

Good design in development – is it subjective?

Good design and the Planning service

Delivering good design in development is part of what Town and Country Planning is all about. Nationally, the advice is that:

“Good design should be the aim of all those involved in the development process and should be encouraged everywhere. Good design can help promote sustainable development; improve the quality of the existing environment; attract business and investment; and reinforce civic pride and a sense of place. It can help to secure public acceptance of necessary new development”.

(PPG1 – Planning Policy Guidance: General Policy and Principles, paragraph 15)

However, aspirations and reality can be very different. Following the first phase of the biggest ever audit of new housing developments in England, the Commission for Architecture and the Built Environment (CABE) concluded that “four out of five buyers of new build houses and flats have to settle for ‘mediocre’ properties”. (Press release, 11 October 2004).

From the evidence in the housing sector, CABE points to the need for action in priority areas which include:

- Skills – local authorities need to be better skilled so they can demand better design.
- Co-ordination and implementation – local authorities should use the guidance on design quality that exists and be clearer about the developments they want to see. They then need to work with developers from the outset to ensure good results are achieved.

Is good design subjective? The distinction between ‘style’ and ‘quality’

From first principles, Planning authorities are called upon to play a key role in the achievement of good design for the areas and the people they serve. If good design is essentially a subjective matter, how can that be achieved? An answer is by examining design quality and not design style.

There is a very important distinction here. ‘Style’ relates to matter of taste. Taste is largely subjective and is a matter of personal feelings or opinions. On the other hand, it is possible to be objective about quality. A systematic approach to assessing design quality makes the assessment more objective and less subjective.

Assessing design quality

In *Building in context : New development in historic areas* CABE and English Heritage make this point.

“... differences of opinion and matters of personal taste should not be allowed to obscure the fact that 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 will include asking questions about the quality of the building itself and its quality as a contribution to the urban design of the neighborhood in which it is situated.

Components of development form

One basis for doing this is set out in *By Design – Urban design in the planning system: towards better practice* published by the DETR and CABE (2000).

Assessment is based on looking at aspects of development form. Together, these aspects define the overall layout of the place (in terms of its routes and building blocks); its scale (in terms of building height and massing); its appearance (as expressed in details and use of materials); and its landscape (including all the public realm, built and green spaces).

The role of design policy and design guidance is to focus on how, in a particular context, development form can achieve urban design objectives for the site and the area within which it is set. (Urban design objectives are the subject of *Derby City Design Papers 2*).

Towards objective assessment of the urban design quality of development proposals : checklist of aspects of development form (DETR / CABE)

Layout: urban structure

The framework of routes and spaces that connect locally and more widely, and the way developments, routes, and open spaces relate to one another.

Layout: urban grain

The pattern of the arrangement of street blocks, plots, and their buildings in a settlement

Landscape

The character and appearance of land, including its shape, form, ecology, natural features, colours and elements, and the way these components combine

Density and mix

The amount of development on a given piece of land and the range of uses. Density influences the intensity of development, and in combination with the mix of uses can affect a place's vitality and viability

Scale: height

Scale is the size of a building in relation to its surroundings, or the size of parts of a building or its details, particularly in relation to the size of a person. Height determines the impact of development on views, vistas and skylines.

Scale: massing

The combined effect of the arrangement, volume and shape of a building in relation to other buildings and spaces.

Appearance: details

The craftsmanship, building techniques, decoration, styles and lighting of a building or structure.

Appearance: materials

The texture, colour, pattern, and durability of materials, and how they are used.