

The Royal Society *of* Edinburgh

A Policy on Architecture for Scotland: Review of Policy

The Royal Society of Edinburgh (RSE) is pleased to respond to the Scottish Executive's consultation on progress to date in implementation of its Policy on Architecture published in 2001, and on the direction of future policy. These comments have been compiled with the assistance of a number of expert Fellows of the RSE under the direction of the General Secretary, Professor Gavin McCrone.

The Society very much welcomes the fact that the Executive has a policy on architecture. It might be said that architecture is the unavoidable art. It impinges on us all but, at the same time, architecture is possibly the least consciously studied of the arts. We tend to take buildings for granted, working and playing in and around them without really looking at them. In our opinion, architecture deserves a prominent place in Executive thinking.

The Society's response follows the headings in the consultation document.

Co-ordination and cross-cutting issues

The main difficulties standing in the way of achievement of the Executive's aims derive from the Policy's emphasis and dependence on consensus. Since the publication of the Policy there have been significant landmark developments in a number of Scottish towns and cities that do not meet its yardsticks. For example, neither Newhaven harbour, Kirkcaldy harbour, Dundee foreshore and harbour nor the canal basin in Edinburgh match up to the Policy in terms of quality, international standard or in terms of involving the community. Yet these are all prominent sites and showcase developments led by the local authorities themselves or by bodies with whom local authorities have close relationships. This suggests that the main cross-cutting issues remain those already identified in the Policy, namely:

- Promoting the value and benefit of good architecture
- Fostering excellence in design
- Promoting greater interest and community involvement in architecture
- Establishing a culture of quality in publicly funded procurement
- Ensuring that planning and building legislation is appropriate to these agendas.

The RSE welcomes the fact that the Executive has recognised the importance of a partnership approach. We understand that in the Ninewells Hospital project there were no less than 24 disciplines involved to produce the design of this first major teaching hospital to be built in post-war Scotland. However, partnerships need to involve more than just those directly involved in building construction; those who commission and use buildings, as well as local communities, also have a contribution to make to implementation of the Policy. This suggests to us that the emphasis over the next few years should be focussed on the following cross-cutting areas:

- Process
 - Client education
 - Procurement
 - Civic ambition
- Knowledge
 - Understanding urban evolution
 - Sharing knowledge of practice elsewhere
 - The understanding of the historic environment and its potential
- Focus on pre-emption
 - Identification of areas of sensitivity
 - Identification of critical sites
- Focus on problem areas
 - Peripheral estates
 - Decaying smaller town centres

- The urban periphery.

The Society considers that the policy and its implications are too important to be left to architects alone.

Raising Design Standards and Building Quality

The Society considers that there is a need to increase awareness of the benefits of good design. We consider that there is a role for Architecture and Design Scotland (ADS) in demonstrating the fact that investing in quality design is commercially successful. ADS should provide decision makers with examples from around the World of the beneficial results of good design. For example, Frank Gehry's Bilbao Gallery has transformed that town, and the decision by the town of Flensburg to restore its alleyways and closes at the heart of its tourism regeneration could have implications for some Scottish towns. ADS might usefully be charged to investigate the relevant fiscal and tax regimes in other countries.

We consider that ways need to be found to stimulate awareness of, and interest in, good design. One approach might be to provide financial support for the commissioning of options for selected landmark sites. The Cowgate site in Edinburgh might have been appropriate for such an exercise. This would help engender debate. What can excite the public is when different values are strongly defended and contested. An informed media would be an important player in providing information and a platform for different views.

In similar vein, we see merit in the commissioning of pre-emptive "sensitivity analyses" of areas.¹

ADS has an important role to play in raising standards. It will be important that it focuses as much upon volume housebuilders, industrial estates and peripheral estates as upon the one-off design. In our view, ADS should be prepared to give evidence at Public Inquiries.

Public Engagement and Community Involvement

Every opportunity should be taken to promote good design, particularly through the media. However, we recognise that, for example, television programmes on architecture will only be produced if there is a perceived market for them. More subtle approaches should be explored, for example using important, eye-catching buildings for important meetings could lead to exposure in news programmes. The space between buildings is also architecture, the walls of which are the surrounding buildings. Programmes about gardens and public spaces are relevant in this context. Where architectural awards attract strong media coverage this is clearly helpful, but awards generally impact principally on the profession. They are valuable as a sign of commitment, but should not be ends in themselves.

Public involvement might be better stimulated by a collaborative programme of local character analyses in order to establish a sense of local identity. Such analyses could be followed by pre-emptive briefs as mentioned above so that debate about the nature and scale of change could take place long before development pressure emerged. Since such a process would have provided the public with a vision of the potential of a site, it would be hoped that it would create a demand for good architecture.

We have already referred to the importance of exemplars from abroad. For those who find it difficult to imagine in the abstract, looking at what has been achieved elsewhere can prove a great stimulus. Unfortunately, too many of our public authorities appear unwilling to open themselves to such debate. Equally, there has to be an understanding of contemporary thinking about places, for example the study of the "weather-protected" town whereby places throughout Europe have evolved to control, particularly, sun or wind. Again, this work has largely been ignored in Scotland.

In the view of the Society, communities can best be involved in development by being encouraged to understand their place and how it has emerged; and then by being shown examples of change elsewhere appropriate to their circumstances.² The promotion of architecture would be integral to that process.

Place Making/Urban Design/Landscape

The Society welcomes the approach to place-making in "Designing Places" but is concerned that it omits important areas. For example, it includes no reference to comfort in spite of the fact that it has been demonstrated that people tend to avoid locations that are too exposed, as evidenced by the many examples in this country and elsewhere of well-meaning but largely unused urban spaces.

In the case of the peripheral estates, the questions are neither purely physical nor purely about social inclusion. They are to do with the very nature of an urban 'community' and indeed whether the community should remain peripheral. Simply exchanging, at great expense, the physical appearance of the 1960s for

¹ Possibly along the lines suggested in the draft Historic Scotland Burgh Surveys for Fraserburgh and Whithorn.

² This approach was adopted in an RIAS/Scottish Homes competition in Easterhouse in 1993.

the physical appearance of today does not address the real problem. In our view, this subject merits a more rigorous approach.

Procurement

In spite of the ambitions of the Policy in this area, unfortunately the situation appears to be that the procurement of public sector buildings generally encourages the mundane. Greater weight should be given to the quality of architecture and the life cycle cost of a building. Although design quality is now an element taken into account in procurement, more emphasis on design would help improve standards. One approach that might be considered would be to fix the design fee at a base level cost that tenderers would have to accept. That element would thereby be eliminated, and the selection process could concentrate more on quality.

Other steps that the Society considers the Executive should pursue are:

- Examine the different ways EU competition regulations are implemented – generally in Scotland there has been insufficient study of how quality is maintained elsewhere through such procedures.³
- Encourage a greater number of architectural competitions – the current focus on limited selection is stultifying compared to the architectural culture of the late 1980s
- Public sector clients should be encouraged to share their ambitions with their stakeholders at public meetings, drawing on what has been achieved in similar circumstances elsewhere
- Our proposals mentioned above for area sensitivity analysis, carried out pre-emptively, should assist the procurement process in identifying the opportunities for change
- Also as proposed above, pre-emptive briefs or even finance to commission a variety of schemes should be made available for landmark sites.

The Society endorses the suggestion in the consultation document that ADS should be proactive in providing support and incentive for higher quality public sector design. ADS has been strikingly silent on recent landmark schemes. In public terms, its role appears peripheral. In our view, ADS should lead specific debates on such sites and schemes, and perhaps even lead in selecting other landmark sites for pre-emptive analysis.

The Society recommends that a review of public procurement by Local Authorities or official bodies be undertaken to examine the proportion of commissioning through selection, appointment, competitions, design-and-build, PFI, and similar patterns. The Executive should focus, particularly, upon the extent to which the commissioning practices of such bodies conform to the spirit and the letter of the Policy on Architecture, and that this should be monitored.

Sustainability

The Society welcomes the recognition of the importance of sustainability in building design but considers that it would be useful to have a clear statement of what is intended by the term. For some it appears to imply buildings of low energy-use, albeit high-tech in construction, whereas others apply the term to vernacular building constructed with immediately available local materials.

We consider that in this area there are 4 specific issues with which the Policy should engage. First, as we suggested in 2000 in our response to the consultation on the development of the Policy, attempts should be made to investigate the sourcing of materials, especially stone, slate and timbers, through re-opening quarries and new plantations of trees of appropriate species. Second, the dismantling rather than the demolition of existing buildings, and developing a strategy for material re-use. We recognise that there would be associated transport and storage issues, and also the need to develop new tools. Third, as the Historic Environment Advisory Council for Scotland has identified, there is a need to address the issue of the low skill base of building operatives when using traditional materials or working on historic buildings. Fourth, Scotland has a poor record in comparison with other countries in re-using older buildings. Elsewhere in Europe and in North America, adaptation of older buildings to modern needs is more imaginatively done leading to a more satisfactory marriage of the old and the new. This may require some rethinking of attitudes in Scottish Schools of Architecture.

The Wider Design Agenda and the Cox Review

The questions raised in this section of the consultation document suggest that aspects of the Lighthouse's remit have yet to be achieved. The larger question is the inherent responsiveness of the situation. As suggested above, the Society considers that public funding should be made available to identify likely

³ The National Trust for Scotland pioneered one method of reconciling fee tendering with quality appointment through competition.

landmark sites of the future, and to use them to engage the public and design professions in the questions listed.

International Promotion and Networks

The particular value of international connections should be to learn what is being done elsewhere, and to test those lessons for their applicability to Scotland.

The Society welcomes the links being forged with European partners, and the presentation of Scottish material abroad. International recognition is best achieved by promoting the inherent quality of the Scottish character environment and building heritage, but this should not be an end in itself. The real value would be to have a critique of that material from non-Scots to provide a measure of the country's international culture level.

Scotland will only be able to compete internationally by being better; by having a distinctive identity or approach that can travel beneficially; and by having a deeper national design creativity than a small number of architectural superstars. In our view, if Scotland could develop a more holistic understanding of its cultural past and of the role that that could play in the future, this would provide it with a distinctive edge. Scottish architecture must build on the past to produce the best in the future, and it is a vital link from the past to the future that will sell Scottish architecture internationally.

Recording and Archiving the Built Heritage

The Society agrees that Historic Scotland and RCAHMS have important roles to play in taking forward the Policy. There are potentially great opportunities for both organisations to contribute to the better understanding of our inherited built culture. However, if these opportunities are to be realised this will require changes in the ways both organisations operate. For example, Historic Scotland has tended to present our Renaissance houses as "castles", presumably for reasons of tourism promotion, at the expense of Scotland's Renaissance culture. As a result, our past is less well understood than it might be. Although RCAHMS has invested greatly in digital technology, this has been in respect of its archaeological rather than its architectural collections to keep abreast of current research and scholarship. Investment is required to modernise its catalogues and to complete the assimilation of its architectural collections into its photographic collections. RCAHMS charging policy should also be reviewed to ensure that people wishing to use its collections in publications are not inhibited by the scale of the charges.

Managing and Understanding Change in the Built Environment

The Society agrees that the historic environment should be valued as an asset rather than thought of as a constraint in development. Scotland's historic and natural environments are two of its greatest assets. Where they are seen as a brake on development this is usually because of a lack of understanding as to what is held to be valuable. With so many buildings now listed, and the purposes of listing not always clearly defined, it is no longer evident which properties or which characteristics are key to the identity of a given area. As suggested above, we consider that there is a role here for holistic informed character assessments or sensitivity analyses. Similarly, pre-emptive briefs would provide the opportunity to test different models.

Education and Research

The Society is concerned that the Policy could become solely self-referential within the architectural community. A possible approach to avoiding this danger might be to use architectural students and research in the role of identifying potential important or landmark sites or projects. They could then prepare pre-emptive briefs or even schemes in order to engage the public with potential alternatives. A more educated and involved public is more likely to support the Executive in the pursuit of its aims of excellence.

"Futures" Agenda

We have set out above the Society's proposals as to how the Executive should take forward the implementation of its Policy on Architecture. These are summarised below:

- Find ways to ensure that Scottish designers (not just two or three) are world class
- Be more proactive in bringing ideas and examples from abroad for public discussion
- Develop greater sourcing of Scottish building materials
- Raise the quality of Scottish building craftsmanship, particularly in traditional materials
- Initiate a programme of sensitivity analyses for specific areas
- Identify likely future landmark sites
- Monitor the procurement practices of Local Authorities and official bodies.
- Commission the preparation of pre-emptive briefs

- Encourage Schools of Architecture to test the options in such briefs by using them for research and project work

The Lighthouse and Architecture and Design Scotland both have important roles to play in taking forward the Policy. It is important that the Executive develops and publishes key performance indicators for both organisations.

Additional Information

In commenting on this document the Society would like to draw attention to the following Royal Society of Edinburgh responses which are of relevance to this subject: *Scottish Arts in the 21st Century* (January 1999); *Celebrating Scotland: A National Cultural Strategy* (November 1999); *The Development of a Policy on Architecture for Scotland* (March 2000). Copies of this response and of the above publications are available from the Research Officer, Ian Melville (email: imelville@royalsoced.org.uk).

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