

- BUILDING IN CONTEXT -



The Design Guide aims to show how important it is that that new development is “built in context”, with an awareness of the issues and characteristics that make the IHCA distinctive, rather than simply applying standard formulaic design solutions.

“Building in context” is an important goal for all new development in the conservation area – whether that might be a home extension, a new building on a small infill plot, the adaptation and re-use of an historic building, a housing estate or a major mixed-use development.

BUILDING IN CONTEXT

Principles of good practice

1. All successful design solutions depend on allowing time for a thorough site analysis and careful character appraisal of the context, as well as the constraints.
2. The best buildings result from a creative dialogue between the architect, client, local planning authority and others; pre-application discussions are almost always essential.
3. Successful contextual architecture can be produced either
 - by following historic precedents closely,
 - by adapting them,
 - or by contrasting with them.
 All three are valid approaches, but each can only be successful if well-executed and if other principles of good practice are adhered to. The most appropriate solution will depend upon the condition, constraints, characteristics and assets of the site, and the skills of the designer.
4. Difficult sites should generate good architecture, and are not an excuse for not achieving it.
5. A bespoke, site-specific approach is essential. As soon as the application of a standard formula is attempted, a project is likely to fail, whether that formula consists of 'fitting in' or 'contrasting the new with the old'.
6. Whether you chose to detail in a traditional or a modern style, building in context requires a commitment to quality and careful consideration of the aspects of development form (see Chapter 2). This should inform the design and ensure the development sits comfortably within its own particular situation, without devaluing or degrading existing assets and features of significance.

BUILDING IN CONTEXT

- 3.1 At the heart of any successful building project – whether it is an extension to a house or a major development scheme covering several hectares – is an understanding of and sensitivity to context.
- 3.2 The key is to approach a design project initially with as few design preconceptions and prejudices as possible – which is different from approaching it with a clear picture of constraints and needs. The latter is essential, while the former will often result in formulaic, unimaginative and compromised schemes, which 'fit in' only superficially, if at all.
- 3.3 The right approach should be arrived at by examining the context for any proposed development in great detail and by relating the new building(s) to its surroundings through an informed character appraisal.
- 3.4 A successful project will⁸
 - Relate well to the geography and history of the place and the lie of the land
 - Sit happily in the pattern of existing development and routes through and around it
 - Respect important views
 - Respect the scale of neighbouring buildings
 - Use materials and building methods which are as high in quality as those used in existing buildings
 - Create new views and juxtapositions which add variety and texture to the setting
- 3.5 This does not imply that any one architectural approach is, by its nature, more likely to succeed than any other. On the contrary, it means that as soon as the application of a simple formula is attempted, a project is likely

to fail, whether that formula consists of ‘fitting in’ or ‘contrasting the new with the old’.

- 3.6 Design in historic areas is more often than not attacked from one of these two basic standpoints – two seemingly conflicting schools of thought. Both can produce equally harmful and unsuccessful results, if used inappropriately and without proper understanding of context. Equally, neither approach is *wrong* by its nature. Adaptability and a bespoke approach are essential to the success of both.

Learning from the past

- 3.7 Whether a ‘traditional’ or a ‘modern’ approach is taken, some kind of character appraisal process is invaluable, before decisions about design are taken.
- 3.8 We can learn a lot from the past - why are buildings where they are, for example, and why do they look like they do? Almost all locally-distinctive building traditions are rooted in common sense and evolved out of local constraints (such as available materials, particular topographical conditions, or the demand for land/resources for particular purposes, such as agriculture or industry). Properly understanding the local building vernacular, and the styles and materials that tended to be used for different sorts of buildings, can help new buildings fit in ... and just seem somehow *right*.
- 3.9 Sometimes imitation is perceived as the ‘safe’ option, whereas contemporary interpretation or adaptation is seen, quite rightly, as requiring great skill. However, poor imitation may in fact be very damaging. A ‘traditional’ design which misses the basics of scale, proportion and detailing results in a watering-down of distinctiveness; it reduces our ability to perceive and appreciate the subtleties of local distinctiveness: we begin to be unable to see the wood for the trees.

- 3.10 *Building in Context - New development in historic areas* [English Heritage/CABE 2001] identifies a number of sins, which tend to stick out like a sore thumb, showing that the ‘traditional-style’ new development hasn’t really learnt or understood any lessons from the past:

- **Random application of historic elements:** a ‘stick-on’ approach to detailing, whereby features such as quoins, string courses, chimney stacks, sash windows, or other elements of traditional architecture are applied to a building, without any real attempt to understand how (or why) they were used locally, and without any corresponding attention to the proportions of historic buildings and the local vernacular. The use of these sorts of tricks is particularly dubious when sold as a means of ‘breaking up’ an overbearing or badly proportioned elevation. *Building in Context* describes this as “the lipstick on the gorilla”...
- **Matching materials, which don’t match:** if, for example, cheap, modern, machine-made bricks are not used structurally but in panels, complete with mastic expansion joints, they do not match hand-made historic brickwork. That is just a fact. Juxtaposed against ‘the real thing’, they simply emphasise the difference between the materials and methods. Now, this can sometimes be cleverly used to advantage ... but not when the intention is to ‘match’, and rarely when combined with otherwise traditional architectural characteristics. In the conservation area, this is particularly true of stonework: we are blessed with extremely high quality natural stone and historically high standards of craftsmanship
- **‘scaling up’:** detailing large modern buildings with models taken from small historic ones, or attempting to sub-divide large volumes while retaining big floor-plates/footprints, often does no more than emphasise just how large the new building is instead of making it look similar, as is hoped;
- **‘stepping down’:** when a new tall building meets its (historic) smaller neighbour at more or less the same height, and then gets higher in steps as it moves away along the façade. This can produce a lop-sided appearance in the new building and merely emphasises the difference in height between the two. Unless done with great finesse, it does the older neighbour no favours at all.

Right: Traditional new-build houses, which are nicely proportioned and sensitively landscaped. But even these have some arbitrary details (e.g. off-the-peg fibreglass porches), which are not very locally typical.

Centre right: modern housing, which in some ways reflects the sort of scale, rhythm, gutsy detailing, bold slabs of colour/materials and plain hard landscaped spaces which often typifies the industrial environment.



Volume housebuilding can be particularly guilty of superficial application of ‘local-ish’ details or materials to otherwise standard boxes and standard layouts. Even where significant attempts have been made to tailor the design to local circumstances, this approach is rarely successful and can lead to a ‘watering down’ of how we perceive local distinctiveness.

These houses [left] are not bad looking, and their canalside setting is undeniably attractive. But canal-fronting housing is traditionally uncommon in the IHCA and the hard ‘wharfstyle’ edge is not typical of the Stroudwater Canal. They are still standard developer housetypes – with extremely deep plan forms and hence very tall roofs, which have to span that depth. They are stone faced, which is certainly locally typical, but brick window heads are far from common in the conservation area, and the combination of stone walling with clay roof tiles is also rather odd. This part of the conservation area, around Stroud, has a very strong vernacular – features such as the stone arched window heads and the shallow plan form (hence not very dominant roofs) are not impossible to reproduce (see **bottom left** and chapter title page). Attention to detail can therefore reinforce local distinctiveness, rather than erode it.



Different approaches to extensions...

Top: A traditional extension showing very careful attention to detail and beautiful craftsmanship: the extension (the last bay on the right) is almost seamless.

Above: A modern extension (not a local example) picks up on materials and quality of craftsmanship, but contrasts traditional construction with very obviously modern technology – the extension respects scale, palette of materials etc, and you can still ‘read’ the scale and character of the original building;

Left: An honest modern extension in timber frame at William’s Kitchen, Nailsworth, works along similar principles of ‘contextual contrast’.

- 3.11 It is often this kind of superficial application of ‘traditional’ details on otherwise standard, uncontextual boxes that gives “pastiche” a bad name (volume housebuilding can be particularly guilty of this). Pastiche, if done sensitively and to a high standard, is a perfectly valid design approach and it certainly has its place in the conservation area. If you do choose to build in a traditional style, it requires a commitment to quality and an extremely sensitive handling of scale and detail.

However, it is by no means the only option.

Modern architecture in context

- 3.12 Modern architecture is often resisted in historic areas (by communities as well as by planning decision-makers) because proposals often show little or no regard for the context in which they sit – eroding rather than enriching the character of the area as a result. But all contemporary architecture should not be tarred with the same brush.
- 3.13 In some contexts, a contemporary building may be less visually intrusive than one making a failed or ‘superficial’ attempt to follow historic precedents.
- 3.14 Sensitivity to context and the use of traditional materials are not incompatible with contemporary architecture. Sometimes, the juxtaposition of the historic and the modern can serve to highlight the best of both and nudge us into looking at familiar surroundings with new eyes. The key is to look at the underlying qualities of **layout, scale, appearance** and **public realm** that give the area (or building) its particular character and local distinctiveness – that broad framework will often provide potential to design and detail in an imaginative and contemporary way.

So what sort of development is most likely to be acceptable?

- 3.15 Something that fits into the local scene. The best starting point is to look at the area around your site – the shapes and proportions of the buildings; the architectural styles and materials used; the boundary treatments; the quality of traditional craftsmanship; also those small details that make your conservation area particularly attractive and distinctive.
- 3.16 This does not mean that all new buildings or extensions have to be exact replicas of past styles. The Council welcomes innovation and imagination in design - so long as the proposal is of high quality and is in character with and, ideally, enhances the conservation area. If you prefer to build in a locally typical ‘traditional’ style, then great care and skill is needed.
- 3.17 The IHCA Conservation Area Statement should give you some pointers. **VOLUMES 1 and 2** describe the history of the area and what makes it so special, and they provide guidance on the features that justify the conservation area designation. The **Management Proposals SPD**, together with this Design Guide, provides some detailed design guidance for new development.

Building in context: appraising a proposal

3.18 It is true that there is a subjective element in judgements about design quality and people often disagree about what they like. Such differences of opinion and matters of personal taste should not be allowed to obscure the fact that it is possible to arrive at opinions about design quality that are based on objective criteria.

3.19 There are many ways of doing this, but asking the following questions may help. These questions encompass both the quality of the building itself and its quality as a contribution to the urban design of the neighbourhood in which it is situated:

1 The site [LAYOUT; SCALE]

- How does the proposed building relate to the site?
- Is there a positive and imaginative response to any problems and constraints?
- Have the physical aspects of the site been considered, such as any changes in level within or beyond it?
- Are access arrangements convenient and existing routes respected?
- Can the amount of accommodation required be fitted on the site in an elegant way?

2 Wider setting [LAYOUT; SCALE]

- How does the proposal relate to its wider setting?
- Are the street pattern and grain of the surroundings respected?
- Are there changes in height between the existing and new development and if so how are they managed?
- Will the result enhance or damage the quality of the townscape?

3 Density [LAYOUT; SCALE]

- How is the density of the proposal related to that of existing and neighbouring uses?
- If there are differences, are they acceptable?

4 Impact on close views [SCALE; APPEARANCE]

- Has the impact of the building in close views been assessed?
- Is it either weak or overpowering?
- Does it respect the scale and rhythm of its neighbours?

5 Materials [APPEARANCE]

- What materials are used?
- How do they relate to those of the surrounding buildings?
- Is the quality as high?
- Are there interesting comparisons or contrasts in the use of materials?
- How will the colours work together?

6 Architecture suitable to its use [SCALE; APPEARANCE; PUBLIC REALM]

- Is the architecture of the building suitable for the uses it contains?
- Is it trying to be too grand or pretending to be more modest than it really is?

7 Composition [APPEARANCE]

- How does the architecture present itself to the viewer?
- Is there a strong composition in the pattern of solid to void/opening in the façade?
- Does the detailing of the materials show signs of careful thought or originality in the way the building is put together?

8 Public realm [PUBLIC REALM; LAYOUT]

- What contribution, if any, does the proposal make to the public realm?
- If new open space is created, is it clear that it will provide a positive benefit and have a genuine use?

9 Vistas and views [LAYOUT; SCALE; APPEARANCE]

- In the wider setting, has the impact of the building in views and vistas been considered?
- Does it make a positive or negative impact?
- Does it form an harmonious group or composition with existing buildings or features in the landscape?
- Does it distract the eye from the focus of the view and if so does it provide something better to look at?

This Building in Context Checklist is taken from *Building in Context – new development in historic areas*, published by English Heritage/CABE (2001) <http://www.building-in-context.org/documents/sheets.pdf>

- 3.20 The Building in Context Checklist may be useful as a prompt to thinking about issues connected with the **design process** and **urban design objectives**, as set out in Chapter 8. It presents some of the associated issues in a practical way, which makes the sometimes rather abstract concepts easier to grasp and easier to apply to a particular site or proposal. Use of the checklist is not compulsory or expected, but it may be helpful.

- 3.21 Stroud District Council planning authority may use the Building in Context Checklist as an aid when assessing development proposals in the conservation area, or proposals which would affect its setting.

- 3.22 The IHCA Management Proposals SPD says in guideline **IHCA-G1** that:

“proposals for development can use the Building in Context Checklist as a prompt during the design process, or as an aid/template for a design and access statement, or as part of a design and access statement to support an application, or pre-application discussion”.

[see the full guideline on page 13]

The IHCA Management Proposals SPD says in guideline IHCA-G1 that:

Proposals for development can:

- Use the Building in Context Checklist as a prompt during the design process, or as an aid/template for a design and access statement, or as part of a design and access statement to support an application, or pre-application discussion.

[See the full guideline on Page 13] [Refer to paragraph 4.14, Chapter 4 of the IHCA Management Proposals SPD]

Quick check: how does the scheme match up to national policy guidance on design and building in context?

PPG 15: Planning and the Historic Environment

Paragraph 2.14

“The design of new buildings intended to stand alongside historic buildings needs very careful consideration. In general, it is better that old buildings are not set apart, but are woven into the fabric of the living and working community.”

“...new buildings do not have to copy their older neighbours in detail. Some of the most interesting streets include a variety of building styles, materials and forms of construction, of many different periods, but together forming a harmonious group”.

Paragraph 2.11

[Local authorities]...“should expect developers to assess the likely impact of their proposals on the special interest of the site or structure in question, and to provide such written information or drawings as may be required to understand the significance of a site or structure before an application is determined.”

PPS 7: Sustainable Development in Rural Areas

Paragraph 12

“Planning authorities should take a positive approach to innovative, high quality contemporary designs that are sensitive to their immediate setting and help to make towns and villages better places for people to live and work”.

Paragraph 12

“Planning authorities should ensure that development ...contributes to a sense of local identity and regional diversity and be of an appropriate design and scale for its location, having regard to the policies on design contained in PPS1 and supported in *By Design*”.

PPS 3: Housing

Paragraph 37

“New [housing] development should be of high quality inclusive design and layout... and be informed by its wider context, having regard not just to neighbouring buildings but to the townscape and landscape of the wider locality... The key test should be whether a development positively improves the character of an area and the way it functions.”

Further information:

Building in Context – New development in historic areas.
[English Heritage/CABE 2001]

...and the Building in Context Toolkit

www.building-in-context.org

