



**MINISTERIAL ADVISORY GROUP
FOR ARCHITECTURE AND THE BUILT
ENVIRONMENT FOR NORTHERN IRELAND**

**MAG RESPONSE TO FARRELL REVIEW OF
ARCHITECTURE AND THE BUILT ENVIRONMENT**

CALL FOR EVIDENCE QUESTIONS

Comments on Farrell Review of Architecture and the Built Environment Call for Evidence Questions

1. Understanding the role for Government in promoting design quality in architecture and the built environment

The review will look at lessons that can be learnt nationally and internationally about the role for Government in promoting and achieving design quality. The role of built environment bodies and other organisations that promote the appreciation and better understanding of design quality in the built environment will also be considered.

1.1 Britain has some of the best architects and designers in the world but that does not automatically mean that standards of architectural design in England are as good as they could be. Why is this?

Architects have been perceived as "necessary when the scheme needs some drawings". Administrators, managers and economists do not understand the importance of design input from the first indication that change is needed. Good design may indicate that no new building or infrastructure (hardware) is needed at all and a change of how we use places (software) may be the most effective response. Design is wide ranging and integrative; it is multi-functional and can positively affect more than the defined users but this does not fit well with the "normally expected" process which is often driven by the perceived need for a "project" rather than a solution.

The policy should require day to day decisions affecting swathes of public realm and buildings to respect local circumstances and professional opinions in heritage management, architecture, urban design, urbanism and conservation in government agencies/staff and consultancies. The emphasis on "business cases" and "economic appraisals" omits two of the three elements of the "triple bottom line" - social and environmental issues. This imbalance towards economic analysis adversely affects people's lives, their heritage and the wider environment. Work on the policy could investigate this more fully and confirm any need for early change, particularly in the selective use and abuse of HM Treasury Green Book as purely economic guidance when it is clearly more than this.

1.2 How can the "everyday" quality of our housing, public spaces and buildings be significantly improved?

The design of good stewardship of our existing environments uses techniques such as "action learning" which by even (for example) a modest 'clean-up' can give positive results – within hours or days rather than weeks, months or years. Action learning by its nature involves people directly in their own creative and positive activities which give them 'permission' to make the necessary small improvements. The learning part of "action learning" can then be applied to the briefing of the

necessary design for change – when that kind of change is necessary. Design briefs are therefore better informed and come from local experience which is real and well grounded.

1.3 Would having a formal architecture policy (as some European countries do) help to achieve improved outcomes? What might be the potential aims of such a policy? What might the benefits be and how they could be measured?

The Northern Ireland Policy for Architecture and the Built Environment has been enormously helpful in encouraging better outcomes. It has taken several years and excellent Ministerial leadership to give it confidence and connections that are now making real differences to places week by week and establishing improved methods of working in central and local government as well as in local communities and specialised, passionate communities of interest

1.4 What can local and national bodies do to promote design quality? What policy infrastructure would assist them in this important task?

The promotion of design quality comes from people (whether or not they belong to local or national bodies) realising that design starts long before a building or infrastructure is conceived. Starting by designing what we can do today or tomorrow – for real – makes the design brief for a “project” hugely better.

1.5 What other recommendations would you like to make relating to this particular theme?

It is vital that the proposed Policy recognises and requires “strategic design” of process as expounded by the Helsinki Design Lab. David Kelley’s “Ideo” has taken “design thinking” to a new level – design is not just about the curtains – it seeks solutions that may involve software, hardware and combinations of the two. Systematic Civic Stewardship (Boston) gets results now and is an important key to ensuring that recognition is given to the reality of design, removing common perceptions that design is some kind of aesthetic “add on” (the curtains).

2. The economic benefits of architecture and design, and maximising the UK's growth potential

The review will consider the contribution of architecture to the UK's economy, how the economic value of good built environment design can be demonstrated, and how it can be maximised in the future.

2.1 In what ways does architecture and built environment design contribute to the UK economy?

Good buildings and places build confidence in a society and an economy – this is exportable. The stewardship of places informs good buildings other necessary design activities and adds a further exportable skill; writing the software for the use of the public square is just as much a design task as deciding on its layout, levels, drainage and furniture, or the buildings that surround it. Chester's "Code of Conduct for Street Entertainers" required design thinking just as much as the buildings along the streets required design. Towns and cities all around the world are struggling for good software to run their public places – this is a huge economic opportunity for designers to design and see results – "lighter, quicker, cheaper" as noted by the Project for Public Spaces (New York).

2.2 It is claimed that high standards of architectural and built environment design add economic value. Can this be demonstrated and, if so, how?

Architectural and built environment design must be taken as a holistic approach to places. If this is the case, and if the better designed "process" recognises that the real resource is people not professionals, then the techniques that have added value to English villages over many generations can become normal by genuine involvement.

2.3 What is the commercial value of our historic built environment for the UK brand and for local economies and tourism?

The commercial value is that the historic built environment brings people to places. Developing the software of the place helps to keep them there. Refer again to the Chester Code of Conduct for Street Entertainers which includes advice to Fire Eaters. Places need this. Designers are equipped to provide it. Commercial operators of theme parks want you to stay longer – so their programming is designed to keep your interest alive. They want you to lodge there as well as visit. Have a close look at their investment in "place software" design and management, including arrival, welcome, fm radio information, wi-fi, etc. Check it against the investment in place software in a typical town centre. Check the software investment in a project with the cost of the hardware. These are the things that add value to places, whether historic or contemporary in expression.

2.4 How do we ensure the culture of architectural and built environment design excellence is part of a perceived national brand identity that can be exported and how can our expertise (such as place-making and sustainability) be offered to a rapidly urbanising world?

The culture needs to be built from the ground up (literally). Often the ground is the dirtiest part of the place. Clean it. There are no toilets at the evening event in the public square. Litter the place with dozens of portable toilets or set up viable software that allows use of the public building adjacent to be opened to service the events out of normal government opening hours. Pay for things twice out of public expenditure or use design thinking to pay for them once. Design is vital for the operation and management of places as the above (real) example illustrates.

2.5 To enhance market leadership in built environment design how can we ensure that the UK is leading and responding to innovations in technology, sustainability and communications in an era of rapid globalisation?

Innovations in technology, sustainability and communications are already here. They have not yet reached the administrators of places. Book a seat on an airline – that's easy. Book the use of a public bandstand – that needs paper forms to be filled in – it needs to go to a committee meeting – it may need to go to full council – by that time the band of creative musicians has moved on. Designers – where are you please?

2.6 What other recommendations would you like to make relating to this particular theme?

Start now, use globally best practice techniques which may as easily be in Lane Cove, New South Wales as in a major city centre and bring strategic design techniques (which can start to make a difference tomorrow) to the forefront of design activity. This is not difficult.

3. Cultural heritage and the built environment

The review will look at how to encourage good new architecture whilst retaining the best of the past, and the value of our historic built environment as a cultural asset and in successful place-making.

3.1 How does architecture and the built environment contribute to our society and its identity and how should we evaluate this?

Architecture develops according to society's needs and the means available to meet them. That development is one of the things that makes the history of towns and cities interesting, but that doesn't mean that things should change continuously. Often it is better to re-use what is there than to pull it down and start again, because that ensures continuity, minimises disruption, and very often it produces a more interesting result than if one starts from the tabula rasa. And, if we don't look after our older buildings, there is no future for our new buildings either.

Survey after survey has shown that people respond well to good places. But you can have a great party in a field – if the party is well designed. Techniques of excellent stewardship from the countryside can help to inform the maintenance (from which learning occurs), management (which teaches us more again), and design (informed by all that learning) of our urban places. These town and city centres and neighbourhoods have received scant design of their maintenance and management – so that when a "project" is proposed to intervene it is often out of context and tends to be single function (bad) rather than contextual and respecting of the multi-faceted nature of the urban place (good).

3.2 Do we value heritage, whether historic or recent, evenly throughout the country?

Sadly, no. "Historic" towns recognise that their identity and income derive from their historic past, which gives them the Unique Selling Point that attracts new businesses and residents as well as tourists. But every town has a unique character which could be built on and most architects and planners need to learn to appreciate their unique local heritage.

Heritage encompasses everything – the spaces between buildings as well as the buildings themselves. While many people use their heritage spaces all the time, there is a danger that to a great extent they don't really 'see' them, and understand them less. Whilst the Ministerial Advisory Group's experience relates principally to Northern Ireland, the new policy should be aware that in certain places a relatively low level of value is placed on built and natural heritage.

Heritage needs to be used to be valued. It is insufficient to "protect" heritage. Consider the evocative title of the seminal work by Sherban Cantacuzino "New Uses for Old Buildings". It is the **uses** that give value.

3.3 How do we make sure that new architecture understands and responds to its cultural and historic context?

Designers of new architecture and built environment have not sat there enough. Recent designs for the revitalisation of a public space showed that it was on budget and on timetable. Sadly when you went out to sit there (as we did during the public consultation period) it was clear that the designers themselves had never closed the street and sat there as we did. It was freezing and windy; there were no active uses planned. Once we became active the space worked very well. All that took us two hours; we met lots of people, got lots of feedback and used the existing place well, leaving it improved from our visit. No response to the reality of the place had been evident in the proposed design. The proposed design missed the point. This policy is about getting real with places.

Architecture students need substantially more training and action learning as described above in 'reading'/understanding cultural context and how to design within this sensitively; the policy could include guidelines that recognise this need as further creative opportunities for education and practical experience.

3.4 Are there characteristics in older buildings and places that are valued which are lacking in new buildings and places? What should the design of new places learn from the best of the past?

New buildings can never match old ones for patina or history, and reproductions and pastiche will rarely be as good as the originals they are mimicking (though a few towns like Chester have some splendid Victorian buildings that may be even more exciting than their models). So there should be a presumption in favour of retaining and adapting before building new. When something is built new it needs to be of the highest quality and extremely adaptable. As for what they can learn from older buildings - individual character, ornamentation, storytelling, local materials, detail, and humour - the list is endless.

Older buildings and places have much to teach – their continuing presence indicates sustainability and analysis of their management and use can also teach the value of adaptability to changing external circumstances and contexts.

There has been a habit to stereotype and box things up. The percentage for art is a great example. Art has been seen as something on which to spend 2% (often as an add-on at the end) and is perceived not as a way of thinking or doing but as an object. So art (of all things) is put in a box. The Treasury Green Book is hugely encouraging in how to get the best value for money, but most of the good bits are never read. Managers and administrators go straight to the formulas for economic appraisals and are not reading the inspirational bits. Architects and designers can quote the inspiring bits and insist that these are used from the very inception of proposals (which may or may not involve "projects") to insist that a more radical approach is taken. Some inspirational phrases in the Green Book follow.

HM Treasury Green Book 2011

- it's about activities – not just projects;
- greatest benefits to society;
- other approaches (including radical options);
- vary the time and scale of activities;
- change capital and recurrent expenditure;
- consulting early;
- carrying out pilot studies and ;
- building in flexibility from the start.

3.5 What is the role for new technologies in conservation to enable older buildings to meet modern needs and to be adapted with less impact on their historic features?

A lot more research needs to be done on the impact of insulation and air tightness on older buildings. Technologies should be reversible where possible and any changes need to be monitored. We can always learn too from how materials were used in the past.

Every use is different; matching use and building is a design skill that should be used early in the process of assessing the use and the building. Trying things out is good. Temporary uses can help to define a suitable fit which demands least change and still gets benefit for the users, the building and visitors.

One of the difficulties for old buildings during much of the 20th century has been the application of new technologies inappropriately – causing significant technical and performance problems. The drive to retrofitting old buildings for greater energy efficiency raises concern that past lessons have not been learnt. Use of modern, impervious insulating materials as a lining on the inner face of solid walls, for example, seems counter intuitive and may well create future construction defects. Excellent research has been undertaken by SPAB on the energy efficiency of old buildings – minus the contemporary impervious dry linings. One significant drawback of the current drive to insulate internally is loss of original historic detail.

3.6 What other recommendations would you like to make relating to this particular theme?

Cultural heritage is not just buildings and places. It is activities (as pointed out in HM Treasury Green Book). It is short and long term cultural heritage. It is about how we use places as much as what we build. It is about capturing the cultural passions and ensuring that designers are aware of these, have experienced them and design for these opportunities. The greatest skill of the designer is in the brain and thinking but this is often unrecognised and designers are thought of as people who draw and get things made. The greatest skill of the artist is also in the brain but public and government perception is that it is in the hands of the sculptor, the voice of the actor or the feet of the dancer. The brains of the designers and the artists must be

celebrated and given permissions (and commissions) to be involved from the conception of the change that is needed,

4. Promoting education, outreach and skills

The review will consider the potential contributions of built environment education to a broad and balanced education both as a cultural subject in its own right and as a way of teaching other subjects. Public outreach and skilling-up will also be considered.

4.1 What is the potential contribution of built environment education at primary and secondary school level, both as a cultural subject in its own right and as a way of teaching STEM (science, technology, engineering and maths) and other subjects?

This should be by action learning. Children who have used available technology to measure the speed of traffic outside school or home will have an opinion on the subject that will never diminish. Children who have handled building materials and tools early will develop a whole different view of a building. Children who have excavated on an archaeological dig respect their origins and the origins of other people. Children who have cleaned the classroom or the school grounds or the river or the street outside have a lifetime view of litter and behaviour. Appropriate software is available to allow these things to happen within all the regulatory boundaries of health, safety, insurance and risk assessments.

Interactive workshops for primary and second level children can raise their visual awareness of the heritage in the world around them.

A Northern Ireland example can be cited which uses the positive dialogue inquiry process of 'Appreciative Inquiry' as a highly successful method of engagement. The Walled City Partnership engages young people (and adults) in greater visual awareness and understanding of their environment through simple interactive activities - particularly drawing in the field - but also talking, walking, drama, poetry and storytelling. These activities draw out their existing knowledge/experiences, expand thinking, and develop capacity to express opinions, broaden awareness and develop creative skills.

Walled City Partnership has taken the opportunity to invite P3 teachers, parents and learning group leaders during autumn 2013 as part of the Derry~Londonderry UK City of Culture 2013 programme. www.seeingproject.co.uk This online learning resource and archive gallery offers a full range of explanatory video clips, lesson plans and supplementary resource materials for workshops designed for 7 year olds. Our experience has been that children absolutely love this and we've had extremely positive feedback from teachers involved too.

Walled City Partnership's 'Taste of Traditional Building Skills' programme is a further example of innovative educational practice in Built Environment skills development – this is a series of half day workshops on high calibre heritage repair contracts offering

mixed clusters of second/third level students, construction professionals, and trades people an opportunity to visit heritage repair contracts, meet the range of professionals and trades people involved in a heritage repair contract, see specialist subcontractors at work as well as gaining a little hands on experience. This is intended to whet the appetite of participants to engage in more concentrated heritage training elsewhere.

Education is for all – and goes well beyond the traditional school age groups....
Lifelong learning is an attainable goal!

4.2 What is the role of architecture and the built environment in enabling a better public understanding of issues related to sustainability and the environment?

Designers can encourage doing things differently, asking why that fence is there or why a single function car park can take up so much room and lie so empty for so many hours out of 168 per week in the city centre. Why can it not accommodate tents and events for homeless people every night and become a great place? Total place involvement by architects and designers is needed. These things, when designed as part of normal civic stewardship give sustainable solutions to built environment "problems" which are usually created by single function thinking in the past but whose software can be changed now - literally overnight - by carefully designing and aligning public habits, practices, policies and legislation to achieve the good as well as through trying to avoid the bad.

4.3 How can high standards of design be achieved and promoted through neighbourhood plans?

One neighbourhood plan included a neighbourhood handbook – constantly changing. The handbook included the lightest but most frequent touch of a totally committed professional who was constantly available (when asked) to give advice for years and years beyond the publication of the plan. Most plans have 18 hardware proposals and two software ideas. This balance needs to change. Software (stolen from the computer industry when they stole our word architecture) is the definition of today in each place. It is easily and cheaply changed, the glitches can be identified and modifications made (consider how many software updates your computer receives every month). The software of the place is the future of the architecture policy.

4.4 How can we better ensure that awareness and support of high standards of design are shared among all the professions concerned with architecture, the built environment, and quality places?

Use "collegiality" which acknowledges and respects the independence of everybody and also the benefits of collaboration as appropriate in leadership and in support. The migrating flock of geese travels in V-formation across vast oceans. Each bird is independent but they all want to go to the same place. There is always a leader, but it is not always the same one; it changes organically according to circumstances. The leader cannot fly without the support of the others and the birds, flying together are a measured 70% more efficient using the collegiate model

than flying alone. Flying alone, they just wouldn't make it across. If one bird goes down, two go down with it to help to form a V to get up and rejoin the flock.

The policy should specifically help the various construction related professions and their organisations to acknowledge that none of us has all the answers. It is only by collaborative working that design professionals can influence those without a design background.

Architects need to broaden their skills to include a clearer understanding of urban design/urbanism and a greater understanding and love of old buildings and how to work with them.

4.5 How can we ensure fair representation (gender, ethnicity, class, etc) and better preparation for those wishing to enter into higher education and the built environment professions?

Start by exciting all. Make pathways that reflect circumstances which prevailed in the early years of the professions which did not depend on universities. Learning by doing is the best learning anyway so education in practice is recommended again. The internet is a vast resource of good practice. It is universally available and does not cost anything like the university fees being charged by some institutions. Mentoring by passionate professionals is brilliant. Bureaucratic institutions can be a big waste of resources. Strategic design can link the passion to teach with the equivalent passion to learn. We need to free this up.

4.6 What other recommendations would you like to make relating to this particular theme?

Architects are not the only people who should draw every day..... the policy should find ways to encourage the skill of drawing as a wide ranging opportunity to express oneself – not least in the public consultation process.

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