

RIBA CORNWALL EVENT

Development Management Staff Design Quality Workshop Notes

Date and Location

Tuesday 12 April, Trethorne Leisure Park, Launceston

Thursday 14 April, Pool Innovation Centre, Pool

Workshop contributors and attendees

Chair: Phil Mason

Facilitators: RIBA, Phil Mason, Rachel Smith, Nigel Doyle, Peter Phillips, Mark Broomhead

Attendees: Development Management Staff; Affordable Housing; DM Policy

RIBA Volunteers – Nicola Fox Hill (Parkes Lees), Michael Harris (Michael Harris Architect), Mark Innes (Innes Architects), Dan Ranson (Innes Architects), Jane Hamlyn (Atelier 3)

Workshop Format

25-30 minute workshop, runs 4 times throughout each morning

Approximately 25 delegates per session

Workshop Aims

- To ascertain feelings/opinions regarding current Cornwall design resources, how often they are used, awareness of what they have access to.
- To provoke a discussion on what makes a good design, how to recognise it and what information you need to determine this.
- To promote the idea of collaboration between planners and architects and as a part of the wider construction industry, as a means of producing higher quality architecture.

Workshop Content

Questions from Cornwall Council were sent out to delegates:

- Cornwall Design Guide – do you use this and what would make you use it more?
- Cornwall Design Review Panels – are you aware of them?
- What makes good and bad design?

RIBA CORNWALL EVENT

Development Management Staff Design Quality Workshop Notes

Workshop Programme

	TOPIC
1	Welcome and Introductions
2	Introduction to workshop
	Part 1 Current Design Resources
3	Cornwall Design Guide Q&A
4	Cornwall Design Review Panel Q&A
5	Prioritising Design Discussion
	Part 2 –Case Studies
6	Case Study Good Design Talk through examples
7	Case Studies – Discussion in Small Groups
8	Collaborative Working Discussion
9	Activities/Events and conclusion

FEEDBACK FROM WORKSHOPS:

Part 1 A review of current design resources

RIBA Question to Cornwall Council

1.0 What is the first thing you check when a new planning application comes in?

1.1 Site and context

1.11 Where is it? What's the Context?

1.12 Check Site constraints - Interactive map (AONB, Floodplain, Rights of way, Conservation area etc).

1.2 Design and Access

1.21 It was generally felt that the best way to get a feel for a scheme is to view the Design and Access statement (if there is one!) and Location Plan.

1.22 The Majority of Design and Access statements are found to be very basic and give little reference to the design. They do not give any back story to the evolution of the design.

1.23 Design and Access statement could be embellished with a brief statement/ diagrams on how and why the architect arrived at the submitted proposal. RIBA design panel response: Cornwall Council could provide an online guideline for what

RIBA CORNWALL EVENT

Development Management Staff Design Quality Workshop Notes

they are expecting in a D&A report for all agents to follow, including non-qualified agents.

1.24 When photomontages were included in applications they were found to be useful in determining good design.

1.3 Quality of applications and information given

1.31 It was noted that many applications documentation can be of a poor quality with the bare minimal tick box information. The general consensus was that RIBA chartered practices tended to deliver better than average planning documentation. There was still a feeling that some chartered practices are not exempt from this criticism!

1.32 Electronic information can be problematic for officers as site visits have to be undertaken without physical documents to refer to whilst on site.

1.33 There have been a number of submissions by RIBA chartered practices that don't indicate context in their drawings – they appear to 'float' in the landscape. This is expected by non-qualified agents but deemed bad practice for chartered architects who are trained to understand the relevance of indicating context, levels etc.

1.34 In terms of design (excluding conservation areas etc.), the bare minimum is required to get planning, so long as the other principles have been addressed – highways, local area plans, drainage etc. Larger scale projects such as affordable housing are more politically led and design plays a minor part in the decision making process.

1.35 Often the supporting information e.g. heritage statement is quite generic with too little written in specific regard to the project and local area plans/ information. It is good practice to reference or extract relative items from these local plans or NPPF in relation to the proposal. In addition - it is frustrating for the assessor if this information is repeated/ copy and pasted into the D&A statement. There needs to be greater coordination and clarity between the design proposal and reports.

1.36 Determine that the level of detail for the type of application is correct (validation).

RIBA CORNWALL EVENT

Development Management Staff Design Quality Workshop Notes

1.37 The assessors' initial review is generally a site response – is it viable in terms of its orientation, how does it sit within its neighbouring context, response to levels, consultation with Cornwall interactive map etc.

1.38 Identify who has been consulted and why, and review supporting information e.g. ecology and heritage reports etc. Larger scale schemes required greater levels of supporting information at the early stages to ensure viability and that the principles will be met.

1.39 There is a desire to have a pre-application process for household applications and time allocation was discussed as one of the primary reasons why this is not currently possible.

1.4 Materials

1.41 The appropriateness of materials is considered by the assessors as part of the design to ensure weathering/ longevity within its regional context.

1.42 Value engineering in today's client led market has meant that there are more applications requiring material amendments.

1.43 It has become clear that the majority of projects are client or market led in terms of materials, cost etc.

2.0 Cornwall Design Guide

2.1 Design guide is broad-brush, lengthy, and chapters are not definitive. There were also many comments that it is too generic and 'woolly'. The old district design guides are still used by some officers (although not as a material consideration), to determine good design. This is seemingly due to their regional specific nature, and generally more prescriptive approach.

2.2 There is little guidance on 'place making' - i.e. starting afresh on green-field sites which is/ becoming very relevant to Cornwall with affordable housing developments.

2.3 The proximity between neighbouring properties is published in the design guide at 25m however there is no indication given to this origin and there was general frustration that it veered from the 21m rule.

RIBA CORNWALL EVENT

Development Management Staff Design Quality Workshop Notes

2.4 The Cornwall Design Guide was found to be useful by some officers despite many comments that it needed better indexing as it was hard to navigate and hard to use the online.

3.0 Design Process / Interactive Design Communication

3.1 It was generally felt that documentation of design process – communicating research and background of scheme concepts etc., along with any previous design iterations is helpful in determining good design.

3.2 Design and Access statements are one of the most useful tools for ascertaining the quality of the design. These are however no longer mandatory.

4.0 Design Review Panel

4.1 Attendees were not aware that it is going through a ‘revival’ – marketing needs to be considered.

4.2 General response is that in its current organisation, it is more often experts reviewing the work of experts.

4.3 Non-architect agents are not keen to spend additional money to go to a DRP whilst there is still risk that it can be rejected by planning, so planning officers don’t tend to mention it as a facility. Some officers were aware of the Design Review Panel, others possibly not.

4.4 There were a number of comments that the DRP has tailed off in its usefulness.

4.5 It was felt by some to be a good resource to back up arguments in relation to design, and was found to be useful as a key consultant response in making a design based planning determination. The panel seemed more focused and useful since its re-launch.

4.6 The cost of a full panel design review was seen to be an issue, however most officers were unaware of the small panel option and thought it a good idea in principle.

4.7 It was felt by some that the process needed to be more integrated into the planning process.

RIBA CORNWALL EVENT

Development Management Staff Design Quality Workshop Notes

5. Quality vs. Acceptable Design

5.2 It was communicated that outside of Designated Areas it is very hard to refuse an application on design grounds – This seems to be due to a combination of factors including government pressure for fulfilling housing quotas and planning inspectorate decisions that have been in favour of seemingly lower quality design despite officer refusal on design grounds.

“Acceptable if it fits in and doesn’t cause genuine harm”

5.3 Whilst it was agreed by all that good design is the aim of the planning process, it was generally the consensus that over the last 10 years overall design quality has fallen / taken a back seat to the pro development agenda.

5.4 It was generally agreed that quality design is often manifested in the detail of the scheme (especially place making details such as tectonics, green infrastructure, street furniture etc.). However, while these important specific design details can be conditioned, it is often found that these are often amended /left out at later stages by larger developers to the detriment of the overall scheme quality. Also, to maintain throughput of housing construction officers often under pressure to minimise this type of conditioning.

5.5 Value engineering often erodes quality design.

5.6 The proposed Cornwall architect/ Planner helpline was met with great enthusiasm.

Part 2 Case Studies

6 & 7. Case Studies

A series of award winning buildings around Cornwall were used to prompt workshop discussion on good design.

8. Future Collaboration

8.1 A greater collaboration between agents / planners and developers was generally felt to be a good idea.

“If the client is keen on good design from the outset then everything else is easy”

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Development Management Staff Design Quality Workshop Notes

8.2 Possibility for developers workshop session to encourage quality design / show that design quality invariably adds value? Cost/Benefit analysis?

9. Future RIBA Cornwall Event Programme Events

Delegates were invited to attend future RIBA events – 3rd June Summer Lecture with Stan Bolt, Falmouth University, 20th July RIBA and Women in Property Summer Cruise, 24th September Architectural Sandcastle Competition St Ives, 11th November CAT Lecture and Dinner, Falmouth Maritime Museum.