
off the fence

The design review service offered by CABE all too often fails to offer constructive criticism and wise counsel – and urgently needs some basic rules of engagement, says David Lock

rules for the design police



There is an excellent tradition in schools of architecture and civic design of constructive criticism – a ‘crit’ – of one’s work by a tutor or a wider peer group drawn from other teaching staff, visiting professionals, and respected student colleagues.

The crit is a pretty stressful experience, because those giving the criticism are respected and experienced, and cannot be bluffed or blarneyed. They will spot lack of rigour, see through a ruse, and know bad work when they see it.

The best architectural and urban design consultancy studios also make time for the crit to review emerging project work. The crit trains the designer to explain the design briefly and clearly, to defend design decisions as necessary, and to accept wise counsel. It also sustains the art of constructive criticism in design discourse: destructive casual and sarky comments show the ignorance of the speaker and contribute nothing to the art. Constructive criticism, on the other hand, informs and encourages the designer, who may readily and with enthusiasm rethink the whole project without feeling bad.

Pressures of time (and therefore money) constantly threaten to squeeze the crit out of the design process. There is difficulty, too, in finding a competent peer group, as constructive criticism and intellectual discourse are types of human interaction that are in decline.

Against this background it might be thought good that the Commission for Architecture and the Built Environment (CABE) has built a business case on its ‘design review’ service. CABE can be called in by local planning authorities to conduct a crit. In fact anyone can ask them in,¹ although the public hasn’t cottoned on, and their response can be eccentric (when I tried to get a particularly ugly proposed development at the world famous Bletchley Park looked at, they wouldn’t bother, and the hideous result is there for all to see). In some regions CABE

has subcontracted this service to an architecture centre. CABE has also appointed ‘enablers’ who can be called upon to give design advice as individuals.

Unfortunately, although the CABE package sounds good, it isn’t. The ‘design review’ is a dreadfully shallow process. People likely to be total strangers to the designer are selected by CABE staff by unknown processes. Their appropriateness professionally or technically is unexplained, and too often is obviously quite inappropriate. And some don’t bother to turn up.

A gaggle of miscellaneous professionals willing to give up a day’s work for a meagre CABE fee, and comment on the work of people they don’t know, is a far cry from the respected ‘peer group’ of the classic crit.

The ‘design panels’ seem to receive some briefing papers the night before, which typically take the form of bad-quality photocopies of extracts of a brochure about the project. The panellists do not visit the site, although their CABE staff minder will have done.

The panellists have a private pre-meet, presumably where they are further briefed. Then they are brought into the crit room, in which the design team (limited to a small number) has been waiting in front of a maximum of 12 mounted A1 boards of drawings. The quantity of drawings is the same whether CABE is reviewing a bus shelter, an office block, or (in my own experience) very large sustainable urban extensions – whole pieces of town – for upwards of 18,000 people.

Roughly an hour and a half is available for the crit. The design team are given about 20 minutes to present the scheme. The discussion is then mostly taken up by questions being asked and clarifications given, because the pre-briefing was poor and the presentation was so short. Having no experience of being ‘CABEd’ for an individual building, I can only report that for large sustainable urban extension schemes most panellists seem embarrassed by having little to say, and are well outside their comfort zone. Mostly the panel is forced to latch onto predictable standard urban design formula points – ‘Why isn’t there a High Street full of shops?’; ‘Is it all perimeter blocks and no culs-de-sac?’; and ‘Where is the tram?’ – but it is clear that most are having trouble getting the scale of the

project right, and are looking at it as if it were a housing estate instead of a very large, mixed-use piece of town that was being scrutinised.

A few days later a 'confidential' report is provided (so much for the Freedom of Information Act!) which records the mostly banal discussion, with the addition of a few points that had never been raised but which must be the personal beef of the CABE staff member writing the report.

Sometimes the panellists hit the right target (usually some horrid requirement from the highway authority), and the CABE report can help the designer to get things changed. That is a political

'All this is about as far as one could get from the highly valuable crits in classic design studios. CABE has a cheerleader role, a nanny role and a didactic role, for sure. But not like this, through badly briefed and barely engaged strangers with little relevant experience, and slight skill in constructive criticism and design discourse'

role – CABE is being used – rather than a design service. Sometimes the reports are just off-beam because the panel didn't understand the site, or the designer, or the client, or the planning authority, or all of them.

All this is about as far as one could get from the highly valuable crits in classic design studios. CABE has a cheerleader role, a nanny role and a didactic role, for sure. But not like this, through badly briefed and barely engaged strangers with little relevant experience, and slight skill in constructive criticism and design discourse.

The CABE enablers can present other problems. The status of 'CABE enabler' is waved about boastfully as if it were a well earned qualification or some other badge of honour and authority. Actually all the label signifies is that this person, for some reason or other, has put themselves forward for some part-time consultancy work for CABE and, by mysterious assessment, is thought (by CABE) to be loyal to CABE's ideals and mantras. The enablers

seem to be available for parachuting by anyone into any stage of anyone's design process, without any accountability or clarity as to role or purpose, and with a brazen willingness to intervene in projects about which they have had no briefing at all.

This is a terrible mess, and some basic rules of engagement for the design police should be established immediately. No CABE design panellist or enabler should allow themselves to be drawn into criticism of an architectural or urban design unless:

- the panellist or enabler has some skill or experience relevant to the matter in hand; and
- there has been good documentary briefing with interactive briefing by the designer; and
- the panellist or enabler has inspected the site.

It is difficult to speak up, because no-one wants to draw the wrath of CABE and so 'get a bad review'. That fear indicates a kind of corruption, because it puts CABE beyond criticism, and has allowed it to develop working practices that can be unprofessional and shallow and which rarely add real value. It is also sad to note that the concept of a 'bad review' misses the whole cultural point: design review should be a constructive part of the design process. It should not be an examination or trial, and, if it was, I'd want properly qualified examiners, a proper jury system, public scrutiny and full accountability!

● *David Lock CBE is chair of masterplanners David Lock Associates (DLA), and has experienced CABE design reviews that have been good, bad and indifferent. He has also served once as a CABE enabler. He is a Vice-President and Trustee of the TCPA, and Visiting Professor at the University of Reading. The views expressed here are personal.*

Note

- 1 Details on how to submit a scheme to CABE's design review, which schemes are eligible, and the supporting documents that are required are available at www.cabe.org.uk/design-review/submit-a-scheme