

The CABE agenda

By Paul Finch OBE

About CABE

- CABE is a non-statutory company limited by guarantee, created in 1999, to replace the Royal Fine Art Commission
- Its remit is to promote the quality of architecture and the built environment in England by a variety of means, including design review, enabling projects, advising government departments and other public bodies, publications and conferences
- Its 40 staff operate from London; more than 100 “enablers” and 24 members of the design review committee are part of CABE’s broader “family”
- CABE has regional representatives who act as our eyes and ears across the country
- CABE operates in partnership with private and public bodies, and has close relationships with (in particular) English Heritage
- CABE is answerable to the Department of Culture, Media & Sport, but also has relationships with the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister and the Lord Chancellor’s Department, who fund some of CABE’s work

The following material is extracted from the Commission for Architecture & the Built Environment’s document, *Design Review* (2002):

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 the following:

Order. “Order in architecture” wrote Geoffrey Scott in “The Architecture of Humanism” (1914), “. . . enables us to interpret what we see with greater readiness; it renders form intelligible by making it coherent; it satisfies the desire of the mind; it humanises architecture.” Order 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.

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.

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.

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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.

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 dwellings.

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 scheme 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.

Flexibility and adaptability. The purposes for which a building and the parts of a building will be 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, that is, capable of being altered or extended conveniently when necessary.

Sustainability. Taken in the round, a project should use natural resources responsibly. Finally, 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

- 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 floorplates 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?

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