

# 24 Evaluating entries for the Civic Building of the Year Award



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**How can design quality be defined?** We know from past experience that this question has defeated many who had a keen interest in the subject. Think what Margaret Thatcher could have done with Compulsory Competitive Tendering if any of her advisors had seen the light. Defining a way of retaining objectivity when dealing with an issue which easily drifts into a very subjective area was always going to be difficult.

The system developed by the Construction Industry Council using Design Quality Indicators (DQIs) appears to recognise this problem and cleverly compiles a score sheet of 'indicators' applied at four stages of project development. There is an acceptance that an element of subjectivity is bound to creep in but, if the analysis of the key factors is carried out faithfully and consistently, a fair assessment of a buildings quality will result.

The CIC promote the system as being able to be used by anybody with an interest in design, from the general public, private clients, developers, users and contractors to construction professionals. It can be used across a wide range of building types and is applicable to the whole project. It accepts that the design quality of a building is constrained by a

number of key factors which include finance, time, the environment and resourcing, all of which set the context within which a building should be assessed. It recognises that there is no single measure for good design so if the full system is applied to the assessment of a building it is necessary to attribute values to the different key factors. The process is organised into three sections that explore the functionality, build quality and impact of the building, following the ideas conceived by Vitruvius in his theories about firmness, commodity and delight (firmitas, utilitas, venustas).

It was following the first year of the Civic Building of the Year Award, three years ago, that the members of the Assessment Panel looked to see if it would be possible to apply an objective analytical process similar in principle to the system being promoted by the CIC. There hadn't been any problems in assessing the short listed projects during the first year, but such had been the popularity of the Award in the public sector that the Panel members became very conscious of the need for objectivity. After all, their fellow professionals would in turn make personal assessments of their judgements.

The context within which the Panel operated was constrained by limited financial resources and time. In practice, the buildings short listed could only be visited on one occasion due to the availability of the individual Panel members. For the second and subsequent years of the Award the Panel has considered similar key factors to the CIC system in analysing each project, but does this following a single visit after practical completion has been achieved. ▣



St. Thomas of Aquin's High School, Edinburgh, winner of the first Award in 2003

Obviously, at this stage there isn't any possibility of influencing the contextual issues, such as the time allocated for design development or method of environmental assessment, or the rather pragmatic approach adopted by some clients in the public sector where consideration of whole life costing is still far away on the horizon. The Panel has to accept the constraints set but, of course, if the context is blinkered then it usually follows that the quality of the building will also be disappointing.

The question is, however, has it worked? Speaking as Chairman of the Panel, and probably initially a big DQI sceptic, the answer is undoubtedly an unconditional yes. By being totally honest, not letting personal preferences or prejudices sway your judgement, and by steadfastly considering every element of each key factor, quality is recognised and high scores are achieved. It is no surprise that the building that gives you a real 'buzz' when you first see it, the 'delight' or 'wow' factor, inevitably flies through the process and acquires an excellent score. However, what the

system does well is sort the very good from the average. It enables credit and recognition to be awarded for projects where much has been achieved, which in turn gives encouragement to professional teams and clients so that they progress and produce even better buildings in the future.

What are the most common disappointments?

They are still the old chestnuts of design detailing and standards of construction. Many a pleasing building, which potentially has the 'wow' factor, fails due to one of these two major components being poorly executed. After all the debate, attention to detail is still the key to the success of the whole process; it needs to be applied to each and every stage of development.

The DQI system enables the Civic Building of the Year Award Assessment Panel to ensure objectivity is maintained in the awards evaluation process, which in turn helps SCALA to promote the development of high quality buildings through the formal recognition of excellence in design and construction. ■

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"THIS BUILDING MAY LOSE MARKS ON BUILD QUALITY"