



The Birmingham Civic Society

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City Design Team
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Sent by email to:
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06.11.17

Dear City Design Team,

Birmingham Design Guide Visioning Document

Birmingham Civic Society has for almost 100 years campaigned to improve our built environment. The Society promotes the highest quality in the design of buildings and the public realm. Our Planning Committee is a body formed from of multi-disciplinary built environment professionals covering all aspects of planning, architecture, conservation, regeneration, urban design, transport and landscape architecture as well as our members from the local community. Our Planning Committee has reviewed the Birmingham Design Guide Visioning Document and we submit the following comments as part of the consultation process.

General Comments

We welcome the proposal to create a new Birmingham Design Guide (BDG). A design guide for the city is very much needed and we fully support the need for good design and high quality to be at the heart of all development within the city.

Birmingham should not settle for second best. For too many years, the city has accepted developments of poor design and low quality on the presumption that any development is good development. It is our view that Birmingham should set itself a bold vision to change this approach. The BDG has the potential to be one of the ways in which the city can make a positive change for everyone.

Whilst we appreciate the aspiration of the BDG and the final guide needs to be developed, the Vision Document lacks the clarity and direction required to shape and inform the final guide. The Vision Document appears to be written more as a broad 'marketing tool' rather as a brief for the development of a design guide for the city. At times, the Visioning Document is naive and does not reflect the uniqueness of our city.

However, we fully support the development of the BDG and recognise the need for sufficient time to enable these aspects to be discussed, consulted on and developed. It is essential that appropriate resources are made available to the development of the BDG to ensure that it's full potential is achieved.

The Birmingham Civic Society are committed to supporting the development of a Birmingham Design Guide that ensures good design and high quality is truly at the heart of all development in the city. We welcome the opportunity to work together with Birmingham City Council, professionals and local communities to make Birmingham a better place for all.

Our more detailed comments have been noted under the following five areas:

1. 'Good Design' and 'High Quality'

The 'Importance of Good Design' (p6) section of the Vision Document helpfully sets out some of the benefits of 'good design' and 'high quality' however it does not define what 'good design' and 'high quality' is. This is fundamental in enabling developers to understanding the requirements and standards that they will be required to adhere to. Only then will the full potential for

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economic, environmental, social and health benefits be achieved through 'good design' and 'high quality'. The BDG should raise awareness of what good design is to all. It should guide developers, architects and other built environment professions, whilst inspiring and engaging the general public into the benefits of good design.

2. 'Big Design' themes

The proposal to identify key themes for the BDG is helpful however the five themes identified need significant development to ensure that good design is embedded within development across our city. It is concerning that many of the sub-headings for each of the Big Design Themes is not expanded upon in the relevant section. For example, The Birmingham ID does not adequately expand on the importance of 'historic environments', 'Living and working places' does not mention 'tall buildings' and 'Connectivity' does not develop the importance of the 'public realm'. It is unfortunate that the themes and the supporting information at this stage is not sufficiently developed - currently it is inconsistent and in places naive. It is critical that the BDG strengthens these the content of these themes.

2. Existing built heritage

The BDG offers a unique opportunity to ensure that good design is put right at the heart of all development in our city - good design for new developments as well good design for our existing built heritage. The BDG Visioning Document does not give adequate importance to the conservation and development of our built heritage. The emphasis on retaining and celebrating our most important heritage assets needs to be much stronger and clearer. Previous documents such as the Big City Plan or the masterplans for Snow Hill and Smithfield do not adequately raise the importance of our built heritage - the result of this is that significant areas of our built heritage is being lost through new development which is of poor design and low quality.

Rather than seeing our built heritage as a constraint, the BDG should promote them as an opportunity for developers to retain and revitalise. Birmingham has some outstanding examples of how this can be achieved. Fort Dunlop, Rotunda, Stirchley Baths, The School Yard in Harborne and Handsworth Park are some examples from different periods of our history across many areas of our city.

3. Detailed but not prescriptive

The BDG needs to be a detailed design guide whilst not being overly prescriptive in terms of architectural solutions. It should not discourage a variety of architectural styles that are appropriate to the specific context of proposed developments. The BDG should include or refer to other design guides on specific areas of our city. The Jewellery Quarter is as different to Edgbaston, as Sutton Coldfield is from Bournville. The BDG should ensure that all of the suburbs of our city are included within the design guide - what makes each of these areas unique and how does this relate to 'good design' and 'high quality'. We believe that good design and high quality development is relevant and reflects the needs of the local community.

4. Public Realm and Transport

The BDG should not simply focus on buildings. The spaces between are just as important and therefore the BDG needs to include the public realm within it's scope. This should address issues such as signage, shopfronts, paths, street furniture, lighting, trees/landscaping. The overall built environment of Birmingham should be improved through the BDG. With the increasing demands of the city's population for more and affordable housing, better transport and a healthier environment, the design guide can be an instigator of better design and better environments.

There is no mention in the BDG Visioning Document of walkability, the word walk (and cycle) only appears once. There needs to be a greater commitment to designing complete streets which promote walking and cycling, address severance., improve permeability and connectivity and promote health and wellbeing.

New transport schemes should also be subjected to design review by the proposed Birmingham Design and Conservation Review Panel, at the moment only transport schemes associated with development are likely to be reviewed as part of the planning process but any new transport infrastructure should be subjected to review to ensure it is fit for purpose.

The BDG Visioning Document makes no reference to car parking. This can have a major negative impact upon the public realm and quality of our streets. The approach to parking across out city needs to be addressed within the BDG.

5. Resourcing

We support the proposal that the Birmingham Design Guide will become a statutory planning document. However, this will involve significant investment and development to ensure that robust policies and an adequately resourced planning, conservation and enforcement team is in place. A significant number of Birmingham City Councils statutory planning documents are out of date. These will need to be brought up-to-date and in line with the BDG or superseded/included within the BDG.

The BDG does note that good design should inform development of all scales - from tall buildings down to domestic extensions. We support this aspiration however there needs to be significant investment to enable there to be sufficient support and guidance provided, especially to smaller scale/domestic developments.

We welcome the formation of a Birmingham Design and Conservation Review Panel. This should be an independent and multi-disciplinary panel, formed of professionals (architects, engineers, surveyors and other specialist consultants) and members of the local community. It should include developers who have an understanding of the economics of development. The priority for all members of the panel should be an understanding of what 'good design' and 'high quality' to ensure that Birmingham is improved for everyone.

It is important that the BDG sets out how developments are delivering good design post-planning approval. All too often, developments are revised once approvals have been granted with the final building not meeting the original standards required. the BDG should set out how this is to be prevented.

Recommendations

From the five areas of concern noted above, we have the following 15 recommendations:

1. Establish criteria for measuring 'good design' and 'high quality'.
2. Raise awareness of 'good design' and 'high quality' to all.
3. Set targets for energy efficiency and sustainable design.
4. Identify outstanding examples of new developments which are of 'good design' and 'high quality'.
5. Identify outstanding examples of where existing buildings have been brought back into positive use.
6. Clarify and strengthen 'Big Design' themes.
7. Define design guidance whilst not being overly prescriptive.
8. Develop principles of 'good design' and 'high quality' relating to the broader public realm.
9. Ensure that the BDG includes guidance on good design principles for moving around the city with a focus on walking, cycling and public transport.
10. Ensure all areas of the city are reflected within the Birmingham Design Guide.
11. Confirm resources that will be made available for the development of the Birmingham Design Guide and training of Birmingham City Council Committee Members
12. Ensure Birmingham Design and Conservation Review Panel includes multi-disciplinary professionals and members of the local community.
13. Develop strategy for how 'good design' and 'high quality' will be maintained following the formal planning process.
14. Provide summary of all Birmingham Design Guide consultations and how comments have informed the development of the design guide.
15. Provide detailed programme of the development of the Birmingham Design Guide along with future iterations.

We hope that the above comments and recommendations are helpful. We welcome the opportunity to work with Birmingham City Council and other in developing the Birmingham Design Guide to ensure that Birmingham becomes a better place for everyone.

If you have any queries, comments or would like to discuss further, please do not hesitate to contact the Society.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in dark ink that reads "Gavin Orton". The signature is written in a cursive, slightly slanted style.

Gavin Orton, Chairman
The Birmingham Civic Society.