Development in Urban Contexts: Methodology for Visual Assessment

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Introduction

1.   An assessment of any development must be based on evidence. The three principal evidence-based resources are:

      The Place: its geography, geometry and history
      The Proposal: its origin, appropriateness and quality
      The Planning Context: its intention, management, aspiration and exception

2.   All these require thorough analysis:

      The Place can be known through the exploration of its physical form, the understanding of its historic linkages, the experience of its seasonal change, its visual appearance, its attributes and deficiencies and how it is regarded by people in the past and present and what aspirations exist for it in the future.

      The Proposal is an imagination; something difficult to know. We do so through drawings, models and the designer's descriptions. But it must also be interrogated, put on trial and understood from a multitude of standpoints.

      The Planning Context requires understanding through: research; discovering the policy motivations be they social, political and economic; the challenges it sets; the opportunities it provides; the aspirations it embodies and; the opportunities for it to support the exceptional. There are all important aspects which when applied creatively to any development, can be its making.

Skills

3.   The assessor needs certain skills - visual memory, three-dimensional imagination, professional experience, ability to encourage development and refinement and understanding the art of limitation.

4.   The experienced practitioner, whose approach and methodology is again and again understood and respected for its efficacy and good judgement by local authorities and planning inspectors, develops its authority over what is often described as subjective, and transforms it into objective fact.

High Quality

5.   If a development is not of high design quality, when proposed for a particular environment, or one which has a direct effect on heritage assets either physically, or on their setting or on important views to or from them, there is little point in taking the assessment further. Even if the intervention is small, quality is the mark of acceptability and can be represented in an understated design just as much as it can be overtly apparent in a grandiosely expressed large-scale development. It is the quality and depth of thinking behind the design which is paramount. Poor quality design should never be accepted in relation to valued contexts, if anywhere, except when it is not visible! High quality design is demanded in most policy and guidance in the U.K. A precursor to methodology, therefore, is the establishment of high design quality.

6.   Defining high quality in the abstract, is not a fruitful exercise here, but identifying whether it exists in a given design is.   Artistic interpretation and compositional detail can be subjective and indeed supporting the freedom of the designer to take creativity to its conclusion is essential.   There is, however, a baseline of quality which is measurable and objective and indeed proven by consensus.

7.   There is of course also a point about appropriate quality. Each project requires a response which is appropriate to the circumstances of sensitivity or prominence. Different architects have varying levels of skill and there are indeed 'horses for courses', when it comes to a client's need to make their choice. But superficial thinking and a shallow understanding of the consequences of a design can be identified swiftly by the expert and are not acceptable anywhere and certainly not in sensitive urban environments.

Policy and Guidance

8.   While a project must respect certain local planning policies, which it is essential to know and understand, they need to be tempered to the circumstances or exceeded in their aspirations. There is usually no shortage of them.

9.   Most Environmental Impact Assessments require us to 'identify, describe and assess in an appropriate manner, in the light of each individual case, the direct and indirect effects of a project on human beings and their interaction with material assets and cultural heritage'.

10.   National Planning legislation will require there to be a presumption for the retention of protected buildings and designated heritage assets and the preservation or enhancement of their character or appearance, their setting and views affecting them. Development in heritage areas should aim to enhance either by better revealing an asset or by high quality sensitive design.

11.   The cultural heritage, represented by established townscape, embraces history, archaeology, architecture and urban design and includes aspects not limited to material and economic value but

extends them to human activities, ideas and spiritual and intellectual attitudes. It can legitimately be seen as a subject area which includes - human perception, emotional response and the deep meaning which people attach to the visual and built environment around them.

12.   In an urban situation, a prominent or sensitively positioned building should always be designed to enhance heritage assets, their settings and the townscape to which they relate. Tall buildings need always to be of high design quality and in the hands of a designer capable of achieving such quality. Adding fabric to the urban scene is a positive thing. Any new tall building should be in an appropriate location, should be of first class design quality in its own right and should enhance the qualities of its immediate location and wider setting. This would generally give rise, therefore, to beneficial effects.

13.   Sensitive modern design can enhance the historic context. New designs can often appear in contrast to their context yet their high quality design approach can be shown to provide a level of relationship and harmony such that both the old and the new enhance each other's appearance.

14.   Heritage practice in the U.K includes a fundamentally important approach to analysing cultural values. This approach is as valid for the analysis of proposed new environments as it is for existing historic ones. The 'values' approach introduces the idea of a four-fold approach, separating out – evidential, historic, aesthetic and communal qualities. These qualities can be interpreted to effect a broader understanding through analysis, i.e.:

1. Evidential: physicality, materiality, purpose, size, origin etc.

2. Historical: relationship to time, seasonal, variety of use, pattern of use etc.

3. Aesthetic: design, appreciation, nostalgia, emotional response, raising of the spirit etc.

4. Communal: a shared emblem, sense of place, meaning, identification, ego etc.

This value system can assist in setting criteria for design performance and analysis.

15.   Design quality should be central to planning decisions. It is possible to develop criteria by which a design can be judged for its quality. It is necessary to dispel the belief that architectural quality is merely subjective.

16.   The U.K has a considerable body of advice and formulation of criteria for assessing change in the built environment and in relation to heritage assets. Some is, however, uncoordinated and leaves the practitioner to identify the appropriate criteria to suit the nature of the particular project. It is also appropriate for each practitioner to develop their own criteria for assessment. To develop a 'box ticking' exercise based on all, or even a selection of the policy and guidance available, would be to provide a confused and unnecessarily lengthy result.

17. A heritage asset is one which has 'a degree of significance meriting consideration in planning decisions' or one which 'holds meaning for society over and above its functional utility'. It is important in decision-making to measure the level of significance of heritage assets which may be affected by development. This enables the effect, of an intervention through development, to be considered in proportion to it.

Setting

18. The definition of the 'setting' of a heritage asset remains ambiguous, though simply put it is 'the surroundings in which a heritage asset is experienced'. Any development or change capable of affecting the significance of a heritage asset or people's experience of it, however, can be considered as falling within its setting.

19. While setting is influenced by more factors than just the visual, such as noise, dust and vibration, the setting may change as an asset and its surroundings evolve or as understanding of the asset's influence over an area improves. An important concept is the harm or loss, development proposals can cause, of designated assets or elements of them and whether or not an intervention affects the designated asset 'as a whole'. In relation to visual assessment this concept is helpful. It clarifies how to consider effects on settings in regard to those designated assets which are areas, such as World Heritage Sites or Conservation Areas. For instance, there may be an impact on a setting, but key for the decision maker is to what extent does it impact on the area. Does it affect it 'as a whole', or does it affect it in part, or momentarily or just in one particular view of, from or through the asset. Whether or not the impact on the asset is in part or 'as a whole', will not necessarily constitute harm but considering the impact in this way can inform the decision maker whether the impact is fundamental to the setting as a whole or not. This is also informative about whether an intervention, making some impact, actually changes the setting of an asset or not.

Planning the Assessment

20. While it is easy to identify the immediate context of a development proposal, and assess its effects, larger scale development will of course have an impact on a much wider area. Studying from where a development might be visible, either in glimpsed townscape views, focussed vistas, from broad open spaces or in relation to the views of designated heritage assets, is an important exercise from the start of any project. There is also little use in assessing a proposal only at the point when its form has been decided. Continual assessment during the early design development will help to determine its height and form. It should be used, in the first instance, therefore, as a tool.

21. The assessor needs a good map, knowledge of where there are heritage assets and public spaces, and mobility to experience and explore the particular built environment efficiently. Visual assessment cannot solely be a desktop exercise with a few computer generated images. It is exploratory and there are usually many surprises in such ventures. It is possible to place a light, at the proposed height of a

development, into a computer model of a city or urban area and allow it to cast shadows across a plane set at 1.6 meters (eye level). Where the shadow is not cast, is where a view of this development is possible. This is often called a 'zone of visual influence'. Usually, trees are inaccurately depicted in computer models, and often a visually influenced area might not have the calibre of an urban view of significance.

22.   There is no substitute for actually doing the fieldwork to discover the appropriate view places. Once viewing places are established it is important to choose a relevant viewpoint position which both typifies the experience from an area and provides the maximum exposure or maximum conjunction which the development will have with it.

23.   After assembling a catalogue of viewpoints and identifying the likely performance of a development in each of the views, the designer can progress the design knowing what qualities will make it either enhancing or harmless in relation to its degree of impact. Those circumstances where the sensitivity of the place limits the ambitions of the development by virtue of dominance, overbearing or an unacceptable change of focus, are usually the viewpoints which determine its maximum height.

24.   It is important to understand what is there in the view, how it varies with the seasons and time of day, how it is used and enjoyed by people, and what historic relevance individual objects within have. Also what it is that makes it beautiful, well composed, consistent or diverse or what particular landmarks dominate and indeed what is not so good and warrants improvement. And finally what makes it meaningful to people, the value they give it and why. This phase of the study then represents a 'baseline' consideration. It involves much more than can be captured in a photograph.

Photography and Representation

25.   The use of photography to construct accurate visual representations (AVRs) of a development is common practice in the U.K and has been refined through the work of the London View Management Framework (LVMF). Set out in the LVMF is a clear methodology which will be adopted nationally. While it represents state of the art technology, it remains with shortcomings. No photograph can represent the real thing. Assessments must never be based on the AVR or the photograph. They must result from the real life, 'real-time' experience on site, where our eyes adjust, zoom-in and zoom-out at will and our heads, indeed our whole bodies move in fine adjustment. The natural measurements of distance between objects are subconscious but possible in real life because we experience townscapes spatially, in movement and with our memory. The photograph has no depth, no movement and by virtue of its small size, usually bound into a document, cannot begin to compete with the real experience.

26.   A 50 degree field of view is the optimum field of view, representing best what the static eye experiences and best used for projects in open landscapes. In townscape views it cuts out too much of the context. In such views it is the townscape context, i.e. setting, against which any development is assessed. It helps, therefore, to have the context against which the assessment is made, shown in the

photograph, so that the associated words have some kind of meaning. A 68 – 72 degree field of view is, therefore, commonly used. Held at a prescribed distance from the eyes this does represent an accurate view. Held in another position it may make the subject appear further away than in reality. A cropped version of the image, however, can return it to a 50 degree field of view without a loss of accuracy.

Visual Phenomena

27. It has been rightly suggested that vertical elements in a view appear particularly prominent, even elongated, in the real world. Experiments with Renaissance paintings of landscapes, related to photographs of the real view, show that the painter sub-consciously represented such elements by extending the vertical elements. While this is a fact, actual height is not as important in views as relative heights. The AVR is highly accurate in relative height terms.

28. A further dilemma is the turning of individual photographic images into a 'panorama'. There are computer-aided facilities which accurately join up any number of photographs to form a panorama. The result, however, is to portray a visual image in two dimensions which the eye cannot reconcile with the three-dimensional real view. Only if the image can be curved around the eye of the observer can it bear upon reality. Naturally it needs to be a very large image to achieve this. The LVMF method is to standardise the so called panoramas by using either 3 or 4 photographs, each with a 40º field of view, placed with a small gap between them, to provide a 120º or 165º cumulative field of view.

29. The limitations of AVRs are particularly acute in relation to the kinetic effect. I have already mentioned that we experience townscapes in space, movement and memory. To assess an impact, there is no substitute for being on site and using the AVRs as a tool with which to interpolate the effect of an impact in movement. Some decision makers are very good at doing this in a thorough manner, more planning officers invariably have insufficient time to do this properly and planning committee members hardly ever bother. A weakness, therefore, in any method is the need to be both thorough and economical in producing AVRs, which are very expensive. This means that we must show the 'worst case' views, i.e. views of maximum exposure to the development, and in doing so cannot adequately illustrate the kinetic and sometimes fleeting glimpse of the impact. One must, therefore, emphasise these phenomena through the written word of the assessment.

Written Assessments

30. The written word is the main means of providing the decision maker with sufficient information about the impact and qualities of a development. I believe the written word and the use of the AVRs on site are the only way of setting out the facts which a decision maker needs. We are forced in Environment Statements for instance to give each view studied, an impact rating. These can be tabulated and used statistically, which is why I avoid them if I can. They arise from the written statements and are inadequate as shorthand. These are categorised in quantum and quality. The quantitative can be

rated at substantial, moderate, slight or no change; the qualitative at beneficial, adverse or neutral. These words are often 'abused' by the unenlightened. For instance the phrase 'substantially beneficial' is often used which, though adequate English, misses the subtleties of the assessment which are best found in the written assessments. An assessment can be quantitatively substantial and beneficial qualitatively. That can be an accurate assessment, but it is subtly different to one which is substantially beneficial It is necessary to introduce the 'neutral' rating for the qualitative realm, just as neutral has become common practice in rating a contribution or effect on character and appearance. In large projects or tall buildings I have also sometimes used the term 'adverse mitigated', meaning that it is only the quality of design which makes an otherwise adverse impact acceptable. If you expand the tabulated statistics further, to be able more accurately to reflect a fair assessment, you end up with the written assessments in any case. In my view there is no adequate shorthand for longhand informative assessments.

31. Should these assessments be solely objective? Well, they should certainly be objective, but in my view there is value in also exploring what most people consider to be subjective. This needs to be differentiated and explained in the methodology. Subjective commentary can provide a particular opinion with which commentators can freely take issue, the important point being that it can raise the very issues which will 'colour' the opinion of the decision maker. It will only be of value, however, if it is a subjective opinion made by an experienced professional in the field, or one which is reached through the consensus of an informed group.

32. In my assessments, I make a clear distinction between:
i) a description of the existing view, drawing out its relevant features, composition and historic importance;
ii) a description of how the development will change the view;
iii) the effect of that change, which includes some subjective aspects and;
iv) a statement giving clear reasons why the impact of the development will give rise to a 'substantial' or 'slight' quantitative impact and why it may be beneficial or adverse.

33. As I have mentioned before, the judgements employed in reaching the impact assessment conclusions are based not only on the quality of the design or on the way the development may change a townscape scene, but also on the planning intentions and aspirations for the site which might be the subject of a core strategy or site-specific supplementary planning guidance. I do not believe visual assessments can be fairly and fruitfully undertaken in the abstract or absent from intentions derived from the democratic process and public consultation.

34. It is however, for the decision maker to make a judgement with access to all relevant factors, visual assessment being one of many.

Views of Heritage Assets and Setting

35.   The consideration of visual effects when a new development is proposed in direct relation with a designated heritage asset or as part of its immediate setting is a relatively simple matter. It will have been the designer's prime consideration in formulating the design and many examples exist, where it has been achieved with skill and imagination.

36.   Visual assessment is more complex, however, where a conjunction between a heritage asset and the development takes place, which is not direct and which may only affect a single view of the asset. This is not necessarily a setting issue but concerns the assessment of a singular circumstance in the setting of one view. Such a conjunction can be a limitation to the height of the development. There are, however, many precedents where a high quality design has been accepted as a backdrop to highly graded designated heritage assets. What is important here is that the conjunction between the two objects is visually stimulating and each complements the other.

37.   It may be true that my own examples exemplify the very special circumstances of London. It is also true, however, that there are principles here, of good design which is able to overcoming barriers to achieving an improved environment for the beneficial future of an urban area. At this point it would seem helpful to explore a concrete proposition which embodies the formulation of assessments on setting and its conceptual basis.

Setting of Heritage Assets: Westminster World Heritage Site

38.   I have for some while been involved in the study of three separate proposals for high buildings at Vauxhall, in London, where both the regional and local planning authorities foresee a regenerative cluster of high buildings being built. It is useful, in the context of this paper, to examine my approach to these projects in relation to the Westminster World Heritage Site (WHS) in order to illustrate my views on setting.

39.   The WHS principally consists of:

i. The Palace of Westminster
ii. Westminster Abbey and ancillary buildings
iii. St. Margaret's Church

40.   These buildings are grouped, under the WHS designation, into two distinct parts with Abingdon Street separating them.

41.   In my assessments, the above mentioned buildings must first be fully reviewed individually and interpreted in their capacity as listed or protected buildings. The policy considerations for the WHS were also interpreted, while the effect on views into and out of Westminster Abbey and Parliament

Square Conservation Area were also considered. The visual impacts of developments at Vauxhall on the WHS were then considered.

The Essential Setting of the WHS

42. The developments in Vauxhall do not affect the essential setting of the WHS, in my view, but do affect, to a marginal degree, the setting of certain views in close relation to it. In particular, views from Parliament Square. The policies can allow for development which affects the setting when weighed against the benefit of that development in a proportionate way. It may be that the proposed developments will be seen from the setting but will not change or harm that setting, being some distance away. The development may not constitute, therefore, a change within the essential setting of the designated asset.

43. While a tall building can have an impact on certain aspects of the setting it does not mean that by being visible from within the setting, causes it to become a part of that setting. It is possible, I believe, to agree a boundary to the essential setting of a heritage asset if one accepts that views from it, over it, through it, and alongside it, are a different matter compared to a direct change proposed to its essential setting.

44. In analysing the essential setting of the WHS one is concerned with its visible setting, i.e. that which can be seen and experienced in combination with it. It could of course be said that the Westminster WHS's setting is London as a whole or central London or the governmental centre within London. These, however, are abstract concepts which do not assist in the resolution of planning matters. The definition of setting that this study is concerned with is that essential group of buildings and spaces which bear upon the human senses as experienced spatially, in movement and in memory, while in the presence of the subject element (in this case the Westminster WHS). I include, therefore, all those buildings, which form a group with it, enclose open spaces which are adjacent to it, and which form important approaches to it. Hungerford Bridge, to the north, and Lambeth Bridge, to the south, are natural boundaries to the river aspect of the setting notwithstanding the fact that views of the WHS are possible from a greater distance. Where a heritage asset can be seen from, however, is not necessarily part of its setting. For example, though the Palace of Westminster is visible from Parliament Hill on Hampstead Heath, no part of the Heath is considered to be part of its setting.

45. The proposals for the development at Vauxhall will, to some extent, be visible from within the WHS and from Westminster Bridge, alongside the WHS. They will also be visible from Whitehall, looking towards Parliament Square, and from Parliament Square when viewed between the two parts of the WHS. Where distant development is visible, it may affect the setting of a particular view while not affecting the essential setting itself. Even Millbank Tower, a Grade II listed 20th century building much closer to the WHS, does not, in my view, affect the essential setting but it does affect the setting of views which include it. Looking in the opposite direction, the Shell Tower has a similar effect and future development proposed around it needs similar consideration.

46.   The current UK wording of the guidance on setting leads me to the view that development at Vauxhall cannot be considered as part of the setting of the Westminster WHS but that high buildings there must be assessed on the basis of how they affect the setting of particular views from it, through it, alongside it or over it. The immediate and definable setting, therefore, is not at risk because of high buildings proposed at Vauxhall. What needs to be assessed is not the effect on the essential setting but on the setting of views from various positions. This is what has informed the basis for my visual impact assessments for tall buildings at Vauxhall and what should inform other commentators such as UNESCO, who mistakenly believe the WHS to be at risk.

Conclusion

47.   Although this paper is titled 'Methodology for Visual Assessment', it cannot be established as a laid down, fixed process. This is because no one set of criteria fits all circumstances. The paper aims to show that a general approach is needed on which each practitioner can base their individual assessment methodology for the particular circumstances that are given. Firm criteria are not, therefore, established here. What I have attempted to show is how criteria can be used in a selective way to fit the particular circumstances. It is important that the methodology is clearly laid out and every effort made to ensure that it is read. The assessment, after all, is there to draw out all the facts about a development so that they can be fully debated, understood and a balanced judgement made by the decision-maker.

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Richard Coleman is an architect, and a townscape and heritage consultant. He is a highly respected adviser on proposed architectural designs which affect historic environments. He has long promoted the view that design quality, authenticity and building craftsmanship resolves these issues rather than repeating historic styles. His consultancy, Citydesigner, provides developers and design teams with support for their proposals through careful analysis of both existing environments and imagined environments and design assessments during design development.

Following architectural practice, he ran the executive of the Royal Fine Art Commission (the precursor to CABE) giving advice on visual matters concerning nationally important projects for 13 years. As a consultant for over 15 years, Richard has contributed to many high profile projects such as the Gherkin and the Merryll Lynch HQ, both in the City of London. He has advised St Paul's Cathedral, the Tower of London and the Tate Gallery and originated and later revised, the London View Management Framework for both the Mayor's of London.

Relevant local projects include: Shell Centre Lambeth with Arup Associates; Founders Court Lambeth with Farrells; Texaco Site Vauxhall with MAKE; Arundel Great Court, Westminster with Wilkinson Eyre

and Horden Cherry Lee; South Lambeth Road Student Tower Lambeth with Feilden Clegg Bradley; Victoria Nova with KPF/PLP; 30 Finsbury Square with Eric Parry.

Other projects: Mildmay Hospital Tower Hamlets with Feilden Clegg Bradley; Holburne Museum Extension Bath with Eric Parry Architects; Kings Place Islington with Dixon Jones; Winchester Town Centre with Allies and Morrison.

Various multiple projects with - John McAslan, Wilkinson Eyre, David Chipperfield, Eric Parry, CZWG, Benson Forsyth, KPF, PLP , Horden Cherry Lee, MAKE, Farrells, Foster and Partners, Allies and Morrison, Fletcher Priest, Hamiltons, Squire and Partners, Lynch Architects, Allford Hall Monaghan Morris, Hopkins & Partners, Studio Egret West, Robin Partington Architects, Assael Architecture.

He is a member of RIBA, registered with ARB and a CABE Building Environment Expert. He is also Deputy Chairman of the 82 year old UK Architecture Club, Chairman of World Architecture News (WAN), an internet news channel with the largest readership and the largest program of architectural awards internationally, and a director of World Cities Network Ltd.