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51. Design review: past, present and future

200 years ago

Design review sometimes feels like a relatively recent preoccupation but in fact has a long history stretching back in England over 200 years. Believe it or not it all began in The Treasury when in 1802 they established a Committee for the Inspection of Models for National Monuments to supervise the erection of memorials to the 'heroes' of the Napoleonic wars. The 'Committee of Taste' (as it quickly became known) was manned by seven leading connoisseurs and collectors under the chairmanship of the Conservative politician (later Minister) Charles Long (1st Baron Farnborough) and operated until the mid 1820s.

A little later, in 1841, a second committee, this time under the title the 'Fine Arts Commission' was set up to supervise issues of public taste and the commissioning of art works relating to the recently completed Palace of Westminster. Established under the aegis of Prince Albert, the Prime Minister of the time (Robert Peel) described the group as being composed of members of each House selected without reference to party distinctions, whose attention has been directed to the cultivation of the fine arts. Thus from the start design review was a-political! The group was disbanded in 1863 when it ran out of steam following the death of Prince Albert two years earlier.

Sixty years on, the Royal Fine Arts Commission of 1924 was created as an altogether more ambitious undertaking, although it came about for very similar reasons to the Committee of Taste a century earlier. In the aftermath of the first world war an unofficial advisory committee had been set up to approve and site numerous war memorials across London. The committee worked well at first but soon ran into difficulties relating to the depiction of nudity in sculptures commissioned for The Strand and Hyde Park. The hubbub confirmed the need for a more independent and authoritative source of advice to Government on matters of design. Drawing inspiration from the 'Commission of Fine Arts' that had been set up in 1910 in Washington DC, in 1923 the idea was taken up by the then Conservative administration under Stanley Baldwin. The RFAC began its work in January 1924, two weeks into the first every Labour administration.

The RFAC

Whilst it talked about 'design enquiries' as opposed to 'design reviews', the RFAC was the most successful proponent of the discipline, at least if success is judged by longevity. In fact the RFAC survived for 75 years until 1999 and in its time conducted many thousands of reviews on nationally significant projects. In large part this success was achieved because the organisation became very practiced at keeping its head well below the parapet for most of its life. As one commentator suggested: "For many years the Commission pursued a policy of discretion to the point of virtually abstaining from public comment".

In that position it conducted reviews largely for the public sector, initially via a standing commission of eight members, half of whom were architects, one engineer and typically an artist (all male establishment figures), rising to eighteen by the 1990s (with a sprinkling of women). It had a huge impact on everything from the red telephone box, to the design of the UCL estate (where I write this), to plans for post-war reconstruction across the country (often a voice of reason and against the clean sweep mentality of the time), to an influential supporter of contemporary projects such as the Lloyds building, Tate Modern and the Great Court of the British Museum. It was, for example advice from the RFAC that directly led to the iconic triangular pattern in the British Museum's dome (the original being a rectilinear grid).



K2 TELEPHONE BOX



LLOYDS OF LONDON



THE BRITISH MUSEUM, GREAT COURT

And perhaps the RFAC might still have been with us today if it had kept its head down, but under its final and charismatic Chair, Lord St John of Fawsley it broke from that tradition and began to more publicly denounce schemes that it didn't like, including the Millennium Wheel. In this period design review for the first time came to the consciousness of the wider public but also increasingly came under fire for being elitist, secretive, reactive, and susceptible to style bias and cronyism. The RFAC also remained strangely detached from the policy changes happening around it, first those of John Gummer and then of New Labour, and the much broader view of design in public policy to which this gave rise (urban rather than aesthetic design).

Along comes CABE

History records that the RFAC was wound up in 1999 in favour of the more expansive, dynamic and ambitious model that was the Commission for Architecture and the Built Environment (CABE). In contrast with the RFAC, design review was just one of the many tools of design governance that CABE deployed to achieve its aim of transforming the national agenda and consciousness with regard to design. Indeed, contrary to some perceptions, only around a fifth of CABE's staff were dedicated to its design review function, even though it was a service greatly expanded from the RFAC days, moving from around 100 projects a year in 1999 to almost 500 at its height in 2004/05, and being serviced by a panel of 40 reviewers.

This number was subsequently scaled back to around 350 per annum from the 1,000 or so schemes submitted annually to CABE for review when a 2005 Select Committee enquiry into CABE's work emphasised quality over quantity in its design review activities. The move followed the controversial departure of Sir Stuart Lipton, CABE's Chair, who the year before had been accused (incorrectly) of a conflict of interest when schemes of his own had come before a CABE panel. The episode reflects a

key challenge for design review that, by its nature, is open to misinterpretation (and potentially misuse) when practitioners are asked to comment on each other's work in the absence of very clear rules of transparency, and disclosure.

Whilst far from CABE's most costly tool, design review was certainly its headline service where most of the publicity (and periodic controversy) derived. It was a service in the public eye, with reviews openly published and with most local authorities, incorrectly, assuming that the advice they received had a statutory weight, when in fact it was never more than advisory. It also got a lot of architects, developers and other consultants hot under the collar, as the description of the service by one less than enamoured participant observed: "a day out for unemployed architects with little relevant skill on the matter in hand, or self-serving fairy dust sprinkling and grandstanding from designer stars past their sell by date". Others argued that 'official' judgement on design without recourse to either a democratic process or an obvious means to challenge decisions was always going to be problematic.

From CABE's perspective, the 'dominance' of design review in the external perception of the organisation (even if incorrect) did not help its cause and tended to obscure the multiple other ways in which CABE engaged with, influenced and evaluated buildings and places. However, just like the RFAC before it, looking at the schemes it influenced, it is difficult to say anything other than that CABE's influence was profoundly positive on projects as diverse as: the Birmingham library, Sheffield Peace gardens, Liverpool One, the crossrail stations in London and the 2012 Olympic projects both in London and elsewhere, numerous school projects across the country, and many residential-led masterplans, including that for Kidbrooke Village. The list goes on and on. And whilst the record does not always record the extent of CABE's influence on schemes, and of course they clearly didn't always get it right (don't mention the Walkie Talkie), we shouldn't forget that just as great an impact, because of a timely and forceful intervention by CABE, is what is not seen today.



THE SHARD



THE OLYMPIC PARK IN GAMES MODE



BIRMINGHAM LIBRARY

Regional design review

CABE also helped to facilitate the spread of design review regionally through funding regional panels, many hosted by the Architecture and Built Environment Centres and coordinated by the Architecture Centre Network. On this front whilst there was already some coverage in some regions and a few local authority panels (including, since the 1920s, a sprinkling of Architectural Advisory Panels), coverage prior to CABE was very patchy at best. For the first time CABE helped to ensure that design review became an activity conducted nationwide, and in the process moved the practice beyond the 'nationally significant' projects that the RFAC and CABE saw in London to a class of major developments that whilst critical to their localities would not have registered at the national scale. Through these means and through the 2000's the practice of design review gradually became mainstream.

A market emerges

Following the demise of CABE in 2011, we have seen, for the first time in 90 years a complete withdrawal of national government from design review and the establishment of a free market in review services. Arguably, it was CABE's mainstreaming of the practice that held out the prospect for this market to work as almost the only tool of CABE toolbox with immediate potential to be marketised. At the same time some argue that it was also CABE's very public and sometimes problematic practices of design review that ultimately left the organisation (in 2010 in its hour of need) without the heavy-weight friends in the architectural establishment that might have helped to save it from the cuts.

Instead, we were left with the rather unpalatable sight of other organisations attempting to muscle in and take a share of the meagre transitional funds that DCLG had made available for two years to move from design review as a public practice to design review in the market. Those organisation didn't succeed and we saw the transition of CABE into Design Council CABE and eventually the Architecture Centre Network into the Design Network with its nine regions.

These arrangements were significantly aided from 2012 by new advice in paragraph 62 of the NPPF that "Local planning authorities should have local design review arrangements in place to provide assessment and support to ensure high standards of design". The policy does not specify what form such arrangement should take of what the consequences were of not doing this (none as it turns out!).

For a few years it looked doubtful whether there was a viable market and in 2013 Shape East went belly up whilst others were on a knife edge (and perhaps still are); but in the spirit of 'let a thousand flowers bloom' other players have entered the market (or have continued to operate), and design review has become more client focussed, less public (or at least less often published or published about) and has retreated (to some degree) back under the parapet; back to the days of the RFAC before 1985.

There nevertheless remains a lot more design review about than in those days, although provision is clearly very patchy and evidence about it thin. Thus today some regions (particularly London) have multiple overlapping providers, whilst others have just a single provider. The diversity and range of panel types, from purely public to purely private and everything in-between is reflected in the following table.

Design review provider		Operation	Example
Focus	Sector		
National panel	Third	Not for profit organisation with no geographic remit	Design Council CABE
Regional / sub-regional panel	Public	Regional or sub-regional panel operating within the confines of its administrative area	Urban Design London, Design Surgeries; or Hertfordshire Design Review Panel (run by Building Futures a consortium of nine Hertfordshire local authorities led by the County Council)

	Public entrepreneurial	Entrepreneurial public sector trading design services to others in its region	Place Services of Essex County Council, formally part of the county's core services, but now an independent profit centre wholly owned by the council and able to sell its services, including design review, inside (to the district authorities) and outside of Essex
	Third	Not for profit organisation with a regional or sub-regional geographic remit	MADE West Midlands, providing design review (and other design services) throughout the West Midlands; or the Cornwall Design Review Panel
	Private panel for hire	Private provision of a roving panel for hire on commercial terms (so far regionally based)	The Design Review Panel, with clients that include local authorities and developers in Devon and Somerset
Local panel	Public	Local authority panel operating within the confines of its administrative area	London Borough of Lewisham Design Review Panel; or Torbay Council, Design Review Panel
	Third	Not for profit organisation with a local (usually town or city) geographic remit	Beam, providing design review (and other design services) to Wakefield; or the Greenwich Design Review Panel run by Design Council CABE for Royal Greenwich
	Private sub-contractor	Public sector organisation operating within the confines of its administrative area but with the panel management subcontracted to a private or not for profit organisation	Haringey Quality Review Panel, managed by private consultancy, Frame Projects, for the London Borough of Haringey; or the London Legacy Development Corporation Quality Review Panel managed by Fortismere Associates
	Private	Private panel organised, funded and managed by a private company to review schemes within a defined site or area	Lewisham Gateway Panel funded by MUSE Developments Ltd following a requirement within the terms of the planning permission (part of the Section 106 agreement) to review schemes

Specialist panel	Public	Public providers focussed on particular types of project e.g. transport or infrastructure	Home Office, Quality Panel, with a focus on buildings for the Police; or Transport for London, Design Review Group, with a specialist focus on roads / public realm schemes in London
	Private sub-contractor	Public or pseudo-public sector organisation focussed on particular types of project e.g. transport or infrastructure but with the panel management subcontracted to a private or not for profit organisation	HS2 Independent Design Panel, with a focus on the infrastructure and impacts of High Speed Rail 2, managed by private consultancy, Frame Projects, for HS2 Ltd
	Private	Private panel within and exclusively serving a private company	Barratt Homes' design review panel reviews all its schemes as part of an internal quality initiative designed to drive up quality across the company's developments

The future of design review

In the midst of all this complexity, a number of significant questions raise they heads:

1. What is the continuing value of design review?
2. What are the critical common principles of good design review?
3. Is better coordination of design review services required: nationally and regionally and between different types of providers?
4. Is there a case for regulation to maintain quality control?
5. Are those conducting review sufficiently accountable, independent and transparent in the service they provide?
6. What tools might be used to increase the uptake of design review by local authorities and others – and is mandating design review the answer?
7. What alternative models for design review should we consider?

A number of reviews of built environment policy more generally have attempted to throw light on some of these questions, and have made a series of recommendations about the future of design review. In 2011, for example, the Bishop Review (commissioned by Design Council CABE) recommended that:

- The NPPF should be amended to strengthen the position of design review
- A simple mechanism of best practice accreditation should be set up
- Design review should be funded through enhanced planning or pre-application fees.

The Farrell Review three years later concluded:

- Design Review Panels should become cross-disciplinary PLACE Review Panels
- They should be less crit-like and more enabling and collaborative.
- The commissions of all publicly funded bodies that procure the built environment should be subject to design review

- Existing places such as high streets, hospitals and housing estates should be reviewed.

Earlier this year the House of Lords Select Committee on National Policy for the Built Environment argued that:

- Provision of design review is disjointed and fragmented, with issues of funding and service quality effecting local delivery
- There is an insufficient number of reviews to justify a wider investment in the new market
- To address this design review should be mandatory for all major planning applications.

Finally, and specifically in relation to London, The Mayor's Design Advisory Group recommended that:

- The Mayor should coordinate design review services in London
- The London Plan should require major schemes to be subject to design review
- Reviews should be funded by applicants.

Big Meet 5

To help clarify the situation, or at least to begin the process of more openly and systematically debating it, in April the Place Alliance devoted Big Meet 5 to a national conference on design review. We took a wide range of contributions from experts who had been or currently are involved in design review from a wide range of perspectives and from all the nations of the UK and beyond. Following a day of evidence and debate spanning this diversity of practice across 100 or so participants, we came to seven tolerably clear conclusions:

First, design review is indeed much more diverse than at any time in the past, with many more providers and no single coordinating (or constraining) hand. Because of this, it has become more innovative, and is finding imaginative new ways of moulding its offer to meet local circumstances. On the downside, there seems no way of capturing this collective experience or sharing knowledge, and practice is variable to say the least. Thus whilst some areas benefit from a comprehensive service, many (perhaps the majority) are subject to almost no design review at all.

Second, there remains a lack of hard evidence about the value or effectiveness of design review, and a need for some systematic research to properly record the state of the nation: what we are doing, where and how, and what works and what does not.

Third, in the context of localism, the relationship between design review and the communities being served seems to be on many minds, although is a difficult and sensitive matter. Ultimately the consensus seemed to be that the essence of design review was the process of evaluation by professional peers and that this was an important and distinct role within the overall design process. Consequently design review was not considered the right tool for engaging the public in decision-making. Engaging developers in these peer review processes, by contrast, was considered critical, particularly if design review was to carry the confidence of all involved.

Fourth, diminishing resources within local planning authorities remains a continuing concern. In this respect design review should not be seen as a sticking plaster to cover the absence of in-house design skills (although in extremis, even that is better than nothing). Instead design review should empower in-house local authority staff to strive for even better outcomes, helping them to step back and take an independent view on development proposals.

Fifth, design review is a distinct and important tool that is widely used and understood and should not be usurped by PLACE review. It should, however, embrace the comprehensive and interdisciplinary vision advanced in the Farrell Review and should seize the opportunity to address

highways, public realm and strategic planning propositions, alongside architectural, landscape and urban design projects.

Sixth, a key innovation in recent years has been the development of more collaborative workshop-based design review techniques, moving away from a crit-based approach and towards a constructive dialogue. In this respect the best international practice emphasises formative rather than summative design review that help to guide outcomes through the design process rather than casting a verdict on finished schemes. In places where a mature and comprehensive system of design review is in place, this is the logical development of the service.

Finally, despite a pretty unanimous view in the room (perhaps unsurprisingly) that when it operates well design review can add huge value, no clear view was reached on whether to support mandatory design review. Here the concern seemed to be that, if made a requirement, then design review could all too easily degenerate into a tick box exercise. Providers nevertheless need to be better at demonstrating that when review is done well, it adds value, with monitoring an essential part of this feeding into a public record of impact.

A mixed future

We are at an interesting juncture, and it looks likely that design review can and will continue to innovate, responding to local needs and learning from others to diversify practices and gradually grow the size of the market. Equally, for the foreseeable future many parts of England will continue in the virtual absence of any systematic design review, despite advice in the NPPF to the contrary. Perhaps that is the relentless logic of the market and overtime we will discover what impact that has on the quality and viability of local places.

In the light of the discussions and findings at Big Meet 5, the Place Alliance Place Quality Working Group will now consider what, if anything, needs to be done to address some the questions posed above. Design review is in an interesting and very challenging stage of its evolution. The story goes on ...

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