

Knowledge transfer: CABE's research programme

Kate Trant, Senior Research Advisor, writes about some of CABE's initiatives and its approach to research



CABE (the Commission for Architecture and the Built Environment) is the UK government's advisor on architecture, urban design and public space. Central to our work is an extensive research programme that underpins our campaigning to change the way people think about buildings and the spaces around them.

CABE is characterised by a very positive corporate curiosity and our research covers a wide field – design as both a process and a product, across an immense range of activities, sectors, timescales and complexity. Measuring the impact on a variety of goals, demon-

strating the intuitive belief that the sometimes intangible criteria of good design adds value makes a single distinctive model for CABE research difficult.

As a result, our research is not limited to formal research commissioned from academics, but embraces a range of methods of investigation and enquiry that lead to a detailed understanding of the full spectrum of the built environment and public space. CABE is uniquely positioned to link economic, physical and construction, and social science research; this means that we constantly search for new and creative ways to demonstrate the impact of the built environment, and our research

Fig 1.
Villa Street
Medical Centre in
London, by
Avanti Architects
(Photo from:
*Designed with
care: Design and
neighbourhood
healthcare
buildings*, CABE
2006. Picture by
Ashley Bingham
and Mark Ellis,
ICD Ltd)

work generally sits somewhere on the spectrum between looking at practice and construction, and academic research.

CABE's case study library

One of the most successful methods to disseminate knowledge is through the evaluation of existing best practice. CABE's case study library holds over 200 completed projects that demonstrate elements of best practice in architecture, urban design and public space (Fig 1). Divided into nine categories, including culture and leisure, civic buildings, neighbourhoods and regeneration, health and housing, the library covers the built environment in the widest sense, and reinforces the positive contribution that design quality can make to neighbourhoods and communities.

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Each case study describes a building, space or neighbourhood, examines the design process that brought it into being, and offers an evaluation of the success of the project. The library is closely linked to the Prime Minister's award for better public building which promotes the benefits of good design in the nation's publicly funded buildings – its schools and healthcare buildings, libraries and art galleries. With a huge building programme underway that will include new hospitals, doctors surgeries and schools, driving home the message that well-designed buildings and neighbourhoods make a real difference to the lives of those who live, work and play in them has never been more important. CABE's library offers a consistent framework for analysing case studies in a way that enables comparison. Case studies can also be inspirational, with general lessons drawn from each specific example.

Designed with care

The library is a key vehicle for the case study work that CABE undertakes, with most of the studies carried out across CABE added to the body of knowledge on the library, as part of the overall dissemination of our work. A set of 15 studies from a recent CABE report, *Designed with care: Design and neighbourhood healthcare buildings*, demonstrates the positive contribution of well-designed healthcare buildings to the health and wellbeing of the communities which use them. Ranging from a doctor's surgery in Devon to a dentist's surgery in Chelmsford (Fig 2), and from a polyclinic in Hove to a birth centre in north

Fig 2. Advance Dental Clinic in Chelmsford, by Richard Mitzman (Photo from: *Designed with care: Design and neighbourhood healthcare buildings*, CABE 2006. Picture by Ashley Bingham and Mark Ellis, ICD Ltd)



London, these buildings are all examples of high quality schemes that relate well to their environments.

The cost of bad design

Meanwhile, to complement the collection of exemplary projects, work over the last 2 years has also addressed the problems that result from poor quality design. One of CABE's recent publications, *The cost of bad design*, brings together a series of essays that unpick some of the issues involved, and highlight what happens when buildings and spaces go wrong. This strand of work is about the examination of issues, the exploration of ideas and concepts, acknowledging that the evidence we need is often already there; what is needed is careful thinking.

The real budget for research

Recognising the complexity of the arena of built environment research, in 2004, CABE undertook and published a study that identified and set out the range of different organisations involved in funding, *The real budget for research*. Aside from the debate about the level of funding available, crucially the report set about defining the nature of built environment funding in order to understand more clearly, and express, the difficulties associated with assessing and evaluating both the tangible and intangible aspects of buildings and spaces (Fig 3).

Research questions

Good research starts with a carefully-considered and articulated research question, and CABE finds many sources for these. Some questions are reactions to policy changes or legislation, others to more grass-roots enquiries while, overall, our research questions support our corporate priorities. Currently, our dominant research themes include:

- the value of design, in order to work towards clarifying the confusion between 'cost' and 'value'
- speculation and exploration of ideas
- sustainable communities, including health and healthy neighbourhoods
- diversity and inclusive environments.

Within these themes, the programme of research is structured around key categories – analysis and evidence, demand (consumer and market insight) and validation, while we also aim to influence the funding of built environment research by other organisations. There is an inherent contradiction in built environment research time horizons – building and urban regeneration take a long time; policy and campaigns are short

Fig 3. (below) The spectrum of built environment research, from *The real budget for research*, CABE 2004

'The nature of research in the hard and soft clusters is very different; hard scientific investigation into materials can require costly investment in equipment, while 'soft' creative research is characterised by diverse areas of investigation, and the qualitative and subjective evaluation of outcomes.'

lived. To counter this, CABE is involved both in long-term research and short term studies.

Getting out there

The subject of study is not the only aspect of CABE's research that gives it a distinctive character; the perspective that we take on the areas we examine, and the use to which we put our findings are both crucial to the work. The target audiences for CABE's research are as wide and as varied as the organisation's audiences overall, and clarity is always needed to ensure each project's success. The research team also considers the organisation as a whole to be an internal client, and is working on developing corporate learning and knowledge exchange.

CABE is in the business of gathering evidence, which is explored and considered carefully, and it is through the discussion that surrounds this evidence, and the ways that it is shared with other organisations, agencies and individuals, that its value is maximised. se

- Visit the case study library and find these publications and more at: (www.cabe.org.uk).

