Fostering Design Culture: How can public sector clients develop their design ambitions?

Tom Sykes
Public Practice is a not-for-profit social enterprise that places outstanding built environment experts within forward-thinking public authorities to build the public sector’s capacity for proactive planning.

10% of the year-long placements is dedicated to a Research & Development programme to share new knowledge and practice across authorities. This Practice Note is one of the outputs of this programme.
FOSTERING DESIGN CULTURE
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ABOUT THIS PRACTICE NOTE
This Practice Note is based on learnings from a year-long placement as a Public Practice Associate in Transport for London’s Property Development team. The Practice Note has been shaped through a series of site visits, design charrettes and skills workshops organised by the author as one aspect of his placement, and through his previous experience as a practicing architect.

CONTEXT
Local planning authorities and other public commissioning organisations (Authorities) are entering a confident new era of development. From council-led housing schemes to Authorities acting as master developers for new garden communities, there is a newfound belief in the leadership of the public sector.¹ Supporting these programmes are ambitious departments with a renewed interest in the benefits that ‘design thinking’ and strategic design approaches can bring to the public sector.² These methods – which include scenario-building, user journeys, and design charrettes – take a structured approach to the design process at the same time as opening it up to a wider audience. If used strategically, they can play an important role for organisations looking to foster, or bolster, their design culture.

This Practice Note was developed within the Property Development team at Transport for London (TfL); a team which has as one of its guiding principles an aspiration to ‘design excellence.’ A series of learning afternoons was set up by the author to explore what design excellence means in practice and to discuss how this aspiration could be translated into replicable processes and good design outcomes. The Practice Note draws together insights from these sessions – which included workshops, design charrettes and site visits – and uses these to produce advice and toolkits to support design culture in the public sector.

¹ centreforlondon.org/blog/borough-council-housebuilding/
² designcouncil.org.uk/what-we-do/design-support/design-public-sector
OPPORTUNITIES AND CHALLENGES

It is generally acknowledged that the best buildings come from good relationships between the client and the design team. When successful, these relationships tend to be built on a shared understanding of design, and on mutual principles. However, Authorities face multiple challenges to implementing design culture, including:

- Understanding the process-led nature of design: Designs are often conceptualised as finished products, for example a beautiful building or well-used public realm. However, understanding that the final outcome is the product of a process is fundamental to instilling a functioning design culture.
- Quantitative pressures: Many procurement organisations are under considerable pressure – time, cost, workload – and devoting time to discussing design can be seen as a time-consuming and costly luxury.
- Relevance vs. Importance: Even if some lessons seem basic, the process of learning them can be transformative. Making workshops relevant to team members can be a challenge.
- Attention vs. Intention: Design aspirations often are broad and ill-defined. For example, the intention of achieving ‘design excellence’ can be overwhelming in its scope. Focusing on specific areas often is the best way of initiating lasting change.

APPROACH

The findings and recommendations set out in this Practice Note were developed through a series of targeted team sessions with the aim of fostering a design culture which were planned and delivered by the author. These sessions included:

1. A ‘values workshop’ aimed at articulating a shared design vision within the team.
2. An engagement workshop aimed at exploring the principles of community engagement.
3. A design charrette facilitated with a mixed team of consultants and internal staff.
4. A building visit to an exemplar scheme to see and discuss good design.
5. An exhibition visit to explore design decisions and promote team discussion.

The objectives, formats and main takeaways from these team sessions are discussed, at high level, in the subsequent sections of the Practice Note. More detailed notes for how to run sessions can be found in the resources that accompany this Practice Note.

VALUES WORKSHOP

Background
Agreeing design principles within an organisation can be challenging and often a shared language for ‘big picture’ aspirations is missing. This workshop was designed as an opportunity for team members to discuss their vision for how the organisation should approach design and to articulate the values to support that vision.

Key objectives
The main objective of the workshop was to understand key motivations for the team – all working in the same department but with different backgrounds – in relation to quality and design. Often large teams do not have opportunities to talk about the wider issues that are important to them, so the intention was to create an environment which was both creative and reflective.

Format
The team was divided into smaller working groups and facilitators brought in to help deliver the workshop. A well-known speaker set the tone from the outset, discussing the importance and value of public realm design. This was followed by three architects from smaller practices who ‘pitched’ the values that inform their organisations and how they work. Finally, groups were given time to workshop ideas for how TfL should approach design as a public commissioning organisation. The session concluded with the groups presenting their findings back to each other. Workshop facilitator notes can be found at publicpractice.org.uk/resources.

Takeaways
Workshops can be unpredictable, but preparation is fundamental to arranging a successful session. Ensuring that the facilitator briefing is clear and comprehensive is essential and should ideally happen face-to-face rather than over email where nuance and context is easily lost. Provision to modify expectations as the workshop plays out should be built in to suit the experience and skillsets of the participants. The workshop organiser should plan for flexibility in terms of outputs and should produce a clear record of the outputs immediately after the session to ensure agreed decisions and principles are captured.
BACKGROUND

Community engagement is a critical part of design development. Engagement helps ensure schemes work for the communities in which they are embedded and complement the neighbourhoods that they will form part of. Following successful design review panels with an external facilitator, TfL decided to run an engagement workshop for the Property Development team with that speaker.

KEY OBJECTIVES

The objective of the workshop was to start a conversation about what meaningful engagement looks like and to explore ways TfL could build engagement into its planning and design processes. The workshop was designed to highlight best practice in engagement and dispel myths about the risks associated with community engagement. It was also the intention to provide attendees with improved language for thinking and talking about engagement.

FORMAT

The team was divided into working groups to enable more constructive working. Groups were first given time to workshop ideas for how TfL should approach engagement. Groups were then asked to develop an engagement strategy for a particular site using the engagement principles agreed in the previous session. Each session ended with the groups presenting their findings back to each other. Workshop facilitator notes can be found on publicpractice.org.uk/resources.
Takeaways
On specialist topics such as engagement, using an experienced external facilitator can reduce the risk of existing practice getting in the way of open and frank conversations. It also represents an opportunity for the team to learn new facilitation techniques. To be effective, the workshop should lead to practical outcomes and actions. Recording possible next steps at the end of each segment of the workshop helps embed learnings and builds the relevance of discussions.

Team comments on principles of good engagement

DESIGN CHARRETTE

Background
A charrette is a workshop format commonly used to develop and test complex designs. Charrettes are valued for their ability to encourage creativity and collaboration and can help open up a project. With many of TfL’s projects developed close to transport infrastructure, this charrette focussed specifically on Over-Station Developments (OSD), but the principles are applicable to other forms of development.

Key objectives
The objective of this workshop was to mobilise the different voices in the design team – including cost consultants, market specialists, planning consultants, structural engineers and architects – by working through example schemes.
Format
A group of facilitators were brought in to help facilitate the charrette. These included engineers, architects, and cost consultants. Each facilitator briefly introduced themselves and presented the knowhow they brought to the discussion. The team was then divided into working groups and given a site to explore. Having familiarised themselves with their site, the groups were asked to workshop fundamental design principles for the scheme and its route to market. Charrette facilitator notes can be found at publicpractice.org.uk/resources.

Takeaways
Creating a relevant brief that is open to interpretation and allows for different outcomes - while narrow enough that objectives can be clearly explained - requires engagement with the various facilitators and potential participants in advance. Organisers should ensure these conversations are had prior to the workshop. Some of the most useful discussions can occur as part of the debriefing session. Organisers should consider how this final discussion can be structured and use the time during the charrette to prepare discussion points for the debrief.
BUILDING VISIT

Background
Understanding what team members think is ‘good design’ is an important part of developing organisational design culture. A visit to a completed building, or a building site, can be a useful way of grounding these conversations and developing shared knowledge. Exploring the process that led to a finished design can also help participants from different professional backgrounds understand what their role can be in producing design quality.

Key objectives
The key objective for this session was to create a shared precedent that could be discussed and dissected by the team. To achieve this, the visit had to emphasise the relationship between the finished project and the process that created it. This meant carefully unpacking the layers of the ‘finished’ scheme.

Format
The team met at a critically acclaimed mixed-use scheme developed at high density. Representatives from the design team and the client had been invited to take part. The site visit began with designers and clients presenting their approach and key takeaways from the project. Following that, the team was led on a guided tour around the site to illustrate how the project had been approached. Time was built in between the presentations and the site visit for the team to ask questions. Site visit facilitator notes can be found on publicpractice.org.uk/resources.

Takeaways
A site visit is an effective way to start discussions related to design and design culture. It requires limited preparation from team members, can be done in a relatively short period of time, and also has the advantage of getting the team out of the office and talking to each other. Visiting the scheme in advance, and meeting with the guides beforehand, will help steer the site visit towards the most relevant features and learnings. Encouraging the guides to be honest about failures and issues can enable a more open and rich conversation on the day.
EXHIBITION VISIT

Background
Exhibitions bring together multiple precedents and ideas in one space. Unlike site visits, this allows conversations to refer to multiple cases which can be valuable. TfL’s Property Development team visited the Design Museum to see an exhibition of the work of a prominent British architect.

Key objectives
The exhibition was an opportunity to see exemplar high-density housing projects at low-to-medium rise. The objective was to use these cases to frame a discussion around how the team could foster a culture to support the development of innovative and ambitious designs.

Format
Three senior representatives from the architecture practice met the team at the museum and guided us around the exhibition. This provided team members with an opportunity to ask direct and tricky questions in a more informal environment than a talk. Exhibition visit facilitator notes can be found on publicpractice.org.uk/resources.
Takeaways
Visiting the exhibition in advance helped frame how a group might experience it, establish a maximum group size, and understand what role the guide should have. The organiser should consider breaking up the visit so that some parts are as a whole group and others are more informal. Time should also be left for attendees to digest information and for team members to ask questions.

Peter Barber discussing his practice’s working process at the Design Museum
RECOMMENDATIONS
The main outcome of the research carried out for this Practice Note is a series of templates that can be used by public sector organisations to help foster or support design culture. The templates include facilitator notes for workshops, charrettes, site visits and exhibition visits and can be downloaded at publicpractice.org.uk/resources. In addition to the templates, six recommendations are proposed for how Authorities can foster Design Culture.

1. DON’T ‘TEACH’ DESIGN
Developing design culture is not about teaching people to become designers: it is about creating an environment where design thinking and open conversations are encouraged at the same time as the skills of expert designers are valued. Finding the balance between accessibility and expertise is central to this. The duty to create a space where designers can relate empathetically and collaboratively with open-minded clients rests with the co-ordinator.

2. PREPARATION IS KEY
Planning sessions is time consuming, iterative and often involves a large number of moving parts. Trying to structure learning is a design process: start with the big picture and work toward the details but be ready to step back to change fundamentals. Role playing the scenarios and testing ideas with colleagues, or mentors, can help flesh out original ideas. Allow realistic timescales for development and make sure you give adequate notice periods.

3. BE FLEXIBLE
The direction of a session, and the learning outcomes, need not be fixed in advance. Allowing flexibility in the programme can make learning more responsive and open up opportunities that you might not have considered. Be ready to change focus, style or format to make the most of the attention and energy of the group.

4. PUT YOURSELF IN OTHERS’ SHOES
What you think is important for people to learn is often not what they think is important, but there typically are areas of overlap. Testing emerging ideas with colleagues in advance can be a good way to refine your briefs. When asking for advice, avoid questions like ‘what would be useful to you?’ Instead focus on specific things you think you can offer and use these to test relevance. At a later stage, running through the programme for the workshop with a colleague can be useful.
5. USE YOUR CONNECTIONS
Consider what connections you can draw on when finding facilitators, sourcing guidance, and locating venues. Some external guests will be willing to participate without a fee, but you should make it clear that these are not networking events or opportunities to pitch for work.

6. BE SPECIFIC
Without specificity a session can lose momentum or fail to deliver its primary outcomes. Ensuring specificity without being prescriptive is key and the balance will likely vary from session to session. If you bring in external facilitators, make sure you are clear about what insights or outcomes are expected from the session and what their role in delivering these will be.

NEXT STEPS
This Practice Note has investigated ways to foster, or bolster, design culture in public commissioning organisations. To take these findings further, there are a number of areas of research that would benefit from more development:

– Alternative forms of workshop and group exercises
– Testing of workshop guides for different public sector bodies
– Measuring the impact of sessions

Public Practice welcomes feedback on the findings and recommendations set out in this Practice Note to help update current resources and inform future research. Please contact us at info@publicpractice.org.uk.
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IMAGE CREDITS
All photographs are copyright Tom Sykes.
The public sector is entering a confident new era of delivery. From council-led housing schemes to authorities acting as master developers for new garden communities, there is a newfound belief in the leadership of the public sector. With this more active role comes an increase in the design ambitions of authorities, as well as greater responsibilities to deliver good quality outcomes that work for local communities.

This Practice Note explores how design culture can be articulated and nurtured within public commissioning organisations. Drawing on learnings from a year-long placement in Transport for London, it explores what design excellence means in practice and how this can be translated into replicable processes and quality design outcomes.

The Practice Note draws together insights from a series of facilitated team sessions and uses these to produce advice to help build design culture within the public sector. It is accompanied by a series of practical facilitator notes which can be adopted or adapted by authorities.

#CapacityBuilding #Design #Council-ledHousing

Practice Notes and other resources are available to download at www.publicpractice.org.uk/resources