

Education Department Research Programme

Survey of the building design professions' attitudes to the Policy on Architecture

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Following the Partnership for Scotland Agreement in 1999, the Scottish Executive began to develop the first national policy on architecture, the first stages of which were documented in the framework publication *The Development of a Policy on Architecture for Scotland*. This stimulated debate about the issues involved in good design and how to improve architecture throughout Scotland and was followed by a series of public consultations to obtain opinions about the framework. The findings from which were published in *The Development of a Policy on Architecture for Scotland: Report on the Public Consultation*. The Scottish Executive then launched its Policy on Architecture in October 2001.

This research project was commissioned by the Scottish Executive to investigate the views of building design professionals towards the Policy and the impact it has made on the profession. It was carried out by means of a telephone survey and a smaller number of face to face interviews.

Main Findings

- Less than half of design professionals rated current standards of design as 'good' for all aspects of the built environment. Strongest areas are felt to be Brownfield housing developments and new public spaces. Greatest dissatisfaction is towards Greenfield housing developments.
- With the exception of some traditional and notable prestige projects, standards of design in Scotland are felt to be behind those of the rest of the UK and Europe.
- The design of a building reflects its time, purpose and environment, but it is also strongly influenced by budget, planning constraints, knowledge of the client and experience of the architect.
- The most commonly mentioned ways in which standards of design could be improved in Scotland included increased public understanding of the importance of good design, changes to the planning system, better training and improved funding.
- 60% of design professionals said they were aware of the Scottish Executive's Policy on Architecture, although under half (42%) credited it with having had an impact on their work. Overall, the Policy appeared to have made the greatest impact among planners.
- There is wide-spread support for the values of the Scottish Executive's Policy, in particular 'to lead by example in the work they commission'. However, there is some frustration that the Policy does not sufficiently challenge or influence the activities of the professions.

Background

The Policy on Architecture emphasised four main aspects of the importance of the built environment:

- it is a key component of developing an inclusive society;
- it is an expression of our cultural identity and aspirations;
- it contributes to the conservation and development of our built heritage; and
- it contributes to economic well-being, stimulating local economies and regeneration.

It identified five key objectives:

- Promote the value and benefits of good architecture, encourage debate on the role of architecture and further understanding of the products and processes of building design;
- Foster excellence in design, acknowledge and celebrate achievement and promote Scottish architecture at home and abroad;
- Encourage greater interest and community involvement;
- Promote a culture of quality in the procurement of publicly-funded buildings; and
- Ensure the planning and building standards systems and their associated processes promote and facilitate design quality in development.

Aims and objectives

Research conducted in 2004 with the general public established baseline measures of their awareness and attitudes towards the built environment. The next stage was to commission research among building design professionals to establish views on the policy. In particular the research was intended to:

- provide Ministers with views of the building design professions on the value of the various elements of policy, the impact the policy has had to date and the relevance and importance of the policy to the professions themselves;
- provide baseline data against which attitudinal changes over time can be analysed;

- provide a further means of raising awareness of the aims and achievements of policy within the professions and in related specialist press; and
- inform considerations of future policy priorities.

The survey

The survey consisted of both qualitative and quantitative components.

Six face-to-face in-depth interviews were conducted with senior representatives of the building and design professions throughout October 2004. These interviews identified the key issues for consideration in the main quantitative survey.

A telephone survey was conducted among a cross-section of 500 building design professionals from 3–24 November 2004.

Finally, 16 follow-up in-depth interviews were conducted with 16 representatives of the building design professions in February 2005 to explore some of the findings from the quantitative survey in more depth.

Findings

Perceived role of different members of the design team in the design process

When approached to discuss attitudes towards architectural design in Scotland, the vast majority of structural and civil engineers felt they did not have a role in influencing the design of the buildings or public spaces for which they formed part of the design team. In addition, the vast majority of surveyors felt they only have a limited role in the design process itself.

Perceptions of current standards of design

Less than half of design professionals rated current standards of design as 'good' for all aspects of the built environment. The strongest areas were felt to be Brownfield housing developments (44% good) and new public spaces (43% good), while views were divided towards new industrial, office or retail developments (39% good) and new public buildings such as schools and hospitals (35% good). The design of these developments is believed to be influenced in a positive way by a number of factors. From professionals' comments they are often one-off developments which should have a more positive consideration for their environment, planning constraints and required purpose.

The highest level of dissatisfaction is aimed at Greenfield housing developments – 1 in 5 felt they are good, while the

clear majority (55%) felt they are poor. Planners, structural engineers and architects were the most critical of the professional groups. Views are evenly divided among surveyors and developers. Criticism was made of the lack of inventiveness or challenge to these developments. It was accepted by many that design is often compromised by the balance between development costs and return on investment. However, many also believe developments are often made to standard specifications without involvement of a qualified architect.

With the exception of some traditional buildings and notable prestige projects, general standards of design in Scotland were believed to be behind those of the rest of the UK and Europe. For many, responsibility lies with local authorities in Scotland. However, there was a general acceptance of the need to raise public awareness and debate about our built environment.

Drivers and barriers to good design

Design professionals felt it was difficult to define good design. The design of a building reflects its time, purpose and environment and is strongly influenced by budget, planning constraints, knowledge of the client and experience of the architect.

The most commonly mentioned ways in which design professions felt the quality of design in Scotland could be improved included increasing public understanding of the importance of good design, changes to the planning system, better training and improved funding.

Funding is clearly important. With the exception of one-off, prestige projects, many felt sufficient funding is not made available for publicly funded initiatives such as schools and hospitals. Design is often felt to be compromised by budget; and procurement models, such as PFI and PPP, are often felt to undermine the good design.

Knowledge and expertise of the client is also extremely important. Professionals would like to see an increased willingness to challenge the quality of design for all types of development from prestige project to large-scale housing developments. The acknowledgement of good design through awards and competitions is felt to play a role, but, education programmes and changes to the planning system were felt likely to have a stronger influence.

Professionals are commonly critical of the planning process – often regarding it as a hindrance to good design. Although important, it is also frequently perceived to be slow and often short-sighted. Many planning departments are believed to be under-staffed and insufficiently experienced. Some architects actively mention ‘dumbing-down’ design in order to shorten

the planning process. Too much importance is placed on precedent and procedure and planning departments are criticised for their reluctance to challenge the quality of design in planning applications. There was very little criticism of local authorities that have placed design higher up the agenda of planning decisions.

A Policy on Architecture for Scotland

60% of design professionals said they were aware of the Scottish Executive’s Policy on Architecture for Scotland. Awareness was highest among planners (77%), landscape architects (68%) and architects (65%). It was, however, much lower among other professionals. All professionals, including planners and developers are more aware of the Scottish Planning Policy (SPP1): The Planning System. Awareness of the Policy and all the documents derived from it was much higher among planners than other professions.

Under half (42%) of professionals credited the Policy with having had an impact on their work. A similar proportion (42%) felt SPP1 had made an impact. Professionals more commonly acknowledged impact in their work as a result of the subsequent planning publications including Designing Places (55%), PAN 68: Design Statements (55%) and PAN 67: Housing Quality (53%).

There was some expressed frustration among design professionals that the Policy, while encapsulating professional aspirations, does not sufficiently challenge or influence the activities of the professions. The documents that followed the publication of the Policy appeared to have provided more guidance, set standards for design and outlined requirements for the planning process. Reflecting levels of awareness, planners were more likely to have felt that the subsequent planning publications have had an impact on their work.

There was widespread support amongst the building design professions for the values of the Policy on Architecture. Almost 90% of professionals felt all of the aims of the Scottish Executive’s Policy on Architecture were important to the quality of the built environment in Scotland. The most important aims were ‘to lead by example in the work they commission’ (76% very important), ‘campaigning for better quality buildings and the built environment’ (73% very important) and ‘increasing public awareness and appreciation of good design in buildings and the built environment’ (68% very important).

Professionals were very supportive of the role of education in improving the quality of design. As well as raising public awareness, the majority would like the Executive to work more closely with schools to make young people more aware of their environment and encourage more interest and

community involvement in matters affecting the built environment. Centres of excellence, such as the Lighthouse; prominent public buildings, such as the Scottish Parliament; competitions and awards; and the media have all influenced public debate on the quality of design in Scotland. While

some professionals mentioned examples of community involvement in the design of public places working well in the past, there is also reluctance among other professionals for the public to be involved in the design process without first educating and raising the levels of public understanding.

If you wish further copies of this Research Findings or have any enquiries about this project, please contact:

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