

CABE and London

The Commission for Architecture and the Built Environment is sometimes criticised for being London-centric in its design review programme. Chairman designate Paul Finch argues this is far from the case, and that London, arguably, deserves more attention.



Paul Finch is joint publishing editor of *Planning in London*.

CABE only has responsibility for England; London produces an extraordinarily disproportionate quantity of buildings in relation to England as a whole; yet CABE is careful to avoid devoting a matching proportion of its resources to influencing what happens in the capital.

There is method in this, in the sense that projects in London which would be major events in other towns and cities barely provoke comment here. A large office building in the City of London is just another addition; transplant it to almost any other city and it becomes a talking point.

Moreover, government has quite legitimately charged CABE with spreading its activities across its geographical area to try to ensure equality of service, which it does partly through working with local architectural and built environment centres. And in a reverse side of the coin argument to the one stated above, much smaller projects in the regions, especially in small towns, will have a disproportionate influence on local futures and therefore deserve review.

So by and large, CABE reviews, enables and gets involved in public space projects where they are truly significant in the capital. Past activity has included supporting at inquiry

the Heron Tower and the 'Walkie-talkie' tower in Fenchurch Street; and partly supporting the 'Shard' tower at London Bridge. Letters supporting or opposing countless schemes have been sent to planning authorities and occasionally the planning inspectorate, but again generally only on major projects. CABE's public space people have done fine work on the emerging green spaces strategy across east London.

Sometimes you win, sometimes you lose, depending on circumstance. Ian Ritchie's elliptical housing towers by Tower Bridge were

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supported by CABE, approved on appeal, but never delivered because of site ownerships and the (to me) mystifying opposition of Southwark Council. On other occasions, CABE has been most effective when it has been able to stop poor designs in their tracks, very occasionally by intimating that the existing design team is not up to it.

But does London get its fair crack of the whip? You might argue that since every other region in England has CABE representatives as our

'eyes and ears', why isn't there one for London itself? This is probably because, being based in London and inevitably being aware of what is going on in our own back yard, there has always been a feeling that it would be an act of duplication to have a formal regional panel, and in these troubled financial times the last thing any quango needs is that. But even in writing this, I am conscious that this is an attitude which resulted in the ignoring of outer London for far too long, until the Outer London Commission recently came into being.

The truth is that London is a country rather than a city, and given the apparently insatiable appetite for design review, it will be impossible to advise on everything where advice is sought. Nevertheless it will be important in the next few years, given the likely dearth of major new commercial projects, to have an eye to projects of significance which might not have caught CABE's eye in the boom years, particularly where they are likely to make major changes to the character of a place. Of course that could be good news or bad, depending on quality of idea and quality of design.

London will, of course, continue to be on CABE's radar; the question of how much resource will be devoted to it will also be a subject

Paul Finch appointed new chair of CABE from the *Architects' Journal* 17 August 2009

Paul Finch has been appointed as the new chair of CABE and will take over from Sir John Sorrell this December.

Paul is Programme director of the World Architecture Festival, and editor emeritus of *Architectural Review* and *Architects' Journal*.

He has chaired CABE's London 2012 design review panel since 2006. A former commissioner and deputy chair of CABE, Paul spent five years as chair of CABE's design review panel, and also chaired its regional committee.

Sir John Sorrell said he was delighted by Paul Finch's appointment as his successor: 'He will be a powerful advocate for good design. He brings an

encyclopaedic knowledge of architecture and urban design, and he knows the work of every leading designer, internationally as well as nationally. Most importantly he knows how to get the best out of them, which is exactly what we need in difficult economic times.'

CABE chief executive Richard Simmons welcomed the announcement as good news for CABE and for the people CABE works with: 'Paul always speaks his mind with great clarity and incisiveness, so I think his appointment demonstrates how much the government values CABE's independent voice. As chair of CABE's London 2012 design review panel, he has led one of our

toughest, leading edge programmes superbly well, ensuring that good design and value for money have been at the heart of the project. He will bring that professionalism and understanding of contemporary design issues to all he does at CABE.'

The four year appointment was announced by Culture Secretary Ben Bradshaw today, who said that Paul Finch 'brings a wealth of experience and a formidable understanding of the world of architecture and the built environment to the role'.

Ben Bradshaw thanked the outgoing chair, Sir John Sorrell, 'under whose assured leadership CABE has gone from strength to strength'.