

Architecture Design Place +ve

Positive Change via the Policy on Architecture

Key points from A+DS' response to
A Policy on Architecture for Scotland –
Public Consultation: Review of Policy



For the Scottish Executive's Policy on Architecture to make a positive difference in improving the quality of Scotland's built environment, it must address the key issues of procurement, skills and leadership.

Architecture and Design Scotland is committed to working with all those in the built environment sector who also wish to make positive difference. Working together, we believe real change is achievable.

Introduction

The Scottish Executive's Policy on Architecture was published in October 2001 and its urban design policy Designing Places launched later the same year.

5 years on – and in line with its commitment to periodically reassess objectives – the Executive is now carrying out a review: it is publicly seeking input to the development of A Policy on Architecture.

This short report comprises the key points of Architecture and Design Scotland's response to the policy review.

Established in April 2005 as the independent national champion of good architecture, design and planning in the built environment, A+DS welcomes this opportunity to contribute to the strengthening of the policy context in which the organisation operates.

Our full report covers all the points raised by the Executive in its Public Consultation document. This briefing note highlights the critical issue for a rejuvenated policy: delivery.

For the policy to make a positive difference in improving the quality of Scotland's built environment, it must address the key issues of procurement, skills and leadership.

The Policy Approach

A+DS applauds the imagination and initiative of the Scottish Executive in launching the Policy on Architecture, the first of its kind in the UK.

We recognise the benefits of placing the policy – and the Unit set up to develop it - within the cultural remit, where they can be most effective in promoting the social, economic and environmental benefits of good design across many departmental programmes.

We believe that the current level of both cross-party and public awareness of architecture and design has been spurred on by the policy framework and its review. We welcome this degree of commitment and participation in creating a higher quality built environment for Scotland.

The Process of Design

Many recent Executive policies involve aspects of the built environment. Departments are demonstrating a collective high-level endeavour to create and locate communities in distinctive settlements of character with sustainable transport networks. We welcome this integrated approach to creating successful places.

The key to pulling together policies such as:

- Choosing our future : sustainable development
- People and place: regeneration and social inclusion
- Changing our ways : climate change
- Schools estate : strategy documents
- Cultural policies : engaging the creative
- Ageing population : the futures agenda
- Transport strategy : integrating services

... is DESIGN: of systems, processes and places. The principal value of good design – synthesis – is the resolution of complementary and competing influences to produce a balanced holistic response.

Thus good design is fundamental to achieving the aspiration for Scotland to be the best small country in the world. A well designed approach to policy development and linkage creates a coherent big picture: a model of joined up government.

At A+DS, we envisage A Policy on Architecture intimately bound up with the Urban Design Policy set out in 'Designing Places'. This recognises that architecture is as much about the places between buildings as the buildings themselves: that there is a fundamental inter-relationship between architecture, design and place.

Treated as an iterative process, design can become a powerful instrument for creative, collective and +ve change.

Delivery

Policies without targets result in little progress in the drive to improve quality. As key policies become established, the acid test is delivery on the ground.

Without quantifiable goals, the impetus for change will be lost and too much of what is built will remain below the quality threshold. The result will be a country wherein few contemporary projects can ever hope to be seen as “the conservation areas of tomorrow”.

In our view, three factors hold the key to delivering a step change:

Procurement, skills and leadership

Procurement

Procurement is the means by which developers and clients secure design and construction services. It is thus the first – and most significant step – in securing built quality over the life cycle of a building or place.

How a project is procured sets out the framework for its design and delivery. Too often, procurement mechanisms serve to thwart excellence in these areas, despite the aspirations of many private and public sector clients. This happens when mechanisms block or distort the balance between the various criteria for good design. These include:

- that design should be undertaken by skilled designers
- that it should be allocated time to be developed, tested and refined
- that it should be matched by appropriate budgets

At A+DS, we are heartened to see an awareness of these factors embedded in the Scottish Executive's own procurement guide. Monitoring its impact in practice will be imperative.

Procurement In Practice

With Executive level investment in the schools estate at its highest for sixty years, it is now possible to examine what effect procurement policy is having on the ground.

Under PFI / PPP arrangements, local authorities are for the most part procuring new and refurbished schools in substantial rolling programmes. While such activity can - on the surface - produce evidence of best value and delivery on time and to budget, it places an inordinately heavy burden on the market, both locally and nationally and can often result in a 'one size fits all' approach.

Since starting work in April 2005, A+DS has reviewed schools by seven local authorities, based on criteria including:

- is the building in the most appropriate location in the settlement and designed for its specific site?
- are its internal and external spaces carefully planned and likely to encourage a positive learning environment now and for the next 25 years?
- is it exemplary in sustainable development terms?
- have the client and the community got what they wanted?

Worryingly, we have not been convinced that many of the schools can satisfy these criteria. Often, despite extensive efforts on the part of clients to produce quality buildings, the procurement mechanism has adversely constrained the time and resource required to develop designs.

In particular, we are concerned that too many stakeholders are aiming only at narrow functional agendas (for example, Cullen) that - while important - obscure the principal ambition which must be to produce inspiring learning environments.

The current situation justifies immediate action if future investment is to produce results worthy of the efforts being made by clients and designers.

The gulf that has emerged between the Scottish Executive's aspiration and what is being delivered in practice justifies the immediate establishment of a review group to investigate the causes and recommend action.

Skills

In anticipating the arrival of the new Planning Act for Scotland, A+DS welcomes the Executive's commitment to a framework of reporting, monitoring, evaluation and support.

We acknowledge the considerable steps that are now being taken in addressing skills shortages through the Planning Development Budget.

We recommend that the implementation of the new Planning Act run in tandem with other targeted activity to raise the quality threshold in Scotland in a directed and coherent way, with all players working towards common goals.

Through our research, enabling and review activities, A+DS can help with the core tasks:

- raising awareness among public sector budget holders and local authority planning committees of the social, economic, environmental and cultural benefits of design
- embedding urban design skills and awareness into the thinking of all professionals, groups and disciplines working in the built environment

We further recommend that progress be tested, perhaps by a regular audit of:

- local authority based design skills and their deployment
- the use of 'Designing Places', other local policy instruments and/or Design Statements
- the use of masterplanning techniques.

Leadership

The talent to deliver is waiting in the market place. It is for leaders to demand it, and to champion its delivery.

Without good CLIENTS, good projects cannot and will not happen. A quality step change in Scotland depends upon clients...

- with ambition and determination
- who engage in the interactive design process
- who encourage stakeholder buy-in
- who manage these processes well
- who act as PATRONS, treating architecture and placemaking in a holistic way.

Such champions require support from the policy makers and structures that allow their vision to flourish. This requires awareness and – most importantly – leadership within:

- government
- key agencies and NDPBs
- local government

Architecture and Design Scotland is committed to working with all those in the built environment sector who also wish to make a +ve difference. Working together, we believe real change is achievable.

Architecture and Design Scotland offers three principal strands of operational work:

- Research
- Enabling
- Review

Staff will be pleased to assist in addressing relevant queries from clients and developers with project work in Scotland, and welcomes the opportunity to support and promulgate best practice.

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