

Case Study

Ecclestone Road, Maidstone

Planning Practice Seminar



Barry Shaw, MBE
introducing the
seminar

Client: Kent Architecture Centre, Maidstone Borough Council, CABE, RIBA

Location: Maidstone Town Hall, Maidstone

The Project: Planning Practice Seminar

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Background

Kent Architecture Centre wished to disseminate the lessons learned from a Local Inquiry Appeal decision that upheld Maidstone Borough Council's refusal of a housing scheme on a significant riverside site in the town on the grounds of design quality. The scheme had previously been presented to the South East Regional Design Panel, and the Panel's expert opinion formed a key part of the Maidstone Borough Council appeal case. This seminar explored the issues that arose from this case.

The seminar was delivered in partnership with Maidstone Borough Council, CABE and RIBA. Over 40 delegates attended from across the region, from public and private practice and across the built environment disciplines representing local authorities, county councils, English Heritage, housing associations, CABE, Planning Aid and the Housing Corporation.

The South East Regional Design Panel (SERDP)

SERDP was established in 2002 and is sponsored by the South East England Development Agency (SEEDA). It provides independent free design review advice for developers, local authorities, community groups and built environment practitioners. Essentially, the Panel assesses the strengths and weaknesses of significant development proposals throughout the south-east. Its Patron is Richard Rogers and the meetings are chaired by Paul Koralek CBE.

Background to the appeal

Maidstone Borough Council sought the views of the South East Regional Design Panel on a planning application they had been negotiating for some time. The proposal was for high density housing covering in excess of two hectares on brownfield land adjacent to the river and close to the town centre.

The land was allocated for housing and a draft brief existed to guide the shape and quality of development. There were a number of constraints including in particular Environment Agency requirements with regard to the flood plain, land contamination, noise, highway requirements and land assembly. Good urban design is already a key object of the town with the riverside identified as a zone of townscape importance. The proposed redevelopment of the whole area including Eccleston Road presented, according to the brief 'an exciting opportunity to create a flagship urban housing scheme'. The situation within the river corridor provided a real opportunity to develop attractive high quality living environments with a true sense of identity and place. The draft brief also said: 'The river frontage sites particularly provide the opportunity for innovative designs which respect the natural context provided by the river corridor.' Beyond the riverside, it stated that views and focal points should be emphasised and development should integrate with the surrounding urban fabric which includes Victorian terraces and modern detached houses.



The appeal site

The scheme discussed by the Panel included 162 homes of which some 10 per cent were for key workers. In all there were 36 houses, the rest being flats. The central section of the riverside housing was set on columns, because of flood plain requirements, creating a deep accessible unprotected space underneath. A planted pedestrian route would wind from the top site down the two changes in level to the river via two groups of steps.

The scheme attracted the following comments from the Panel:

- *The panel realises the developers have spent considerable time in negotiation ...*
- *The proposals have taken too little note of the exceptional nature of the sites ...*
- *They also fail on a number of other counts including lack of vision, open space treatment, layout, poorly considered pedestrian environment, lack of natural surveillance, poor presentation to Ecclestone Road, unconvincing architectural approach to higher density.*

Negotiations with the developer were unsuccessful in overcoming these concerns and the developer subsequently appealed to the Secretary of State. The Panel were therefore asked by the local authority to attend the hearing as an expert witness. The evidence presented was a detailed critique of the proposals in relation to government guidance, the local authority's policies and established principles of good design in all its aspects of functionality as well as appearance.

The Planning Inspector dismissed the appeal. He agreed that the site was visually important and that the proposals failed to achieve an acceptable standard of design,

"I do not believe that the proposals adequately acknowledge and exploit the potential of the site as a whole, close to the river and stepping down to it.....Overall there would be little or no tangible sense of distinctiveness or "place" that the location and character of the site warrant. In my view the design and layout of the appeal proposals are deficient in a number of important respects.... The buildings on the important riverside area are of uninspired design and both they, and the pedestrian route through the development, fail to take advantage of the site's assets"

The Seminar

The audience were particularly interested in the emphasis in revised government guidance on development being 'good enough to approve'.

Esther Kurland responded that this doesn't mean insisting on iconic architecture. Development must take into account the context of the site, the opportunities it may give for improvement of an area and the four aims of sustainability may be used here of social, economic, environmental protection and prudent use of natural resources.

In response to the question of better design adding to cost, Peter Harrison responded that architects used by developers to design difficult brownfield sites could also be deployed on greenfield sites and their experience used in adding value.

Kent Architecture Centre Seminar

Delivering High Quality Design through the planning process

A seminar to review the process and outcomes of a significant Public Local Inquiry in which design quality was the central issue

Council Chamber at Maidstone Town Hall, High Street, Maidstone
Monday 21 March 11.00am-2.00pm

Programme

11.00am Registration

11.30 Welcome and introductions
Barry Shaw, Chief Executive, Kent Architecture Centre

11.35 Design Quality within the planning process: national overview and context
Esther Kurland, Senior Policy Planning Advisor, CABE

11.50 Local Maidstone context
Rob Jarman, Planning Officer, Maidstone Borough Council

12.00 Role of Regional Design Panel in Inquiry Process
Barry Shaw

12.20 In defence of Design Quality
Peter Harrison, 6 Pump Court

12.50 Questions and discussion
Chaired by Barry Shaw

1.20 Conclusions followed by lunch
Barry Shaw

2.00pm Close

The audience heard presentations from the speakers and took the opportunity to question them on issues of design guidance and negotiation

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'If we deliver poor design, we know that we will not deliver sustainable development'

Lord Rooker, planning minister, House of Lords, Jan 04

'All involved in planning must work to achieve sustainable development'

Planning and Compulsory Purchase Act 2004

Presentation extract from Esther Kurland, CABE