



Independent Review of Architecture and the Built Environment led by Sir Terry Farrell – Local Government Association (LGA) Response

July 2013

The Local Government Association (LGA) is the national voice of local government. We work with councils to support, promote and improve local government.

We are a politically-led, cross party organisation which works on behalf of councils to ensure local government has a strong, credible voice with national government. We aim to influence and set the political agenda on the issues that matter to councils so they are able to deliver local solutions to national problems.

The LGA covers every part of England and Wales, supporting local government as the most efficient and accountable part of the public sector.

This response has been jointly agreed by the LGA's Environment and Housing Board and the Culture, Tourism and Sport Board. These are both cross-party Boards. The Environment and Housing Programme Board has responsibility for LGA activity in the area of the sustainability of the environment, including issues of planning, waste and housing. The Culture, Tourism and Sport Board has responsibility for LGA activity in the area of culture, heritage and the visitor economy.

Councils are intimately involved in the constant shaping and reshaping of their local areas. This is not simply concerned with new development but equally about sensitive and positive conservation which can bring an area's heritage to life and integrate it within the core of a local area. Councils have a central role to play to ensure that development and conservation reflects high quality design. We set out in this submission examples of how councils are promoting high quality design and architecture and how investment in the built environment can support wider efforts to attract investment and meet demand.

High quality design and architecture supports locally led growth

Architecture defines and changes places. The built environment is the ultimate statement of a community; where it has been and its aspirations for the future. It can also help to challenge preconceptions of a place and sometimes dramatically change its course. From striking examples of contemporary architecture, which draw people in and help to create exciting destinations, to new houses which fit in with the local vernacular, architecture emphasises the local character of a place - making it somewhere people want to live, work and visit.

Curve, Leicester's state of the art theatre, is situated at the very centre of the city's Cultural Quarter, and has helped to transform the fortunes of the St. Georges area of Leicester from the city's former textile and shoes hub into a thriving area for creative industries, artists, designers and crafts people. Commissioned by Leicester City Council, the building has won two prestigious awards from the Royal Institute of British Architects and the ProCon Leicestershire Building of the year award. Offering a new theatre experience for Leicester's audiences, Curve is unlike any other theatre - there is no traditional backstage area separating the world of theatre-making from the public showcasing modern theatre. The contemporary design of Curve gives a modern twist to the city's more traditional architecture, helping to create a cosmopolitan cultural environment in the Cultural Quarter.

Canada Water Library is at the heart of the London Borough of Southwark's investment in the libraries service. It is the civic centrepiece of a proposed new town centre and a focus for the community. Its inverted pyramid form is an innovative response to providing an efficient single large library floor on a small site. The 'super' library was designed to also incorporate a multi-purpose community/performance space, teaching and meeting rooms, as well as a café. The masterplan positioned the library on the most publicly accessible and visible site in the area. It stands at the head of Canada Water Basin, adjacent to the bus/tube station and fronting a new plaza which sits above the underground station. The building has been a spectacular success. The first four months operation saw 155,000 public visitors and 129,000 items borrowed.¹

According to the architects who designed the modern extension to the Holburne Museum of Art in Bath, the bold use of ceramic, mirrored the permanent collection of the Museum, much of which is on display in the new gallery space created by the extension. The extension is strikingly configured in ceramic and glass, complementing the original Grade 1 Listed building and sympathetic to the museum's collection of paintings and decorative arts. The development provided an extra 800 square metres of gallery space in addition to a garden café, educational and other visitor facilities.²

Architecture and design are also crucial as part of an area's wider efforts to attract investment and tourism and promote locally led growth. The LGA's work with councils has shown the huge potential of cultural heritage and the built environment to unlock and drive growth locally by creating attractive places that encourage visitors and businesses; creating jobs at heritage attractions and in the wider economy, boosting footfall in city and town centres and revitalising rural communities. Heritage is a major motivator behind the tourism expenditure of both overseas and domestic visitors and is worth £26.4 billion to the UK economy.

¹ <http://viewer.zmags.com/publication/d0afce6a#/d0afce6a/1>

² <http://www.ericparryarchitects.co.uk>

Located between Blackpool Tower and the seafront, Tower Festival Headland provides the seaside resort with a new public space. Commissioned by the council and completed in February 2012, the project features a giant paved “comedy carpet” with jokes and catchphrases from 1,000 comedians carved from granite and embedded into concrete, 35m-high swaying “dune grass” blades, a 40m-wide grand staircase to the beach, and a wedding venue. As well as staging weddings, the Festival Headland can accommodate major outdoor public events such as concerts thanks to a 6m high, 180m long removable windbreak system that protects spectators from the strong sea breezes. The scheme is being used to attract inward investment and visitors into Blackpool.

Historic buildings can also be given a new lease of life by adapting them for business and tourist uses. From new hotels in London and Ipswich, to retail and office developments in Bristol and Yorkshire and converted industrial buildings in Derbyshire and Stoke-on-Trent, across the country there are businesses flourishing in historic buildings which have been repaired or adapted to enable them to have a more successful financial future.

Derby’s cathedral quarter is designated as a Conservation Area which is rich in heritage and has a medieval street pattern, covered market and a mix of shops – from 17th century timber-framed buildings to modern purpose-built shopping arcades. Investment was badly needed to refresh the appearance of this collection of buildings whose character had been negatively affected by neglect, unsympathetic alterations and modern fascias. Grant funding from Derby City Council and English Heritage has helped to pay for repairs and reinstatement of original architectural design details. In addition, the City Council has undertaken a programme of public realm works, which create a high quality street scene to complement the restored frontages. Evidence from follow-up surveys suggest that sales and retail footfall have increased, 250 jobs have been created or protected and almost 100 per cent of the refurbished buildings are occupied, bucking the national trend.³

Councils and indeed the wider public sector are also important commissioners of buildings. From the 1,290 homes councils built in the last year to new sports centres in Birmingham and Derbyshire, a new library in Worcester, a police station in Norfolk, refurbishing council offices in Havant and a new college in Barnsley, councils exercise leverage over design in places and can help to raise expectations.

City of York Council have turned the long-term empty former Grade II listed British Rail West Offices, a former railway station and hotel, into a new council headquarters building. The original brick buildings and 1850s hotel have all been renovated with innovative contemporary design being used for the interior with two new linked structures containing flexible modern workspace for the council’s staff. The last surviving section of the original train shed has been re-erected to form a covered conservatory, with planting and seating areas. A public art programme has also been incorporated as part of the building’s transformation. The redevelopment has successfully blended old and new architecture embracing the heritage of the building and preserving the history and culture of the area whilst providing the highest standards of sustainability and energy use which will realise an estimated saving of £17 million over the next 25 years. In addition, the opportunity to release a number of

³ http://www.english-heritage.org.uk/publications/constructive-conservation-sustainable-growth-historic-places/Acc_ConConservation.pdf

important city centre historic buildings for restoration and more appropriate use will also help to regenerate other areas of the City.

The role of planning and conservation

The planning system plays an important role. It is within the local plan that the spatial aspirations and plans for a local area are set out and the local plan provides certainty to investors and can help to attract growth. Conserving what is precious from the past alongside an emphasis for high quality design for new build and redevelopment is the winning formula and can maximise the growth potential of cultural heritage and the built environment.

For new buildings this means using the planning system to encourage high quality design and build standards and appropriate and sensitive siting. Councils support this by setting out their spatial plans for a place clearly in their local plan, putting in place design guides and using their own assets and land or their compulsory purchase powers to support site acquisition to enable sites to get off the ground and increase viability. The majority of Councils have a published local plan and we expect almost all to be in place by December 2014.

Birmingham City Council's 'Big City Plan' is a 20 year vision to encourage and support the continuing transformation to create a world class city centre. It covers every aspect of design and the built environment, from improving links into and out of the City to maintaining and engaging its unique character. Millennium Point was designed to be a venue with 'wow factor'. It is both huge and inspiring, not just in terms of its appearance, but also because of its prime location and unique purpose. It is already home to two of the City's most unique visitor attractions, the Thinktank science museum and The Giant Screen cinema and now also benefits from the City's first central park – Eastside City Park – at its south entrance on Curzon Street. Millennium Point also houses faculties of Birmingham City University and the fashion and design studios of Birmingham Metropolitan College. It opened in 2001 and now has over 1 million visitors a year. The council led the development through the compulsory purchase of parcels of former wasteland and derelict buildings, in order to provide the site for this important landmark which has spearheaded the regeneration of the Eastside quarter of the city centre.

The Market Place refurbishment scheme in Kettering is part of Kettering Borough Council's ongoing regeneration programme to create a characterful and distinctive town centre which provides opportunities for inward investment. The Market Place is an important historic square in the heart of the town's Conservation Area with a number of listed buildings in its vicinity. A collection of 18th and 19th century buildings were previously on the site but were demolished in the early 20th century, leaving an open ended square with no sense of enclosure. The new development comprises a mixed-use terrace of buildings housing two high quality restaurant units at ground-level and ten luxury apartments above with basement parking, all on land previously used as a car park. The development has made an important physical contribution to the Market Place by completing the perimeter and enclosing the square, containing its activity. The style and use carefully integrate with the surrounding buildings, landscape and access routes. The design is broken down into three terraced blocks each with its own character. The result is a building that

enhances and completes a space providing activity and life, without drawing focus away from the existing features of the Market Place. Kettering now has below the national average levels of vacant shop space and continues to attract inward investment into the area with the well-known chains and independent stores opening new outlets in the town.⁴

It also means conserving what is precious through effective heritage strategies and expertise. Effective planning and conservation so that the old and the new within a place complement one another and enhance the character of a place can open up existing and new heritage assets.

Swansea's National Waterfront Museum, celebrates the city's past as the heart of the Welsh industrial revolution in its design approach. Abstract shapes created by the network of railway lines that once covered the 6080m² site were incorporated into the building to represent the life and vitality of the old dockyard. It forms the focal point of current regeneration for the waterfront area. Green space between the buildings encourages pedestrians away from the city, to the coast, establishing the museum as an axis between the two.

Resource pressures mean that there are fewer councils with in house design and conservation experts but within context of budget pressures, councils are finding new ways of working that bring together specialist conservation, planning and archaeological services. Forward looking councils have already achieved significant savings without compromising good design through effective procurement strategies, robust performance management and collaborative working. It is not always more expensive to build high quality homes – in fact well-designed housing can increase property values and demand.

Specialist planning and advice services within Essex County Council have combined to form a multi-disciplinary 'Place Services Team'. The team promotes excellence in design and place making across the county including providing training, lectures and seminars and providing expert guidance on the conservation and repair of historic buildings.

High quality design and architecture can also support councils to meet wider pressures and needs. For example, new housing is often controversial and resident opposition is cited by councillors as the number one barrier to new housing development. Demand for affordable homes continues to increase and the pressure in many areas of the country is acute. Design can play an important role to mitigate some of the often legitimate concerns of residents and engage them in the planning process in a constructive way. Our work with councillors has shown that 42% of councillors thought that local residents were generally opposed to housing development in their local area, but this proportion fell to 11% if the development was designed to high standards and met local needs⁵.

⁴ <http://viewer.zmags.com/publication/d0afce6a#/d0afce6a/54>

⁵ http://www.local.gov.uk/c/document_library/get_file?uuid=11cf5bc8-88ed-46a5-82e0-7b6fb3f4ed02&groupId=10171

Working in close partnership with the Royal Borough of Greenwich and other partners, Berkeley Homes are delivering a landmark £1 billion regeneration project to redevelop the 1970s Ferrier Estate. The council also used its compulsory purchase order power to enable the project to proceed. The Kidbrooke Village Masterplan encompasses an area of 109 hectares and once complete will provide over 4,800 new homes, as well as all of the amenities, infrastructure and public space to make this a sustainable community including eight hectares of new public open space. It is one of the largest regeneration projects in London and will in turn spur on economic regeneration, create employment, opportunity and a higher quality of life, and attract further investment to the area. The Village consists of four distinctively designed yet integrated neighbourhoods: City Point, Blackheath Quarter, Kidbrooke Village Centre and Meridian Gate, with Cator Park forming a 'green river' between them. A central spine of quality landscaping connects the four neighbourhood areas, and the new homes are arranged in a variety of clusters, empowering local identity and ownership. Schools, healthcare, shops, bars and restaurants, a hotel and sports areas bring people together and put essential services on their doorstep. All the homes meet the Code for Sustainable Homes Level 3 and convenient public transport, cycle paths and pedestrian routes all encourage greener modes of travel.

The role planning can play to set the bar for high quality design can be significant. The Government's on-going review of housing standards aims to rationalise the numbers of locally promoted codes and standards. It is likely that we will see a shift away from local discretion to a focus on building regulations and nationally set standards. We are concerned that this could lead to a levelling down of design, space and quality standards and restrict the ability of councils to use the planning system to encourage quality new build. The LGA is pressing for a better balance which simplifies the current system but allows for local flexibility in line with the viability requirements clearly expressed in the National Planning Policy Framework.

Conclusion

The Farrell Review is an important opportunity to generate real momentum around the benefits of good design and architecture for economic growth and quality of life. Our response has also highlighted the role of planning in delivering spatial aspirations, encouraging high quality design and build standards as well as ensuring appropriate and sensitive siting of development.

We hope that the Review will prompt conversations up and down the country about how we can create a culture of higher expectations around design and architecture that is ultimately reflected in the market. Local government can help to convene these conversations and the LGA looks forward to continuing to support this.