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Practice paper

Beyond Design Review: Collaborating to Create Well-Designed Places in Scotland

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Abstract

This paper reflects on the national design advice service in Scotland operated by Architecture & Design Scotland (A&DS) since 2005. It describes how design review in Scotland has evolved from a traditional panel model operating alongside a range of training and skills development functions into a more holistic and dynamic design advice service. The paper argues that the evolution of design review in Scotland signifies an innovative shift away from the combative setting of a design panel, where the force of an argument wins the day, towards a more measured and collaborative process of enabling well-designed buildings and places.

1. Introduction

Design review is generally understood as the method of providing enhanced advice on proposed buildings and places during the planning application process (Scheer 1994). It also now extends into a range of sectors where design is increasingly viewed as a critical concern in public procurement decisions for the built environment. Design review is typically conducted by design experts on behalf of a governing authority (whether local, regional or national), and tends to occur during or alongside the planning application process. One of the common aims of design review is to “expand design expertise” (Paterson 2011, p. 94) thereby increasing the “opportunity space” (Punter 2011, p. 190) for discussion about design and ultimately improving the quality of development (Dawson and Higgins 2009). Design review processes can take many forms, from desk-based evaluations of development proposals by professional actors, to more open public forums where design feedback is sought from the general public. The most common form of design review, however, is the peer design review panel where a group of “nationally or regionally respected and highly experienced professionals” (Punter 2011, p. 190) provide peer-to-peer advice using a method not unlike the combative ‘design crit’ model widely employed in architecture schools to assess student work in real time.

Peer design review panels functioned sporadically in the UK throughout the 20th century and had a particular focus on architectural appearance. The Royal Fine Arts Commission operated as a national design review body for England and Wales from 1924, with a sister organisation, the Royal Fine Arts Commission for Scotland, performing a similar function north of the border

from 1927 (Carmona and Renninger 2018). The Royal Institute of British Architects also supported numerous local architectural advisory panels around the country, although their influence was often quite limited (Punter 2011). Enthusiasm for peer design review gathered real strength during the early and mid-2000s as part of a wider turn towards design-sensitive planning across the newly devolved nations of the UK. As part of this 'urban renaissance' agenda (Urban Task Force 1999), design advocacy agencies were established in place of the Royal Fine Arts Commission in England (Commission for Architecture and Built Environment in 1999), Scotland (Architecture & Design Scotland in 2005), Wales (Design Commission for Wales in 2002), and Northern Ireland (Ministry Advisory Group for Architecture and the Built Environment in 2007). Peer design review panels were collectively identified by these new agencies as an effective way to inject high calibre and free design advice at the national level alongside a range of other design education and skills training programmes (Punter 2011).

Despite the enthusiasm for peer design review panels, they are not without their challenges. Research has shown that successful panels often rely on the "calibre and reputation of both the chair and the other panel members" (White, 2016, p. 29) to be successful. Therefore, if a panel is poorly composed, or does not have a good balance of skills, its effectiveness can be limited. Panels have faced criticism for offering arbitrary advice, behaving capriciously, being swayed by personalities and ego, or becoming unduly political (Lai 1988; Poole 1987; White 2016; Carmona *et al.* 2017). As the design review process tends to give precedence to design expertise, some panels have also been described as anti-democratic (Paterson 2011) and not sufficiently open to public scrutiny. Timing has proven to be another significant obstacle to effective peer design review. In many instances design review is a recommended rather than regulated component of the planning and development process. As a result, it is often the case that projects are reviewed by a panel after key design decisions have been taken and much of the budget for design has already been spent. This can leave little room for subsequent changes, especially if a governing authority does not consider panel advice to be mandatory.

In this paper, we reflect on the national design advice services in Scotland operated by Architecture & Design Scotland (A&DS). A&DS has been supported and funded by the Scottish Government since 2005, which has allowed the provision of design advice to remain one of A&DS's key functions for over a decade and has avoided the shift towards design review as a 'paid for' service as has happened in some parts of England (Carmona *et al.* 2017). The paper looks at how design review in Scotland has evolved from a traditional panel model operating alongside a range of training and skills development functions into a more holistic and dynamic design advice service. We argue that the evolution of design review in Scotland signifies an innovative shift away from the oftentimes combative setting of design

panels, where the force of an argument often wins the day, towards a more measured, iterative and collaborative process of nurturing and enabling well-design buildings and places.

2. The Evolution of Design Advice in Scotland

A&DS was established by the Scottish Government and is an 'Executive Non-Departmental Public Body' tasked with aiding the delivery of an ambitious design policy agenda set out in two seminal documents in 2001, *Designing Places* and *A Policy on Architecture*. These were subsequently developed into an integrated design policy statement in 2013 called *Creating Places*. The role of A&DS is to "support and promote Scottish Ministers' policies and objectives for the built and natural environment" (Architecture and Design Scotland, 2017, p. 2), with the aim of encouraging architectural and design excellence and improving the quality of development in Scotland (ibid.). Its core responsibilities are set out in *Creating Places* and include: supporting the creation and renewal of sustainable buildings and places, improving skills and increasing understanding, providing advice, and promoting excellence in the delivery of public buildings and spaces. A&DS is overseen by a board of nine directors appointed by the Scottish Government and has a staff of approximately 25 who work between offices in Edinburgh and Glasgow and remotely across Scotland. A group of 40 expert volunteers, known as the Design Forum, assist A&DS in their design advice service.

A&DS inherited a peer design review process from its predecessor, the Royal Fine Arts Commission for Scotland and, from its creation, provided direct advice on planning and development applications that were referred by local planning authorities. Soon thereafter it also established an enabling service which saw paid design experts, who were appointed by A&DS and generally drawn from the private sector, providing advice to public clients commissioning new buildings and producing design policy documents to drive change. This advice considered the context of the project, the approach to appointing design teams and oftentimes provided guidance and support on early design responses. A&DS's parallel design review function involved voluntary design experts who sat as a traditional peer design review panel and appraised a range of projects from across Scotland, including significant buildings and major urban design masterplans. A number of these projects had also gone through A&DS's enabling process. Design review panel members were initially drawn from a compliment of approximately 25 government appointed board members, and later from panel members appointed after an open recruitment process.

It fell on the skilled professional staff who worked for A&DS to coordinate the enabling and design review services and manage communication challenges, seeking to ensure that the

two processes didn't provide divergent advice. By 2009 – 2010, there was a growing sense that the skills of these staff, many of whom had a considerable amount of senior-level design experience, could carry out much of the enabling support directly. Public clients, in particular, appeared to trust the public agency's professional staff more readily than an expert enabler who worked in private practice. A decision was therefore taken to transition much of A&DS's enabling functions over to staff. By 2010, agency staff were therefore working directly with authorities on a range of projects, including built environment asset management, visioning, and strategic planning and design. At this time, A&DS staff also began to provide direct design advice on some health and education projects, piloting the 'continuum of support' that now underpins all of the organisation's advice work, and which will be discussed in later paragraphs. The agency's wider design review process continued to operate as a peer review panel where staff played a solely facilitatory role in support of the volunteer panellists.

In 2012, the part of the agency's design review function that primarily focused on providing advice to the planning system evolved. This brought it more in line with the collaborative and facilitative nature of other design support services offered by the organisation. Design review moved from a traditional peer review process, where projects received a formal critical assessment from a panel, towards a three-stage facilitated process focused on iterative advice and support. The new process was branded the Design Forum. The agency's expert panellists continued to be appointed by A&DS on a voluntary basis but were now called Design Forum Panellists. In changing the format of design review, A&DS aimed to address some of the broader challenges associated with panel-based assessment, not least the potentially combative nature of peer review. This particular challenge was compounded by a referral practice whereby projects would generally be submitted to A&DS by local authorities only if they were causing concern and would, unfortunately, arrive too late in the planning and design process for fundamental problems to be timeously raised and addressed.

The first stage in the process was to hold a *briefing workshop* before the development of a design proposal and to support the project team and key agencies to capture a shared view of the site brief recognising policy and commercial drivers. The second stage was then to hold an *intermediate workshop*, again involving partner agencies as appropriate. The focus of the intermediate workshop was to provide feedback on an emerging concept, and to help stakeholders work in partnership with the aim of encouraging them to consider how their role and ways of working could support the shared vision and its realisation. This was followed by a third and final *concluding appraisal workshop* during which an assessment was provided on a nearly finalised design proposal to support the consideration of the subsequent application by the local planning authority.

This innovative model was operated by A&DS from 2012 supporting various major projects identified by local planning authorities across Scotland. The process proved effective in ensuring good design. It was recognised as an important factor in decisions about new buildings and places, and helped to enhance the ambitions for certain projects. It also reduced uncertainty around outcomes for applicants and increased collaboration. However, the time investment required by all parties to engage effectively in the work (i.e. the need to produce briefing materials to enable volunteer panel members to operate effectively) meant that it only proved practical to use the advice of Design Forum panel members on especially large or risky projects. This limited the scope and reach of the support A&DS could offer to planning authorities. In addition, the objectives of the service weren't clearly aligned to the priorities of the organisation's emerging *Corporate Strategy 2017-2020*, being a general offer to local planning authorities to support projects they were concerned about, rather than allowing A&DS to target support in areas it felt would be most useful.

3. A Continuum of Support: Building Long-term Capacity for Design Decision Making

Reflecting upon over ten years of operating design review and advice in various guises, A&DS amalgamated its resources, including staff and panel members, in 2016 to provide more flexible sectoral-based design advice services. The agency's *2018-19 Business Plan* describes A&DS's various advice workstreams as including, design advice for schools, housing, health, public infrastructure and pre-design advice on housing. The ethos and components of the Design Forum service and other advice work, including a partnership developed with Health Facilities Scotland (part of NHSScotland) to provide advice to Health Boards on major infrastructure projects, have remained. However, these functions have been augmented to allow greater flexibility and responsiveness, particularly in the ways that A&DS supports housing projects and local authorities. Capacity for this wider remit was made possible by a further widening of the role professional staff play in providing direct design advice. Under the Design Forum model introduced in 2012 a considerable amount of professional staff time was used to produce written reports of workshops and panel proceedings. Under the new model, professional staff engage in the advice service alongside expert panellists thereby reducing the need to focus on reporting panel discussions and increasing the ability to provide informal support in-between larger workshops.

One of the agency's further ambitions has been to look to build the confidence of actors in the design process. A key aim in this regard has been to find ways to increase their capacity to work constructively when delivering new places in the future, as well as producing a better

building or masterplan in the short term. Members of the development team, planning authority, and stakeholders from other agencies, are thus brought into a dialogue about design from the very start of an advice process. Workshops and other interactive forums are used to foster active discussion and solve problems, while an ongoing dialogue with these teams is maintained by agency staff in-between meetings to support them in progressing the project and considering how their actions and processes might support better outcomes in the future. This approach stands in contrast to a more traditional peer design review panel where presenting designers, their collaborators and the planning authority tend to be passive players who receive advice and criticism from a more detached panel of experts.

The Design Forum panellists have remained key members of the A&DS team delivering this new approach. The three-stage process of iterative support described earlier is still often followed, but the advice A&DS provides, and the resources it applies to any project, can be tailored to the particular needs of the project at hand. Shorter meetings or telephone support may be offered between the three stages to allow teams to progress with confidence. A&DS might also hold a meeting with the relevant deciding authority after the concluding appraisal, either with or without the project team, to support them in understanding if any issues which were unresolved during the appraisal stage have since been discharged. For smaller projects, the three primary stages of advice can be provided by staff who support the dialogue between the developer and planning authority via a couple of informal meetings, bringing in learning from the many other projects seen by the organisation. This is an approach A&DS had been employing for projects from other public clients, such as the health sector, for some time. Design Forum panel members are brought in to support schemes which are complex, sensitive or novel, but more routine advice work is carried out by A&DS's own staff building on the learning of over 10 years of prior project assessments and support. As noted earlier, A&DS describe this approach to design advice as offering a 'continuum of support' that starts well before a design is fully developed, and sometimes before a brief or site is identified.

Generally, 2-5 advisors (Design Forum panel members and/or professional staff) are involved on any one project at any given time and, in an effort to build trust with the project team, A&DS aim to have the same actors involved in a project throughout the time that advice is being offered, but they also aim to limit the role of each panel member to three meetings or workshops. This ensures their time can be spread across a range of projects. The key distinction between A&DS's flexible approach to design advice and a more traditional peer design review is that advice is no longer provided in the quasi-adversarial setting of a panel where the objective is a peer to peer (designer to designer) review but instead is more dynamically based on the specific needs of a project and is aimed at facilitating all the parties

involved in the development (e.g. client, designers and regulators, etc.) to work together to enable better outcomes. The approach equally considers how the project brief and public authorities are influencing the project, and how the designers are responding to those drivers. It is specifically *not* a review of the designer and their creative response. Advice is only provided if it is part of an ongoing dialogue and never as a ‘one off’ commentary as might sometimes be received, but not always acted upon, during a traditional peer design review panel process.

Although the time invested in supporting any one project is much greater than in a traditional panel review, the aim of the process extends beyond the one project to support change in the behaviours of all the people involved in the project, so when they work on another project they can tackle challenges more confidently. For example, one local authority used this process to progress the design of a couple of housing projects where the market conditions meant that the local authority struggled to meet its design aspirations. Through the process of working with A&DS the authority realised that they needed to reconsider their own approach to road adoption. They now use consented examples as a benchmark for subsequent applications when negotiating with applicants. Elsewhere, after working with A&DS on a project, a local planning authority revisited its policies on masterplanning and supported its elected members to strengthen their confidence in assessing larger and more complicated developments. The next project referred to A&DS had a much more positive starting point and further improved upon the standards being achieved locally. In this vein, client bodies are developing their approach and capacity from one project to the next.

4. Conclusions

In this short paper, we have described how the process of design review at the national level in Scotland has evolved over a period of just over a decade from one driven by the deliberations of a peer review panel into an innovative project-based design advice service focused on improving and enabling better design through focused intervention and collaborative practice. We have aimed to demonstrate that the innovative approach to national design advice adopted in Scotland goes much further than the traditional yet often flawed model of the peer design review panel that is commonly used by governing authorities in many local, regional and national jurisdictions alongside other methods of enabling and engagement.

In a 2012 research article that examined design review practices in the United States, the authors Kim and Forester (2012, p. 250) argued that there are “four important roles” played

by design review that are often overlooked in the scholarly literature. First is design review as a process of education, whereby reviewers can help parties involved in a design project navigate “diverse issues from legal constraints to design elements” (ibid.). Second, is design review as a forum for facilitating “deliberative conversations enabling parties to see one another and their design possibilities anew” (ibid.). Third, is design review as a process of therapy that responds to “developers’ and community residents’ fears and anxieties” (ibid.). And, fourth, is design reviewers taking on the role of “ritual convenors” who enable parties to “build relationships, listen and learn” (ibid.). We argue that the design advice service in Scotland has convincingly assumed these roles.

In their roles as *facilitators* A&DS seek to help project teams build capacity for design within existing decision-making structures by demonstrating how new ways of working and collaborating can lead to better design outcomes. Being *ritual convenors* is a key part of this process because building relationships across project teams is often as important (or potentially more important) than a discussion about the intricacies of a particular design proposal. It is in this sense that the process of design advice is a *therapeutic* one because a focus on building relationships helps to break down barriers between the myriad actors and stakeholders involved in the fuzzy process of design. If new conversations about design are not moving from project to project, then little is being learnt. In this sense, perhaps the best measure of a successful process is when A&DS do not have to engage with that project team on any subsequent design process. Finally, the role of design advice is one of long-term *education* and learning about design that extends beyond those already interested in design and planning regulation, such as the architects and planners who engage directly with the design advice service, to those who commission and use a new building or place. Arguably, the most powerful way of changing perceptions about design and its value is if users develop a long-term interest in design from a first-hand experience of a high-quality building or place.

This practice article has demonstrated how design review can take divergent pathways and avoid some of the pitfalls that researchers and practitioners alike have identified with traditional peer design review panels (e.g. Carmona *et al.* 2017; Punter 2011; White 2016). While this paper does not presume to argue that peer design review panels are without merit as a tool within wider design governance processes, it does endeavour to challenge practitioners and researcher to consider the pre-eminence of the expert panel in favour of less high profile but more methodical process of design engagement that still continue to call on the expertise of design practitioners in a collaborative stakeholder setting.

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