



# Good design: the fundamentals

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**In this essay, CABA  
chief executive Richard  
Simmons sets out  
why good design matters**

# Why design matters

The history and culture of a nation are written in its buildings, public spaces, towns and cities. Through their design and how we live our lives in them, we recognise what is special about our society and communities. Every new building and public space is an expression of our values and aspirations. How places are looked after speaks volumes about our self-esteem and sense of national and local pride and identity. Architecture and urbanism are arts just as surely as painting and sculpture. The built environment is a cultural asset. It is essential to design it well and to manage and maintain it to high standards.

## ‘Get design and management right and we make places to treasure’

We all use the built environment – buildings, streets, parks and public spaces – every day. Get design and management right and we make places to treasure. Get them wrong and we build in alienation and dysfunction. CABE’s job is to improve quality of life by advising on how to make places that will be valued by everyone.

People must be at the heart of any strategy for the built environment. Places that delight tend to be valued and cared for. Places that do not tend to cost us in crime, high maintenance, poor health and social exclusion. They become liabilities.

The best tests remain the simple ones. Is this a beautiful place that people cherish? Does it work well and lend itself to easy management? Will it last and be sustainable?

No building exists only for the people who paid for it or who use it. Everybody has to live with it. Streets and parks belong to us all. We have every right to demand the best from those who create and care for our buildings and public spaces. The public frequently pays a heavy price – the cost of bad design – for the upkeep and, ultimately, replacement of the design and management mistakes of the past. Good design, management and maintenance are in the public interest. And CABE is here to be an advocate for the public interest and to defend it when it’s under threat.

Buildings, streets and public spaces cannot be seen in isolation from each other. To be successful they must work together. CABE cares deeply about the quality of the architecture of individual buildings but also about the built environment as a whole. CABE campaigns tirelessly for good urban and landscape design and high quality management that bind the separate parts of a place together.

CABE prides itself on working across boundaries and joining the work of professionals with that of non-professionals. Many different disciplines are involved in designing and managing the built environment; yet architecture, planning, landscape and urban design are indivisible. CABE starts from the viewpoint of the people who use the built environment. They value places where everything comes together to create an enjoyable experience. CABE helps the professions to work with decision makers so that all the components of the built environment receive equal care, creating places that people will enjoy and cherish.

# What is good design?

Design is the way we decide how we want things to be. Everything we make is designed by somebody. So the question is not whether we need or can afford design. It's whether design is good enough. In the built environment, design is the key decision-making process. At the strategic level it creates the vision for places. At a more detailed level it describes how we want them to work, look and feel. Good design is not inevitable. It needs to be championed, invested in and worked at. All decision makers need to understand the importance of good design and how to get the best out of it.

## **'Good design is not inevitable. It needs to be championed'**

Questions of taste and fashion often arise in discussions about architecture. Tastes vary and fashions change. Appreciation of the beauty of the new may grow with time and familiarity. However, the basics of good design have been understood for centuries. They transcend fashion and personal taste.

Style can sometimes be an important consideration, perhaps where it is necessary to complement an existing building. However, there are three much more important principles that make it possible

to recognise good design when we see it, regardless of style. They are variously described as robustness, or durability; usefulness, or efficiency; and beauty, or the ability to delight people.

This set of principles is not new but it can be applied to help everyone recognise a well-designed building or place. This should give us all the confidence to identify and understand the kinds of places that work well and that we want to create.

Applying the three principles, we will know that buildings and public spaces are well designed if:

- they are useful, built to last and easy to care for (for example, Christopher Wren's Royal Hospital Chelsea)
- you can find your way and move around easily, regardless of whether or not you are disabled, in a place in which you feel safe (such as the design of public space in Mowbray Park, Sunderland, or the Bedford Park estate in west London)
- they relate well to the place where they are built; this might mean fitting in quietly or creating new context and new landmarks, depending on circumstances (for example, the award-winning office development at 30 Finsbury Square, which merges easily with the surrounding buildings, or Manchester Civil Justice Centre, which stands out decisively)
- they are flexible and their use can change over time (the obvious examples being period terraced housing and mill buildings from the early industrial revolution).

- they are environmentally efficient and will help us all to live and work sustainably (such as Great Bow Yard in Somerset and Oxley Woods in Milton Keynes)
- the people who use them tell you that they help them to work more effectively and deliver services more efficiently (which is now well documented in the new Kidderminster Treatment Centre)
- the people who live there tell you that their quality of life has improved, and they continue to say this over time (for example on the Holly Street Estate in Hackney)
- people tell you that they are proud of where they live because their building or place has real identity, character and beauty (the case with the Ilfracombe Pavilion in Devon, or Grainger Town in Newcastle).

So it is possible to design well in a variety of styles. The important thing is that 21st century society has the opportunity to contribute worthy additions to the accumulating pattern that makes up our towns and cities.

Buildings and spaces should look good but CUBE doesn't demand that every building should be an icon. Well-made Georgian, Victorian and Edwardian terraces aren't iconic. They are decently proportioned, and laid out on a plan that's easy to walk around, with parks and squares to stroll and play in. They are usually made up of standard pattern-book homes, but with good room sizes, well-proportioned fronts and decent gardens. They can be reconfigured and extended in many ways.

They are attractive, they work and they last. Not much to ask for in the 21st century as well, one might think, with an added sustainability factor, of course.

Attractive background buildings make up most of the places we love. While a mix of older buildings with new is often a sound starting point for great placemaking, many people appreciate good contemporary architecture. Poor imitations of the styles of the past do not do justice to our own era's capacity for creativity and self-expression.

We do well to remember that public controversy does not always mean that a building's design is poor. Opinions about the Gherkin have been polarised. Nobody denies its ingenuity or the fact that it is now a symbol of London. The response to the London Eye was mixed at the start. Now it can't be taken away from Londoners. Both are hi-tech structures, not traditional London buildings. Yet both have been taken to people's hearts and to many speak of London's identity almost as much as St Paul's Cathedral or Tower Bridge. The same is true of the Gateshead Millennium Bridge and the Lowry in Salford. Everywhere that we see great architecture, landscape architecture and urban design we see communities with a renewed sense of civic confidence and self-belief.

# Myths and excuses

CABE has had to challenge many myths. The three greatest and most damaging to the built environment are:

- good design is too expensive, so we have to settle for poor quality buildings and places
- good design is purely subjective; a matter of individual taste, so it cannot be considered rationally; anything goes
- if someone's prepared to pay for it, the design must be good enough.

These myths are often used to justify poor quality housing, badly designed public buildings and the worst commercial developments. None of them is true.

It is not always more expensive to design well. For example, a good housing layout can be more efficient and profitable than a bad one. Sometimes the initial cost of a good building, street or space may be higher, but CABE supports the government's policy that the cost and value of building should be measured over its whole life.

## **'The costs of bad design are usually borne by somebody other than the original builder'**

Buildings, streets and public spaces are assets. Those who build them should invest for the future. Investors care about the long-term value of their assets. The built environment is one of our longest-term investments and amongst our most important assets. On that basis there is no excuse

for poor design. It is important to remember that the costs of bad design are usually borne by somebody other than the original builder, so whole-life value needs to be calculated from a whole community viewpoint.

The fact that the principles of good design have endured shows that it is more than a matter of personal taste. There is plenty of research to show that places that work well and last are what people want. While the variety of people's tastes is something to be celebrated we all have to live with design decisions in the built environment, so personal taste alone cannot be a sufficient test of what makes a design acceptable.

Where land supply is limited and cannot meet demand in a normal market, it is nonsense to say that "if you can sell it, it must be good enough". The property market fails to place a financial value on many things that have value to the wider community. Where people have little or no choice or market power, their elected representatives must insist on quality, using the power they have through the planning system, public funding, procurement and the ownership of land.

## Achieving good design

Design is a creative process. Good design comes from a good client, with a sound brief, working to a realistic programme with a creative design team and an adequate budget. If one or more of these components is missing, the risk of producing poor design rises.

Much of CABE's activity is aimed at trying to help clients to create the right conditions for good design to prosper. Good designers understand what makes good design. They know it when they see it. However, many people who aren't designers make decisions about design. They are often less certain about the quality of what they see. CABE has always sought ways to enable them to work more easily with designers and to know whether they are achieving good design. It is possible to assess the quality of design using methods that most people find easy to work with. People who aren't trained as designers can recognise good design and, just as importantly, identify poor design.

We encourage the use of Design Quality Indicators, Spaceshaper and post-occupancy surveys. These measures involve designers, clients and users in deciding the design outcomes they want from a scheme. Then they can test whether the outcomes have been achieved. Post-occupancy surveys should be used much more widely. They are a useful measure of quality from which much can be learnt to inform future projects and to improve buildings in use.

A second group of tests is based on measuring against best practice and standards. It is possible to check schemes against well-established design principles on which there is consensus from designers who use widely varied styles. Measures such as Building for Life (used for housing) allow schemes to be rated for design quality.

## **'We must allow for creativity and beauty to surprise and delight us'**

People experience emotional responses to buildings and spaces, which means that objective tests alone are never going to tell the whole story. We must allow for creativity and beauty to surprise and delight us. Often, therefore, dialogue is the best way to reach an understanding of what good design looks like. People can be presented with images which contrast existing designs, or better still, taken to see them. Facilitated discussions will then quickly allow them to fathom what works and what doesn't. Other approaches to engaging local people directly in the design process, such as 'Inquiry by Design', are also useful in improving design quality.

What all these approaches have in common is that they enable a structured, rational assessment of design quality which irons out questions of style and taste but which does not inhibit designers' or clients' creativity.

It's important to emphasise that good design can't just be reduced to a formula. That's not the purpose of any of the tools developed by CABE and its partners. Frequently, especially in complex situations or where there is innovation, it is necessary to seek expert judgements from experienced designers. That's when CABE uses enabling (advisors working with clients to help them form a brief and select designers) and design review. Design review brings in leading creative minds, often working on similar problems in current practice. They offer constructive criticism aimed at improving the project. This peer review is a powerful tool to improve the quality of even the most complex projects. Most importantly, CABE's design review exists to support decision makers. It is a tool to empower local democracy and public sector clients and to aid architects and developers in adding value to their projects.

### **Leadership is central**

If leaders demand good design and have a clear vision for what it will do for their community, their business or their service, then they tend to get it. The government and CABE promote the use of design champions in public bodies and the private sector. We have talked to many design champions about their experiences and the environments in which they work. This has helped to identify what makes an organisation fit for purpose to get good design:

### **Behaviour**

- leaders with vision who know that better design improves results
- effective partnerships internally and with the right public bodies and private companies
- knowledgeable, skilled and trained decision makers.

### **Resources**

- design champions who can influence decisions
- strong public buy-in and appetite for design quality
- in-house designers and/or a consultant design team with a brief to support the organisation as client or decision maker.

### **Processes**

- strong published policies and standards
- decision making that talks about and prioritises good design
- robust procurement processes which set absolute minimum design requirements
- access to design review for key projects
- learning through scrutiny of decision making
- post-occupancy surveys of projects.

The more of these features that an organisation can demonstrate, the better it is likely to be at getting well-designed buildings and public spaces.

In an ideal world good design would be demanded by everyone, valued accordingly and produced by the market on every occasion. We all know that this doesn't happen often enough. Even so, CABE believes that the best way to get good design is to convince people that it adds value and that it's in their best interests to produce it. The more the market sees and understands the premium that comes from good design, the more it will become the norm.

However, property markets are not perfect and may not always work in favour of good design. Some developers tell CABE that, in normal circumstances, because land supply is restricted, purchasers have little choice, so there is no profit in adding value through good design. Homes are sold and roads adopted by the local council, so the developer has no permanent stake and no incentive to invest in the quality of a place for the longer term. The market often needs help to overcome its failure to prevent the costs of bad design from being passed on. The community then has to intervene, usually through its elected representatives, to offer incentives or to control the quality of what is built.

What does this mean in practice? The government has already set out clear design policies in the planning system and through national procurement

rules and guidance. These policies need to be acted on by local authorities and public sector clients. The private sector needs to adapt better to meet them.

## **‘A well-built, managed and maintained built environment is a right that everyone should enjoy’**

If we do this we can create a culture that will consistently deliver good design. People demand the best for their communities. Over the last 10 years we have seen the appetite for good design grow. We have seen many excellent buildings and public spaces emerge in response to this demand. No community deserves second best. We must build on the successes of the last decade: a well-built, managed and maintained built environment is a right that everyone should enjoy.

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CABE is the government's advisor on architecture, urban design and public space. As a public body, we encourage policymakers to create places that work for people. We help local planners apply national design policy and advise developers and architects, persuading them to put people's needs first. We show public sector clients how to commission projects that meet the needs of their users. And we seek to inspire the public to demand more from their buildings and spaces. Advising, influencing and inspiring, we work to create well-designed, welcoming places.

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Cover image: Castleford Footbridge. CABE offered practical advice to a Channel 4 TV series about the town and design reviewed its extraordinary new footbridge © David Millington Photography Ltd.



**Winter Gardens**  
Sheffield

Why does design matter – and what is the best way to achieve it? This essay sets out why architecture and urban design are such important cultural assets, and why good design can be reached only if it has users in mind. Good design requires a good process, including a clear brief and adequate budget, along with strong leadership and the right regulation. The essay sets out the thinking behind *Shape the future*, CABE's strategy for 2008/09-2010/11. It will be of interest to architects, designers, clients and to government – and everyone else working with CABE and its agenda for promoting good design.

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