

Government could improve housing design by learning from CABE

13 March, 2017 By Matthew Carmona

It is six years since the government design watchdog was axed, but many of its initiatives could be aped to improve the quality of new housing, says Bartlett professor *Matthew Carmona*

The government is on a mission to deliver more homes, and in the recent housing white paper it conflates this with achieving better design. This is an association that periodically occurs when governments realise i) the products of the volume housebuilders are pretty universally derided; and ii) concerns over their impact underpin much local opposition to house-building.

The logic goes that to get communities onside, we need houses and residential environments that make a coherent contribution to place, rather than schemes imposed on places with little or no regard to outcomes. Rather than seeing good design as an intrinsic good, this is a view that sees better design as a means to sweeten the pill enough in order to get the patient to take the medicine.

The creation and growth of CABE during the 2000s was in part an attempt to address the issue. Six years after its demise, what lessons can we learn from the experience that might inform the latest attempt to grapple with the thorny issue of mass housing design? My new book, *Design Governance: The CABE Experiment* (written with Claudio De Magalhaes and Lucy Natarajan), provides a few answers.

Tools without teeth

As an organisation, CABE was never well understood. It was often perceived as a monolith swallowing up huge dollops of tax payer's cash to conduct design review. In fact only a fifth of its staff were dedicated to design review, while the rest worked on lower-profile but typically highly regarded activities such as: enabling within local authorities; research projects; campaigning; the production of guidance; and a range of educational enterprises.

These (and design review), are what we call in the book 'informal tools' of design governance, having never been defined in statute. Since CABE could not direct anyone to follow its advice, we might equally call them tools without teeth.

CABE used national housing audits to embarrass the housebuilders by publicising how poor their products were

Through such means CABE was effective at helping to build a stronger culture of design across the country than had hitherto been the case, even influencing some of the volume housebuilders in the process. When confronted with a 'wicked' problem such as what to do about the poor state of volume-housing design, the tools could be used in combination to confront such issues from different angles.

In the case of housing, CABE conducted national housing audits, which were then used to embarrass the housebuilders through a campaign that publicised how poor, on average, their products were. CABE promoted principles of better quality through publishing research, case studies and guidance focused on raising aspirations. It put in place training for local authority staff to help it deal with the housebuilders, and worked with government to strengthen national policy, including on highways design in residential areas.

CABE placed its enablers directly within local planning authorities to assist in the preparation of policy frameworks or to respond to particular large-scale applications. And it worked as part of the Building for Life consortium to establish nationally acceptable standards and an awards system for the best housing designs. Finally, it conducted hundreds of design reviews on residential-led masterplans, many of which were modified as a result.

Tools with bite

Since CABE's demise we have seen a large-scale withdrawal of government – nationally and locally – from engaging in design, and a fragmented market in the few profitable design governance services. We have also seen a retrenchment of housebuilders, highways authorities, and planning authorities across the country back to the old ways of doing things. Respectively these are based on standard (often inappropriate) housing types, rigid and over-engineered highways standards, and a deskilled and reactive planning process.

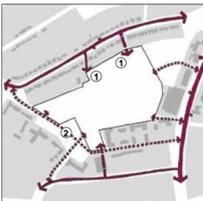
The CABE experiment represented a particular moment in time, and it is unlikely that we will be returning there anytime soon. But learning the lessons from the CABE era, and without further legislation or resources, what should the government do now?

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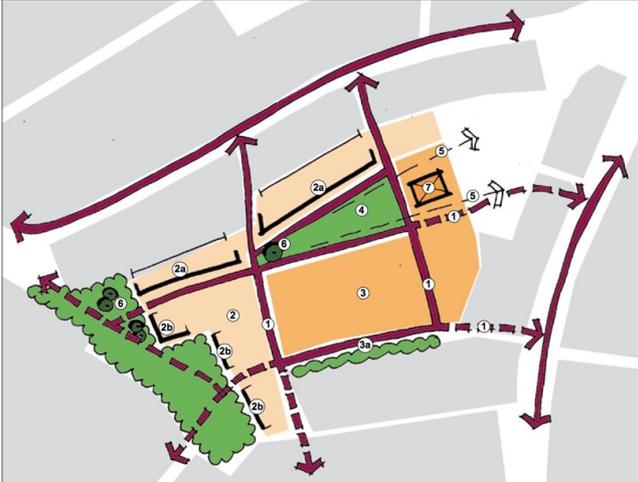
First, don't leave it all to our hard-pressed local authorities, but show some leadership. This must surely involve actively promoting the principles in *Manual for Streets*, the government's own often-ignored guidance on the design of residential streets. Minsters should speak out when residential design is poor, and publicly celebrate it when it is not. They could start by publicising a few appeal decisions where residential schemes are rejected on design grounds.

Second, emphasise proactivity in local authorities, moving away from reliance on generic policies in local plans to the preparation of simple non-statutory but site-specific frameworks and design codes for housing sites that set out the essential urbanistic parameters of place. These tools, such as the use of [single sheet 'coordinating codes'](#), are quick and cheap to prepare, allow communities to engage early with sites (thus reducing conflict), give certainty to all involved, and still allow space for a creative design process.

SITE OPPORTUNITIES AND CONSTRAINTS

community and land use	 <p>Centrally located site with allocation H15 in Local Plan (1) With 5-10 minutes walk of shops, services, employment and parks (2) Located on strategic road network and within walking distance of railway station (3) Surrounded by residential development of varied quality and character (4) >> Central and accessible location suitable for live-work units >> Surrounding area is fragmented and has no uniform character. The development needs to establish its own identity</p>	landscape setting	 <p>Sloping site falling towards the north east with views towards the town centre (1) Established woodland along southwest boundary. This forms a buffer and barrier between southwesterly neighbourhoods and the site / town centre (2) Several mature trees within site boundaries (3) >> Street pattern to follow topography >> Retain views towards the town centre >> Integrate woodland in development to enhance character and connect with surrounding neighbourhoods >> Retain existing trees as indicated</p>
movement	 <p>No direct street frontage, access through "gaps" in building line to north (1) A network of footpaths runs along the site boundary, but do not connect through the site, site forms a barrier between town centre and neighbourhoods to the southwest (2) >> Vehicular access from residential street to north >> Connect internal streets and paths to surrounding footpaths to facilitate through movement and improve connectivity of surrounding neighbourhoods</p>	built form	 <p>Housing type and orientation of surrounding development varies and needs appropriate response: >> Back gardens with minimum 10m depth to respect privacy of existing family dwellings (1) >> Pull back from boundary to avoid overlooking and overshadowing from 4-5 storey apartment blocks (2) >> Position homes to overlook woods (3) >> Position buildings to allow views through to town centre (4) >> Opportunity for triangular green at the centre of the site to address shift in alignment (5)</p>

CO-ORDINATING CODE



New streets and footpaths aligned to follow contours, and create convenient and legible routes linking the site with the surrounding development thus improving access to the town centre for residents in existing neighbourhoods to southwest (1)

Position homes to overlook routes and appropriate in scale and character to development along the site edges:

- Area for 2-3 storey family housing (2) including:
 - Terraced housing backing onto existing family housing; back gardens with minimum depth of 10m (2a)
 - Homes orientated towards the woodlands to benefit from setting and improve security of woodland paths (2b)
- Area for higher density development up to 6 storeys (3) with:
 - Set back and buffer with apartment blocks to south (3a)
- Triangular green space in centre of the site to accommodate shift in grid alignment and create focal point for community (4)
- Retain long views (5)
 - Retain key mature trees in high quality setting (woodland extension and central green) (5a)
 - Retain key mature trees in high quality setting (woodland extension and central green) (5b)
- Opportunity for landmark building up to 8 storeys to further strengthen identity of the development (7)

BROWNFIELD SITE CO-ORDINATING CODE

studio REAL 2016



Brownfield site code

Third, recognise the value of design review as unashamedly a constructive peer-based checking and refinement mechanism. Design review should be made compulsory in the forthcoming revised NPPF for all major housing schemes.

These are all tools without teeth, yet used well they have bite. With little cost and no new legislation we can once again begin to drive design quality up the national agenda.

Matthew Carmona is professor planning and urban design at the Bartlett School of Planning, UCL. [Design Governance: The CABA Experiment](#) is published by Routledge

Readers' comments (1)

- [Rab Bennetts](#) 13 March, 2017 2:51 pm

CABA has not been axed. The Government withdrew funding but CABA carried on (by joining up with the Design Council) and is still offering a range of services including design review with the help of 400 expert design advisers. The back catalogue of design guides is also still available. It would be a shame if this new book gave the impression that CABA is no more, as it is alive and well.
