

What makes a good building?

The Roman architect Vitruvius suggested that the principal qualities of well-designed buildings are ‘commodity, firmness and delight’:

- **Commodity:** buildings should work well – they should be fit for the purpose for which they are designed
- **Firmness:** buildings should be soundly built and durable
- **Delight:** buildings should look good – their design should please the eye and the mind.

These three criteria remain as sound a basis for judging architecture now as when they were conceived. Just as each design decision affects many others, so the three criteria are intertwined within the design process. Many of the aspects of a building which need to be taken into account when evaluating it will touch on all three.

They include:

- **Clarity of organisation, from site planning to building planning.** If the organisation of the plan and section are clear, then much else about the building falls into place.
- **Order.** Order helps us comprehend and interpret the built environment; it can manifest itself through symmetry (or asymmetry) and balance, through repetition of organisational or structural elements such as the grid, the frame or the bay; and through resonance between elements of different scales.
- **Expression and representation.** A building’s appearance can tell us something about what purpose it serves; about its place in the order of the town or city; about what sort of spaces it contains; about how it is organised and put together.
- **Appropriateness of architectural ambition.** Architecture can be too noisy or too quiet. There are places for fireworks and places for modesty within the built environment – in relation both to a project’s context and to its purpose and status.
- **Integrity and honesty.** Is what you see what you get? If so, the plans, sections, elevations and details will all visibly relate to each other and build up to a coherent picture of the design.
- **Architectural language.** The design of a building will involve choices about matters such as whether to represent it primarily as a wall or as a frame structure, about patterns of solid and void and light and shade, and so on. In a good design, such choices will seem compelling and inevitable, with a recognisable relationship to the broad conception of the project and its setting; in a poor building such choices will often seem arbitrary.
- **Scale.** Scale is relative: a good design resolves issues of scale at all stages from masterplan to detail.
- **Conformity and contrast.** A good designer will have considered the relationship of a design to its context. This is not to imply that one of the aims of a design should necessarily be to ‘fit in’. At its worst, this can be little more than an excuse for mediocrity. Difference and variety can be virtues in new proposals as much as sameness and conformity, and of course different contexts themselves may be more, or less, uniform in their nature.
- **Orientation, prospect and aspect.** A building’s orientation should take into account the implications for energy use as well as urban design issues. In relation to prospect and aspect, the design should have considered what happens at different times of day and night and at different times of year. The view from the window, and opportunities to see the sky and weather are as important in buildings such as offices and hospitals as they are in homes.
- **Detailing and materials.** The quality of the plans, sections and elevations should have been carried through to the level of detail; it is disappointing to see a promising project fail because of

a lack of refinement in the detailing. The choice of materials is equally important and relates to an understanding of context as well as to questions of maintenance, durability, sustainability and the way the building can be expected to age.

- **Structure, environmental services and energy use.** In a well-designed building, it is likely that the strategies for dealing with these aspects of the design will be apparent from the plans, sections and elevations. Consideration should be given to opportunities for designing in energy and water efficiency measures, and for minimising waste and pollution wherever possible.
- **Flexibility and adaptability.** The ways in which a building and the parts of a building are used are likely to change over its lifetime. The technologies it contains will change as well. A good building will be flexible (able to accommodate changing requirements without major alterations where possible), and adaptable (capable of being altered or extended conveniently when necessary).
- **Sustainability.** For a masterplan, building or urban space to be truly well-designed it should be economically, environmentally and socially sustainable. This means thinking about whole-life costs rather than short-term economic returns; about using building materials, natural resources and energy efficiently and responsibly; about reduction of waste and emissions to land, air and water during construction and use, and about effective engagement with (and recognition of) the needs of stakeholders throughout the planning, design and construction process.
- **Inclusive design.** Buildings should provide equality of access for all. This means ensuring intellectual, emotional and physical access is considered at the outset of any project and remains integral throughout to prevent costly remedial work. Creative and lateral thinking should have been employed to find innovative and individual solutions, designing for real people with all the different needs they may have. In a well-designed building, appropriate management of inclusive design features will mean that a barrier-free environment is maintained.
- **Aesthetics.** We should not be afraid to ask about a building: is it beautiful? If it is, then the resulting lifting of the spirits will be as valuable a contribution to public well-being as dealing successfully with the functional requirements of the building's programme.

Key questions about what makes a good building

1. Is it likely that the building's users – of all kinds – will be satisfied with the design over time?
2. Does the design enhance the efficiency of the operations undertaken in the building?
3. Can visitors find the entrance and then find their way around the building? Is orientation clear enough not to need signs or maps?
4. Are the plans, sections, elevations and details all of a piece, visibly related to each other and to underlying design ideas?
5. Does the design demonstrate that thinking about the requirements of building structure and construction and environmental services has been an integral part of the design process?
6. Is there evidence that the different design disciplines have worked as a team?
7. Is the building easy to adapt or extend if/when the requirements of the building's users change? Are the floor plates suitable for other uses in the future?
8. Does the design take into account whole-life costs?
9. What does the building look like in different conditions: in sun and rain; at night; over the seasons? Will it age gracefully?
10. Can one imagine the building becoming a cherished part of its setting?