

**The Role and Effectiveness of the
Commission for Architecture and the Built Environment**

**Evidence submitted by The Royal Academy of Engineering to
ODPM: Housing, Planning, Local Government and the Regions
Committee**

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1. Introduction

1.1 The credibility of the Royal Fine Arts Commission (RFAC) was underpinned by the distinction of and regard for its Commissioners, such that opinions expressed by them were deemed to be weighty and worthy of application. The choice of Sir Stuart Lipton as the first chairman of CABE, following its evolution from the Royal Fine Arts Commission, was inspired. Respected as a man of the highest integrity, who cares deeply about the quality of our built environment, he has a no nonsense approach to design and construction. His departure from the role, on the grounds of conflicting interests, raises some difficult issues. It is probable that any person of distinction in the Construction Industry will have potential conflicts of interest unless one can persuade someone in the twilight of their career to take on what has now become a very demanding task. Identifying a new Chairman who is sufficiently distinguished and who has or has been involved with architecture/construction/the built environment will be a challenge.

1.2 CABE has widened its horizons beyond those of the RFAC and has greater staff numbers dealing with a much larger workload. Nevertheless, its influence will be enhanced by the credibility and quality of opinions expressed. It is important to recruit people of the highest calibre to its staff but the standing of the Commissioners, be they engineers, architects, quantity surveyors, developers or others deemed competent to take part in its deliberations, should be of the highest level. Equally, to be asked to become a Commissioner should be regarded as a great honour.

1.3 The answers to the Committee's questions which are presented below are based on replies received from Fellows of The Royal Academy of Engineering with knowledge of CABE and its activities.

CABE's overall priorities for investment and development

2.1 This is believed to be correct. There is a tendency, however, to take on too much. The big issues that they are grappling with have so many interdependencies and interested parties that nothing is ever straightforward.

The work of its design review panel in terms of:

3.1 (a) the criteria used in reviewing schemes

It has been stated that the system worked rather like a high level critique session so there were never really any stated criteria - this may be part of the problem.

3.2 (b) the consistency in the application of the criteria

A lack of continuity in the membership/attendees leads inevitably to differing responses, but with such subjective issues it is hard to avoid this situation. However, the opinion is that the responses tended to be consistent: good design was recognised and praised and the less good was not.

3.3 (c) the choice of schemes reviewed

This sometimes appeared random, but seemed to embrace a good mix of high profile and less high profile proposals. In recent years there has been a greater proportion of schemes from outside London.

CABE's relationships with other national and local agencies

4.1 Our track record in reconstructing our cities in socially, environmentally and architecturally friendly ways has been pretty abysmal since WW2,. Urban places and spaces are created by the buildings, parks and streets which make up our cities and for which applications are made to the hundreds of planning authorities throughout the country year in and year out. CABE appears to work hard to help direct planners and work diplomatically with people like English Heritage, but they are not afraid to challenge opinions and decisions.

4.2 The establishment of "mini-CABEs" at local government level could go some way to assisting planning authorities in urban regeneration. Planners do their best, but their role is to ensure that planning laws are adhered to, and not to act as arbiters on spatial and architectural matters. Advice from CABE- like local groups, drawn where possible from local residents, could provide useful guidance to Planning Committees. The extent to which local government is encouraged to consult CABE is not known. Guidelines would be useful.

4.3 CABE has provided the Housing Corporation with review, advice and assistance services for selected projects. CABE's involvement was sought to improve the quality, across the design, the construction and the operation of its investments in new homes, and also its improvements to older properties. The work was most useful, being influential without being destructive. The quality of the selected projects has benefited significantly. Continuation of CABE's support to the raising of the quality of social housing will be important in its own right and in securing Government's objectives.

The future role for the organisation

5.1 CABE needs to be much more involved at the level of more complex and strategic systems (masterplans, cities, regions, countries, big environmental issues). This will demand a different set of skills to the architect-centric current constituency of Commissioners. Engineers ought to be able to step-up to lead this. CABE ought to be a sounding board for a coherent approach country-wide (albeit with local flavours). They should form the basis for Government White Papers on the built environment. They also need to be much more knowledgeable about issues of transport, energy, waste, health and the contribution of all these to the built environment.

5.2 Education, particularly for the young, on matters concerning the built environment is immensely important. There is increasing evidence that the quality of urban places and spaces affects our lives profoundly both mentally and physically. There were and still are initiatives which seek to expose the young to matters concerning the built environment

and to create a sense of awareness for some of the issues involved. These initiatives need co-ordination and cohesion. Some official body should do this but whether or not CABA is best placed to play this role is doubtful. Its role should be viewed in the light of its other commitments.

5.3 It is hoped that CABA continues to drive through improvements in design standards and that it extends its influence further into issues of sustainability and sustainable development. The new CABA model should not attempt to put distance between itself and the design professions for reasons of apparent impartiality. This would sacrifice CABA's proven telling contribution and consistency for a design-lightweight body, in the name of "transparency".

5.4 CABA should be accountable but bodies like CABA have a developing culture and a position on matters of importance. Not everyone will agree with them but that in itself is not a reason to clip its wings. No matter how gifted the design reviewers, the panel's views can only be a snapshot based on limited insight and should only carry a consequentially small weight. It is thought better to deal at a regional/local level with CABA dealing with strategy for the local panels.

6. Conclusion

6.1 The key to CABA's success is knowledge. All of the design reviewers and commissioners have been practitioners. What must be avoided is a cliquy RFAC Mk2, a committee with power but without the knowledge to wield it, or a body made up of theorists who do not understand the real world of building (or the real world full stop).

6.2 CABA needs continuing strong, practical leadership. So far, it has earned the respect of most design professionals who feel they are being judged by their (expert) peers. This would be lost if the Commission became a vetting agency (many of those reviewed are expert at paying lip-service, passing an exam, saying what is wanted and then doing something else and the Commission must be able to see through the smoke and mirrors).

6.3 In summary, CABA has made a great start. It has been commented that it has been a pleasure to work with them even though there was not always agreement. Their approach is conversational, not confrontational, and long may this continue.

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