148

URBAN DESIGN

Autumn 2018
Urban Design Group Journal
ISSN 1750 712X

THE VALUE OF DESIGN REVIEW

URBAN DESIGN GROUP

London: Reviewing Design Review

Matthew Carmona, Wendy Clarke and Valentina Giordano report on recent research findings

1

2

Design review in London has a long history as a government-run and funded activity focused on the peer review of major projects. Today's design review practice follows many of the practices first established by the Royal Fine Arts Commission created in 1924, suitably adapted by its successor, the Commission for Architecture and the Built Environment (CABE) after 1999. CABE developed a robust and active programme of design review, with a strong focus on London where approaching half of its design review work was focussed. Their publication, *Design Review, Principles and Practice* (2009) became the guidebook for design review nationally, prescribing it to be: independent, expert, multidisciplinary, accountable, transparent, proportionate, timely, advisory, objective and accessible.

With the removal of public funding for CABE in 2011, for the first time in 90 years there was no direct government sponsorship for, or provision of, design review services. However, in lieu of financial support, the government strongly endorsed the use of design review in the 2012 *National Planning Policy Framework* (NPPF) in the hope that this would kick start a new market for design review services across England.

Judged solely by the amount of design review taking place, this has been a success, most notably in London where there are now around 30 formal panels operating across the city, at different scales, run by different providers – public, private and not-for-profit. Most are directly funded by a charge levied for the service by local planning authorities, reflecting the fact that the system is now largely paid for by private developers. At the same time very significant gaps remain in the coverage of design review across the capital, with some London boroughs conducting monthly or even twice monthly panels, and others none at all.

1 Merton, London: Housing modified to show a well-defined street line. The panel judged that it had previously failed to create a coherent street scene
2 The final scheme reduced the visual impact of the large blocks further
3 Types of design review panels in London

Despite this very different landscape for design review, there has been an absence of serious research into how the new market is working. Stepping into this gap, the research report *Reviewing Design Review in London* undertaken in 2017 examines a range of design review panels and cases in London, leading to detailed findings based upon in-depth interviews with applicants, designers, panellists, and panel managers. The study provides a 360degree analysis of the diversity of design review practices across the city and of the benefits that flow from high quality, professionalised provision. This article provides a few headlines from the research.

ACHIEVING BETTER DESIGN AND PLACE-MAKING

Over the years design review has generated strong but mixed feelings amongst protagonists. Today, whether managing, commissioning, serving on, or presenting to panels in London, there is a common and widely shared aspiration that design review will lead to better design and place-making than would otherwise be achieved without it. With this in mind, those interviewed were generally positive about the purpose and value of design review, accepting that for a modest cost

the process did improve design outcomes.

Benefits are felt by all parties and underpin a solid case for investing in the process. Whilst the charges levied for design review varied significantly (on average £3,670 in London), they were never seen by applicants as a barrier and were even welcomed by developers when they led to a smoother and more streamlined route through the planning process. Most felt that the costs associated with design review represent value for money.

AN INDEPENDENT VOICE BUT NOT A PERIPHERAL ONE

Despite being funded by applicants, panels need to be an independent voice, capable of providing impartial design advice, with their role and status made clear. The absence of demonstrable independence can quickly undermine trust in the process, as has sometimes happened in the new market for design review services. As a minimum this should require that, even if a provider of a design review service is paid directly by an applicant, the client for the review remains the public authority.

Panels also need to be more explicit about their conflict of interest provisions, including being clear with applicants (as well as panellists) about how such matters are managed.

The danger of independence is that design review can be seen as a peripheral activity. In fact design review works best when its role in relation to wider planning and design processes is properly established and well understood. To achieve this, consistent criteria are required for determining which projects should be subject to design review, for example all major projects and others of local or city-wide significance.

The most effective borough panels – those whose advice has the greatest impact –are the ones that have managed to get and retain the confidence of both planning case officers and the planning committee. This requires the design review panel to have:

- a good understanding and respect for the local policy context, development challenges and planning process;
- an effective dialogue with the planning committee and key officers that goes beyond the reviews themselves; and,
- a high status when feeding panel views into decision-making.

It is also important to establish from the start the issues that are within or beyond the scope of the design review process. Panels should take a broad view of design that includes place-making and which extends across spatial scales from very large-scale urban design concerns to the internal arrangements of buildings; but this does not mean questioning every planning matter such as the percentage of affordable housing.

MANAGING DESIGN REVIEW

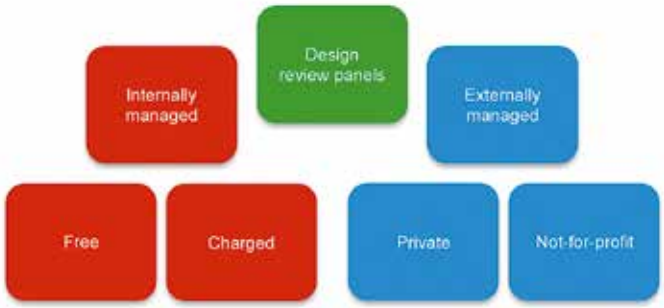
In London, design review panels follow one of four models: internally managed, free or charged; and externally managed, private or not-for-profit. There was no evidence that any one of these four approaches is intrinsically superior to the others. If properly resourced, all are capable of delivering excellent design review services.

In this regard fees for design review support a professionalisation of the service and a greater consistency in the quality of provision, to the great benefit of all parties. Fees also reduce or eliminate the drain on local authority resources and can even contribute to securing greater in-house design expertise through any excess funds generated.

The use of *ad hoc* design review by boroughs without dedicated panels of their own was widely considered a sub-standard model. Such practices lead to a lack of consistency in panel membership and to an associated lack of local contextual knowledge amongst panel members.

GETTING THE RIGHT PANEL

The most important factor to get right in design review is the constitution of the panel. The research demonstrated the need for a combination of:



3

- panel members with a recognised professional standing and expertise;
- local knowledge and commitment;
- a broad spread of inter-disciplinary expertise across the panel; and,
- a diversity of panel members drawn from an inclusive recruitment process.

Good design review comes down to the panel members being open-minded and constructive in their criticism. For example, panellists with very fixed stylistic views should be avoided in favour of those with a more open and pluralistic attitude to architectural design.

THE JOURNEY THROUGH REVIEW

There is no single correct mode of operating panels, and they frequently adopt different practices for very good reason. That said, some practices continue to play into long-held negative perceptions about the process. These can be avoided by focussing more effort on a number

BEST PRACTICE PRINCIPLES FOR CONDUCTING DESIGN REVIEW

1. Consistent panel membership across successive reviews on large schemes (the absence of which can significantly undermine the credibility of the process)
2. Panels that are not larger than they need to be (smaller panels were consistently regarded as more effective)
3. Comprehensive briefing of the panel prior to review regarding relevant policy, the site, ownership constraints, and the planning process
4. A site visit conducted prior to the first design review on a project
5. A presentation by the design team that follows clearly enforced time limits to allow adequate time for the subsequent discussion
6. A carefully structured review discussion, following a flexible checklist of topics circulated in advance (to allow applicants to prepare in advance and ensure a comprehensive coverage of subject matter on the day)
7. A transition in topics across successive reviews for large projects, from broad strategic issues to the detail design, while avoiding revisiting settled issues
8. Careful use of language during reviews, avoiding the use of unduly negative language or unsubstantiated comments that can overshadow constructive engagement
9. Avoid getting bogged down in 'non-design' matters, such as the percentage of affordable housing
10. Panel members with a sensibility to the viability constraints affecting schemes
11. Avoidance of any attempt to negotiate on behalf of the local authority
12. Discouraging panel members from attempting to design projects themselves or recommending alternative designers.

4

of consistently important characteristics for successful design review.

An optimum journey through design review for large projects would typically involve three visits at key stages, while smaller projects requiring a one-off design review should be seen at a mid-way stage when it is not too late to make serious changes, if required.

CLOSING THE LOOP

Following the panel comes the letter or report. Many panels adopt the standard that the report should be provided within ten working days of the review. In this, clear recommendations should proceed in a hierarchy from fundamental concerns to the 'nice to have'.

Design teams then need to demonstrate how they have made a considered and intelligent response to the recommendations of panels. This is best done by requiring a section in the Design and Access Statement that sets out publicly and formally how they have responded to the panel. Similarly, when case officers, planning committees and other regulators choose to depart from an explicit recommendation of a design review panel, a careful justification should be incorporated in the officer's report and/or decision letter in order to justify this.

OPENING UP THE PROCESS

A downside of the fragmentation and commercialisation of design review services after 2011 has been the absence of a mechanism to share good practice. Today, despite most still signing up to the original CABE principles in *Design Review, Principles and Practice* (now firmly endorsed by the Mayor of London in his own *London Quality Review Charter*), the majority of panels are clearly not 'transparent' or 'accessible'.

In London, some panel hearings are far more open than others, without obvious damage to their processes, levels of engagement or reputation, which suggested that a greater degree of transparency could be the norm. If design review is to be seen to be demonstrably conducted in the public interest, then the somewhat closed nature of the process may need to be reversed.

Being less secretive and better at sharing experiences and practices between panels and across the sector is essential. A learning culture should begin by establishing robust feedback mechanisms on how local design review practices are operating. This is a neglected aspect of most design review services which could encompass feedback:

- from service users to managers of design review on their experience;
- to the panel members on how their recommendations are being used and on the effectiveness of the service; and,
- to the public about design review services, about the role of design review and its impact.

GETTING ALL THE DUCKS IN A ROW

The report *Reviewing Design Review in London* demonstrates a clear range of positive impacts from design review. But despite the benefits, as an approach to improving design quality, design review will always have its limitations. It can never, for example, replace the on-going dialogue that it is possible to have with a permanent design advisor within a planning or highways authority. The research suggested that in-house design advice and independent design review are most effective when they operate together.

The recommendations of panels are also only as good as the determination of all parties to see them implemented. Ultimately the success of design review is dependent on:

- the applicant and design team being willing to engage positively with the process and address the concerns of the panel
- the public sector being willing to deny the necessary permissions (or funding) unless and until the concerns of the panel have been addressed
- failure to attend design review when invited being treated as a material consideration in the planning process, and
- a continued focus on delivering design quality by the development team and planning authority even after the necessary regulatory gateways have been passed.

Getting all these ducks in a row is not easy, but it is possible. The diversity of practice across London offers plenty of lessons about how. ●

Professor Matthew Carmona, Wendy Clarke and Valentina Giordano, The Bartlett, University College London

Reviewing Design Review in London is available on the Place Alliance website http://placealliance.org.uk/

THE POTENTIAL BENEFITS OF DESIGN REVIEW

- Better designed projects and places
- Culture change locally through which better design is seen as the norm
- A more collaborative process
- More empowered designers
- A more intelligent design process (benefitting from informed independent critique)
- Greater certainty in the development process
- A faster formal planning process
- Potential endorsement for the promoters of more challenging projects
- Support for internal design capacity within local authorities (where it exists)
- Help to fill design skills gaps in local authorities
- Greater confidence amongst public sector decision-makers
- Learning opportunities for all involved.

4 A residential-led mixed used scheme considered by the London Legacy Development Corporation. Design review led to the appointment of a new design team to engage positively with the design review process