

Newham Design Review Panel

Report after one year of operation – February 2009

Background

The Newham Design Review Panel (DRP) was set up in October 2007 to help improve the quality of design through the borough's planning process.

Newham DRP is an external advisory panel that reviews major applications and pre-application plans and provides design advice to Newham's Council Land Panel and Development Control Committee. The panel cannot make decisions on planning applications, but advises those that do – Newham Members and development control officers. The panel members have been appointed by Newham Council, and the panel exists to serve Newham Council, but it will offer independent design advice.

The panel meets monthly and reviews between 1 to 4 development proposals. Each meeting comprises the chair and a group of 6 independent experts in the field of built environment and design, invited from a pool of 33 professionals who were appointed following a selection process. A list of the panel members can be found in **Appendix A**. Planning officers and representatives of external agencies including Design for London and the LTGDC are invited to attend as observers.

The Panel evaluates developments boroughwide, excluding Olympic applications and Stratford City, which have their own design panels. With particular focus on Canning Town, the Royal Docks, the Lower Lea Valley and the rest of Stratford, the panel reviews designs at the planning applications and pre-application stage for major schemes that impact on the Borough's townscape.

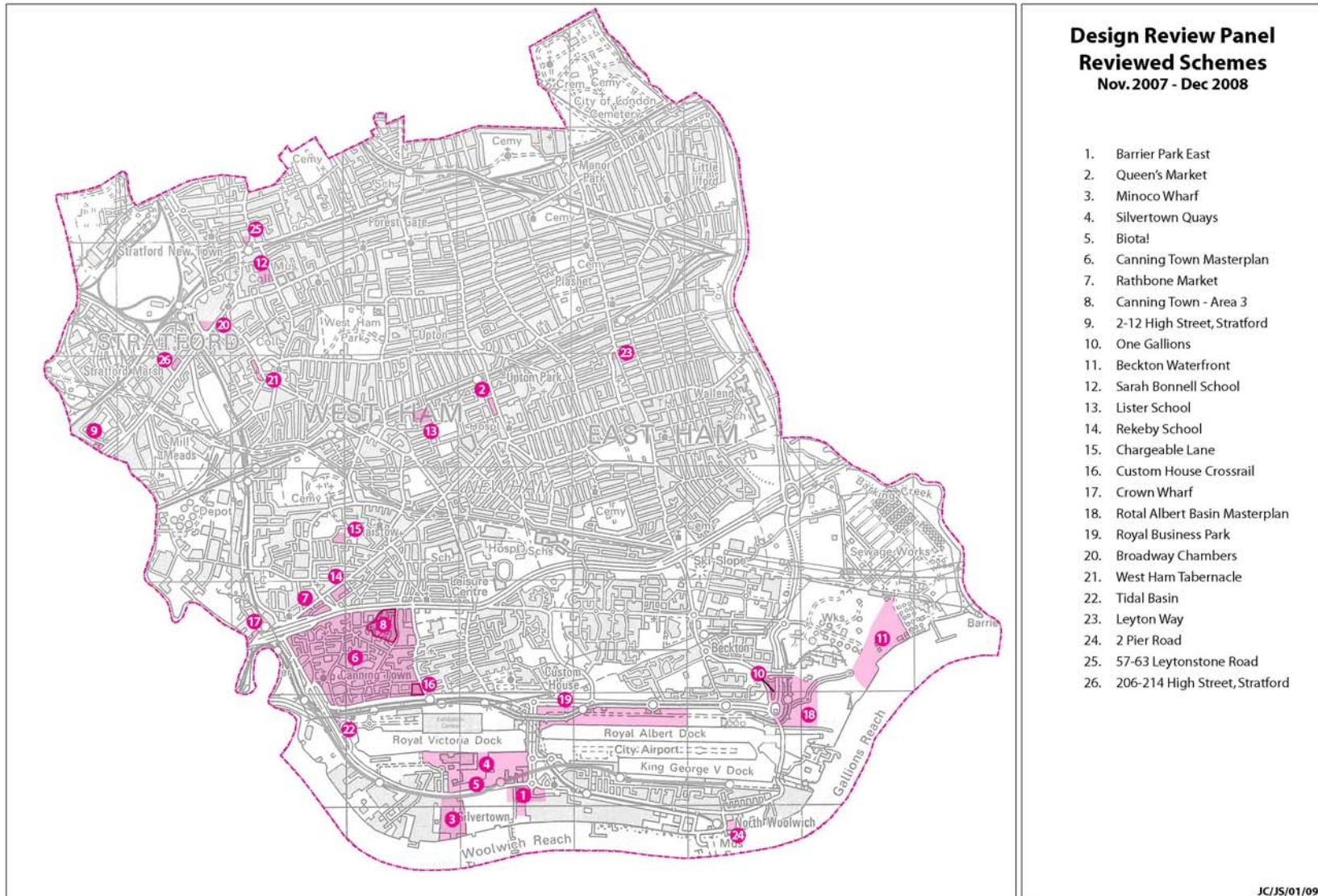
In the majority of cases the panel is commenting on pre-application proposals and thus, the reports issued are confidential. The reports are circulated to the developer, who is required to address the panel's views when developing the designs to the next stage. In the case of schemes which are already submitted as a planning application, the panel's report becomes a public document and is included in the application file.

Reviewed schemes

Since formation, the panel has held once monthly meetings, with the exception of August and two additional meetings in both February and June. It has reviewed 27 schemes predominantly at pre-application stage. Please refer to **Figure 1** for the location of these schemes. Of those schemes, 12 have been brought back to the panel for a second review. Details on the schemes reviewed and the summary of the panel's advice is shown in **Appendix B**.

Following each meeting a report is written by the Chair, circulated in draft to the attending panel members for their comments and then sent to Newham to circulate to the developer and their design teams. Newham's planning officers then ensure that any criticism of a reviewed scheme is addressed by developers and their architects and, where appropriate, scheme redesigns can be taken back to the DRP. The full reports from each of the panel meetings can be found in **Appendix C**.

Figure 1



Progress at six months

The panel was reviewed at the six month point. At that time it was considered that the panel was achieving its objective for the following reasons.

- In most cases, the reviews led the developers and their architects to improve the scheme's design. A number of important and high profile proposals have undergone significant, if not radical design change.
- The panel has also proved a valuable asset to Newham's Planning staff. Development Control officers have found design reports helpful to secure changes in their negotiations with developers. Furthermore, staff have been encouraged to attend the panel meetings as a useful design training exercise.
- The panel has generated extensive external interest. Design officers from other London boroughs and places as far a field as Victoria, Australia have attended meetings in an observer capacity. Additionally, Newham's panel was highlighted as a case study by RIBA in a report to central government on the benefits of local design review panels.

Progress at one year

Since the six month review, the panel has continued to be seen as a positive contribution to the workings of the council. For major schemes, the DRP has become integral to the council's planning process. Furthermore, the panel has increased the publicity of Newham's planning service by being highlighted by CABE as a London case study and through a presentation at the RTPI's annual Design in the Planning Process Conference.

Operational Assessment

Operationally, the panel is working well under the guidance of the Chair Peter Ahrends with whom the Newham Planning Officers have a positively collaborative working relationship. During the meetings, the panel members have reached agreement on the major design issues present in the proposals. The reports have thus been able to provide clear and effective guidance to developers and architects.

Over the course of the year some changes have been made to improve the functioning of the panel, including:

- Pre-meeting site visits have been made longer to provide sufficient time to understand the area. They have also become more formalised with officers related to the site in attendance.
- The system of distributing pre-meeting information from the developers and their architects has been streamlined.
- The rotation of panel members has been changed to allow for a more varied month by month schedule.
- Previously supported by existing Regeneration officers, a dedicated panel coordinator was appointed in mid-May.

- There is an emphasis within the planning service to review proposals as early as possible, thus enabling the panel to have an influence from the early stages of the design process.
- For some larger proposals, a longer review format is used to allow sufficient discussion time.
- Many of the projects that are reviewed are part of wider regeneration strategies, and thus when appropriate, the panel members are informed of these larger initiatives, so that schemes are not reviewed in isolation.
- The procedure for report writing has been streamlined to allow a quicker turn around time. Reports also now include the any minority views of the panellists.
- At reviews, presenting teams are encouraged to leave behind a reference document (boards, drawings, or a model) to which the members could consult during their internal discussion.

Feedback

As part of the annual review of the panel, in November 2008, a feedback survey was sent to all architects and developers who presented to the panel. A copy of the survey is included in **Appendix D**.

In total 36 questionnaires were sent out and we received 6 responses. Five of the six respondents welcomed the creation of the panel and a few congratulated Newham for taking the initiative to create a very professionally run panel.

The questionnaire asked respondents to rate various aspects of the review format and procedure. The results of these questions are summarized in **Figure 2**. The questionnaire also asked more open ended questions and offered an opportunity to add any additional comments. Concerns that were raised in this section and actions that will be undertaken to address the comments are detailed in **Figure 3**.

Figure 2

Questions used the following ranking system: <i>1 = very poor, 2 = poor, 3 = average, 4 = good, 5 = excellent</i>	Average score
Information sent to you prior to the meeting	3.6
Communication with Newham Staff prior to the meeting	4
Notice for the submission of premeeting information	3.8
Presentation facilities (room, technology, etc)	3
Format of the review	3.4
Usefulness of the panel's report	4
Communication with Newham staff following the meeting	3.7

Figure 3

Concern raised	Action taken
The room was too small to accommodate all team members	After the 3rd monthly meeting, the location was changed to a larger room within the same venue
The panel format did not provide enough time to fully discuss the proposal	Since the six month review, longer reviews are now allocated for larger proposals
More feedback received on the day would be useful	A way to facilitate this is presently under review
Not sure what the response mechanism to the report is	When issuing the report, architects and developers are asked to continue their conversations with the relevant case officer, however they may respond formally to the report if they wish
Thought that the panel was too architect dominated	We feel that given the nature of the proposals under review, the panel membership provides an appropriate balance between architects and non-architects

Issues Arising

Although the panel is deemed successful, its operations have highlighted a number of issues worthy of consideration:

- For large regeneration projects there is often a lack of design consideration at the early stages of design team procurement. Where the Council is the developer or a regeneration partner, it should satisfy itself about the design capabilities of the architects under consideration as an essential factor in the procurement of design teams.
- Large schemes may need to come before the panel a number of times. In such circumstances, there is the possibility to set up a sub group to focus on an individual project during the progress of the design stages.
- Under the panel's original formation, Newham appointed a pool of 33 design professionals, from which 6 members were drawn to serve on an individual meeting.

Since this arrangement results in members serving only once every six months, it begs the question whether the pool is too big.

- Likewise, with the present member rotation, some panellists are unaware of the full extent of the panel's activities. Thus, there is a need to better disseminate information and share the experiences of the panel. In order to address this a full meeting of panellists and key officers was held in Newham. Some officers and the panel's Chair made presentations about the full work of the panel enabling a well informed and useful exchange of ideas.
- Architects and developers that have presented to the panel have expressed the need for not only more feedback on the meeting day, but also a more formalised response system. Thus a post meeting response procedure is presently under consideration.

Conclusions

The Design Review Panel has raised the quality of design in development proposals. The panel is now effectively embedded as part of the planning application process. Significant design improvements to projects have been achieved and the panel has brought positive attention to the borough.

APPENDIX A

Newham Design Review Panel Members

Chair: Peter Ahrends

ABK Architects

Amanda Baillieu
Philip Cave
Simon Child
Alessandra Cianchetta
Nigel Coates
Tom Coward
Robin Cross
Tina Frost
Daisy Froud
Susannah Hagan
Julian Hart
Olaf Kneer
David Kohn
Alistair Lathe
Julian Lewis
CJ Lim
Steve Marshall
Jane McCarthy
Claire McDonald
Matthew McGrory
Tom Muirhead
Richard Partington
Richard Portchmouth
Anthony Rifkin
Tim Ronalds
Robert Sakula
Amir Sanei
Theresa Smith
Signy Svalastoga
Andrew Taylor
Ken Taylor
Stephen Taylor
Chris Williamson

Building Design Magazine
Philip Cave Associates
Child Graddon Lewis
AWP
Royal College of Art
The AOC
Lewisham Design Panel
Jestico + Whiles
Open House / The AOC
Brighton School of Architecture
Lancefield Consulting
Mueller Kneer
David Kohn Architects
SOM
East
The Bartlett / Studio 8 Architects
Munkenbeck + Marshall Urbanism
Mouchel Parkman Services
DSDHA
Glen Howells Architects
Thomas Muirhead Architects
Richard Partington Architects
Birds Portchmouth Russum Architects
Urban Practitioners
Tim Ronalds Architects
Ash Sakula Architects
Sanei Hopkins Architects
Mooch Design
London Metropolitan School of Architecture
Patel Taylor
Quay2c
Stephen Taylor Architects
Weston Williamson

APPENDIX D
Newham Design Review Panel Annual Report
Developer and Architect Survey

At which monthly meeting was your scheme reviewed? _____

You are the scheme's (please circle) Architect / Developer

How would you rate the following?
(Please circle, 1= very poor, 2 = poor, 3 = average, 4 = good, 5 = excellent)

Information sent to you prior to the meeting	1	2	3	4	5	N/A
Communication with Newham Staff prior to the meeting	1	2	3	4	5	N/A
Notice for the submission of premeeting information	1	2	3	4	5	N/A

Was there any information you did not receive prior to the meeting, but you feel would have helped you prepare for or present at the review?

Any further comments on the premeeting procedure?

Presentation facilities (room, technology, etc)	1	2	3	4	5	N/A
Format of the review	1	2	3	4	5	N/A

Any further comments on the meeting procedure?

Usefulness of the panel's report	1	2	3	4	5	N/A
Communication with Newham staff following the meeting	1	2	3	4	5	N/A

Any further comments on the panel report?

What improvements do you feel could be made to the Design Review Panel?

Any additional comments?

Would you be willing to be contacted for any further follow up questions? Y / N

If so, please leave your contact details below.

Name:

Company:

Address:

Email:

Phone Number: