission of plans for one site gives the committee an opportunity to ask 'Does the adjacent land/site need development'. It is also an opportunity to evaluate the impact of the public realm.  
Ask if your Council has appointed Design/Historic Environment Champions – if not consider the opportunity.  
Are you making full use of the Historic Environment-Local Management (HELM) resources?  
Are the decisions of your Council based on a clear understanding of your local heritage and its significance?  
Has your Council used the Design Review Panel? Contact the local Architecture Centre if you wish to do so in the future.  
The local planning authority is in the best position to assess the context and test the views of the local community.  
Local Authorities are urged to provide clearer rules to developers and encouraged to have pre-application discussions.  
The complexity of information that is handled by officers must be understood by committee who retain the decision making role.  
Officers rely on the Planning Team to have expertise and that the project meets the Design and Access Statement.