

gaps in a solidly built-up area, with no real escape from the sight of bricks and mortar, or glass and concrete".¹⁰ Thirty-five years later the threat of high buildings around the London parks has receded and it is the relentless pressure from the motor car, as well as a tendency to municipalise, which now endanger "the illusion of rural surroundings".

Context

Fitting new buildings into their context and conversely protecting the setting of existing buildings is nowadays a subject of great concern. This is a reaction to the post-war period when public awareness of these problems was inadequate. There is now a fear of contrast, dissonance and even counterpoint. Yet there are plenty of examples of modern-looking buildings which have become accepted, even admired in their setting. The Royal Fine Art Commission first commented on this subject in relation to the 1947 Town and Country Planning Act. "The question of the appropriateness of new buildings to their architectural surroundings and, indeed, the whole quality of their design, are now matters on which the Planning Authority may exercise its powers of control under the Act. The exercise of these powers can help to raise the general standard of architecture; they can also go far to stultify creative energy and imagination".¹¹ While the Commission repeatedly called for the new work to be sympathetic in scale and character to that already existing, it also made the point that the new work should be at least as good an example of contemporary design as the older work was of its own period.¹²

The Commission has also underlined the importance of the site and the need to study and understand it. In urban areas it has stressed the need for a critical appreciation of the merits of existing buildings and has urged that "new buildings should not generally be treated as the first instalment of an entirely new piece of civic design, with the implied suggestion that we must put up with the resulting muddle until the whole area has been rebuilt; this may never happen. Each generation will have its own ideas, and in England particularly it is this variety which gives interest and vitality to our towns and cities".¹³ These words were written in 1956 but went unheeded during the next twenty years of comprehensive urban redevelopment. In a particular sense they remain unheeded today by planning authorities who compel the architect to design quaint brick buildings with mansards and bay windows, not realising that a place

like the Market Square at Lavenham has every architectural style, material and method of construction and is marvellous because it was built by people who had good judgement and confidence in it.

The context and setting of a building are often considered nowadays to be of paramount importance. A greenfield site is just as much a context as a built-up urban area. Whether on a greenfield site or in a town there is the need for something appropriate to site, circumstances and function, but which must also encompass the original and innovative, great architecture on the cutting edge of the art and therefore initially unfamiliar like the Palace of Westminster, the Eiffel Tower and the Lloyds Building, which were all reviled when they were new. Context or the need for integration is only one of a number of factors, and to set too much store by it could deny the opportunity of innovation and excitement in architecture and continue to force many of Britain's most talented architects to build abroad.

There is the need for critical appreciation of the qualities of existing buildings and it is essential to get the basics right, like height, massing and silhouette, before considering elevational treatment. Appropriate designs are often quite ordinary, and therefore familiar and more readily accepted by planning officers. The genuinely original and innovative design, however, must also be recognised and a judgement made whether the resulting contrast is tolerable.

The Royal Fine Art Commission's view has been consistent over the years. In 1960 it looked primarily to such questions "as whether the new work preserves the scale of the setting and whether its colour and texture and general outline harmonise with its surroundings. A good solution is far more likely to be reached by an architect who has these points firmly in mind rather than by one who starts from the assumption that all will be well if either he builds in the original style or if he puts up a building designed in an unmistakably modern manner".¹⁴ This is not support for anodyne contextualism but criticism of the architect who designs from outside inwards, deciding on the style of a building before considering function and purpose, structure and materials and the appropriate use of technology. The criticism is as relevant today as it was thirty years ago.

Judging designs

Criticism and judgement of architecture require knowledge, understanding and skill. They must illuminate the work criticised. The critic's medium is