

'People should look at these two schools and learn from them.' Paul Finch, chairman, CABE

By James Pallister & Tom Ravenscroft

Cotham, an area of Bristol, and London's Stockwell may be separated by 200 miles of M4, but they share a common claim to fame.

In 2007, CABE became officially involved in the government's multi-billion-pound Building Schools for the Future (BSF) programme. The watchdog played an advisory role by design reviewing all sample schools – specific schools whose detailed plans form part of a consortium's initial BSF bid. Since then, only Walters and Cohen's Cotham School in the centre of Bristol and Sheppard Robson's Stockwell Park High School in South London have won CABE's highest endorsement at design review stage.

Initially, CABE's review held no formal weight, with local authorities able to waive a building through planning whatever its assessment, as was the case with Scott Brownrigg's Elmgreen (see page 20). Last year, schools minister Jim Knight announced the minimum design standard, a move that gave CABE more teeth in its dealings with BSF schools. The minimum design standard introduced a contractual requirement that, to reach the next round of funding, the bidding consortia's sample schools must

get CABE's 'Very Good' or 'Pass' (the top two) grades under the new system. No design approval from CABE would mean no building programme.

It's almost a year since this rule was introduced, but questions remain. Why have so few schools achieved the CABE gold standard? And what impact is CABE's increased influence having on the design quality of schools that come through?

CABE'S ELUSIVE TOP MARK

'Fundamentally, BSF is a programme designed to get the private sector to fund school building. Design quality is far down the list of priorities,' says Pascale Scheurer, director of architectural practice Surface to Air and a RIBA-accredited client design advisor who, though supportive of CABE's involvement, is sceptical of BSF's ability to produce well-designed schools.

That the mechanisms of BSF hinder good design is a view Ty Goddard, co-founder of The Centre for School Design, shares, but he also points to CABE's increased involvement as going some way towards addressing this. 'CABE has finally allowed itself to >>

The AJ guide to getting top marks from CABE

Listen to the major stakeholders. The challenge is to understand the short-term needs of the school and long-term aspirations of the local authority, and then reconcile the two.

Think beyond the building envelope. Successful designs consider how the built components interact with, and make use of, the entire site.

Pay attention to detail. CABE expects to see a scheme that has a thorough design focus running from the furniture to the masterplan.

Give the school a strong identity. Create an aspirational learning environment where students want to spend time and of which the wider community can be proud.

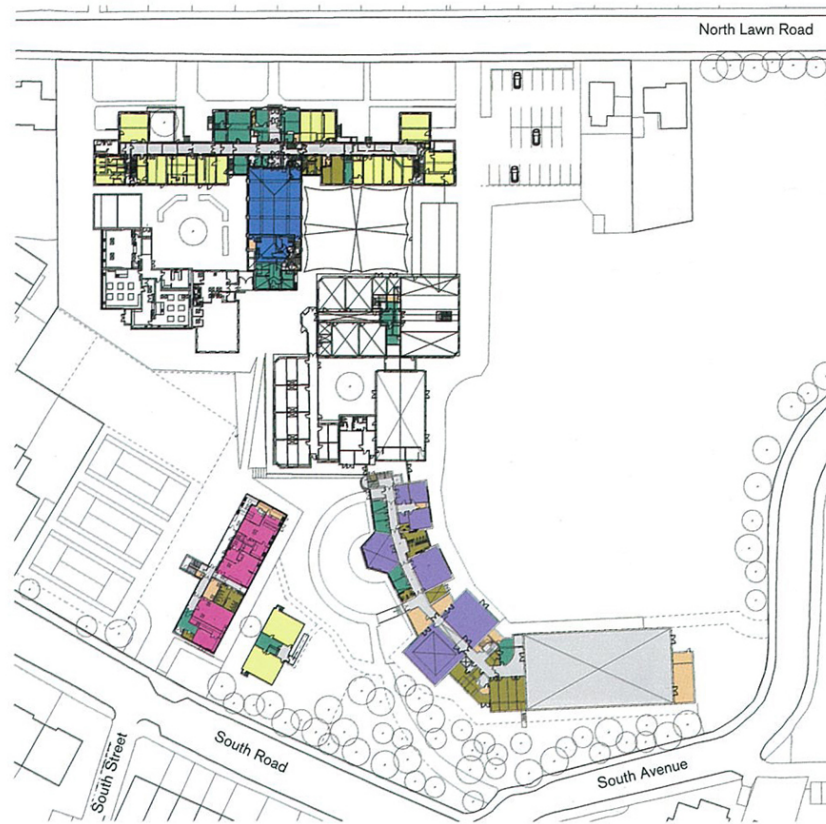
Know your deadlines. Shifting design review dates can scupper your chances of a good mark so make sure you have an open dialogue with CABE from the outset; this gives you better chance of having an influence over the timing.

Right, top Walters and Cohen's Cotham School will complete in March 2011

Right Stockwell Park High School by Sheppard Robson will complete in November



Existing ground-floor plan, Cotham School



Key

- | | |
|--------------------|---------------|
| Plant | ICT |
| Standard classroom | Stores |
| Technology | Resource area |
| Science | WC/changing |
| Music/drama | Sports |
| Kitchen | Art room |
| Assembly hall | SEN 65 |
| Office/staff/admin | Circulation |



The increased weight this gave to design within BSF's procurement process has been popular with architects. It 'is a positive thing,' says Alan Davies, architect director at BDP. 'Clients have realised they need to place a greater emphasis on design.'

Jude Harris, associate director and joint leader of Jestico + Whiles education studio, explains how, in BSF's early days, there was 'a tendency for design to be sidelined in favour of more commercial considerations, but now design is a contractual requirement it has to be taken seriously.'

A change in the presentation process has also helped, according to Aaron Taylor, education director at Anshen + Allen. 'Now we have the opportunity to present directly to the panel, which has proven to be hugely beneficial. We have the opportunity to convey much more information and hear their responses first hand. This makes it easier to embrace and incorporate the ideas into plans.'

Matthew Springett, client design advisor alongside Simon Foxell to Birmingham City Council, is a fan of the changes too. 'The quality of work coming to the design review panels does seem to be improving for the sample schools and I think that's part of >>

'Now that design is a contractual requirement, it has to be taken seriously'

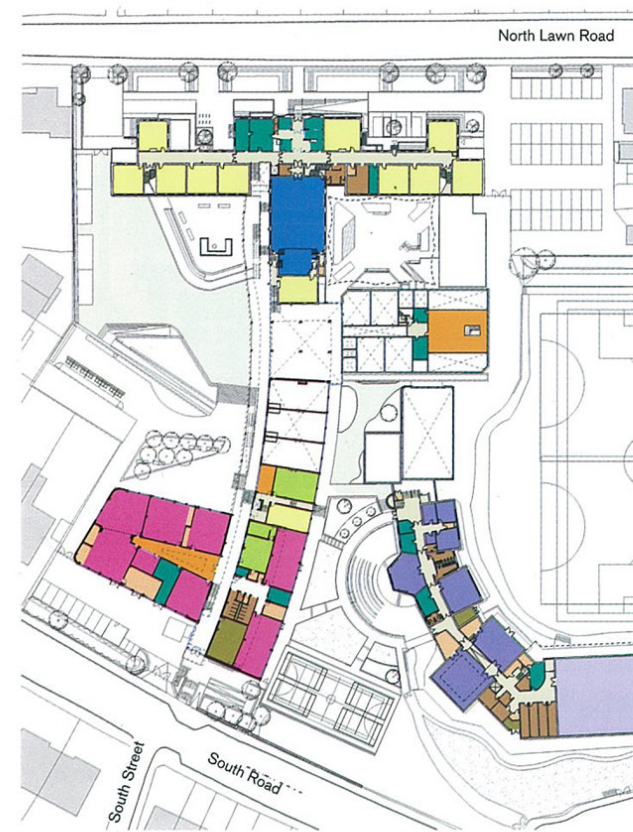
WHAT IMPACT HAS CABE'S INCREASED INFLUENCE HAD? Stockwell Park High School is now in partial use, with phase one completed last April and the final phase due in November 2010. It was here that Knight chose to launch the minimum design standard in May 2009.

articulate the profession's frustration over a process that may itself be the cause of many of the issues the design reviews set out to solve'.

The design of sample schools only represent a small percentage of the project's total weighting, and making CABE happy is not a guarantee of winning the preferred bidder status that will take the project forward. In addition, architects are under time constraints when producing work and have a very brief window in which to advocate for their design – a process that, until last year's changes, they could not do themselves. Previously, design presentations to CABE were given through an intermediary – the client design advisor. As Tony Poole, partner at Sheppard Robson and head of its education sector, explains: 'It is hard to encapsulate what can be 10,000 hours of work into a 30-minute presentation. The information has to be incredibly clear, lucid and self explanatory.'

Poole attributes the CABE 'Excellent'

Proposed ground-floor plan, Cotham School



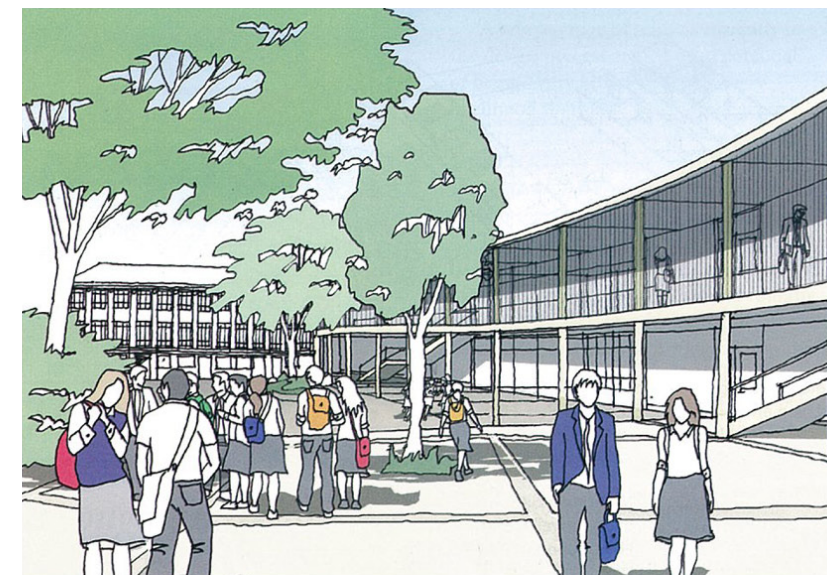
Proposed circulation



Key

- | | |
|---|-------------------|
| v | Entrance |
| — | Circulation point |
| — | New stair |
| — | New lift |

Below Exterior concept sketch of Cotham School



Architect's Statement

Cotham School, Bristol, by Walters and Cohen

'Our brief comprises partial refurbishment and new-build elements, informed by an increase in pupil numbers, the need to replace buildings that are no longer fit for purpose, and a drive to create transformational teaching spaces.'

'A key driver of the design is the improvement of access and circulation across the undulating topography of the site, and to connect its disparate existing buildings. This is achieved by the introduction of a linear two-storey building which physically links the north and south boundaries of the site and creates circulation links between new and existing buildings.'

A new double volume student reception and multifunctional central space is created where the new and existing buildings come together, connected by means of a glazed roof.'



the effect of the minimum design standard'. But Springett is also savvy to its unintended potential consequences.

'It's possible that bidders are frontloading their submissions with better design teams so they can progress their bid, but perhaps not following that through once they have won the approval to continue.' And downstream from design review, standards can deteriorate as well as improve.

THE GOLD STANDARD

Should we worry that so few projects are hitting the gold standard? Poole says no, adding: 'I honestly think that the top accolade has to be something to aspire to and something that is not readily achieved.'

Paul Finch, chairman of CABE, agrees. 'We would be delighted if all schools hit the highest marks but you have to be realistic. Not every building can be of Stirling Prize shortlist quality.'

'It's about expectation and aspiration. It is possible to build excellent schools and people should look at the work that Walters and Cohen and Sheppard Robson have done and see what they can learn from them.'

'The main aspiration is to drive the bad out through an iterative design process. We are starting to see the results,' says Finch.

'The effect of the minimum design standard is that we can see that the standard is being ratcheted up and we anticipate it will continue to do so as long as the BSF project continues.'

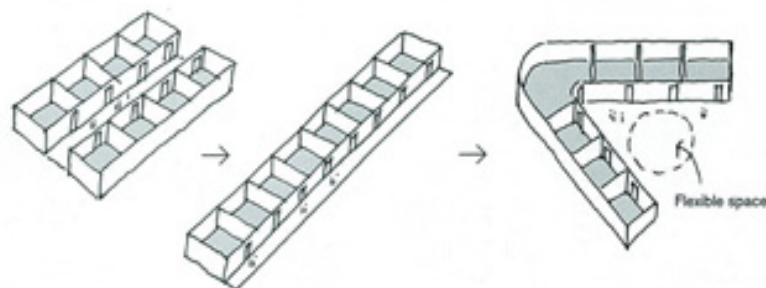
THE FUTURE

How long BSF will continue is a moot point. The six local authorities (AJ 11.03.10) in the last tranche of pre-election spending were announced earlier this month, and though Partnership for Schools (the body delivering BSF) is bullish, there remains uncertainty about the long-term future of the programme.

The degree to which public spending will have to be cut is well documented. And even though both parties have promised to ring-

fence education spending, maintaining good design may be the least of BSF's concerns.

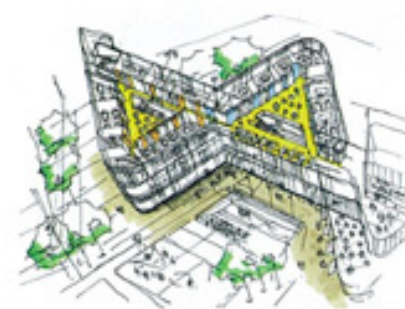
Yet Finch argues that, with only a third of local authorities benefiting so far from BSF, it would be politically very difficult to stop the programme. The danger could be that with the minimum design standard starting to make an impact, the programme's stoppage would result in a collective loss of accumulated knowledge of a process that is starting to produce some high-quality schools.



Sketch showing 'evolution from traditional to transformational teaching environment' at Stockwell Park High School

Top Visualisation of Stockwell Park's circulation space

Right, top Site plan of Stockwell Park High School
Right Concept sketch



'The main aspiration is to drive the bad out through an iterative design process'

'A whole range of schools currently in the design process are showing potential of being "Very Good". There is every likelihood that these designs will achieve a "Very Good" rating when they come to CABE's schools design panel at planning stage,' says CABE senior design review advisor Jennifer Singer.

The effect of the minimum design standard has been to claw back some design quality to a procurement process that was roundly criticised for lack of it. Whether there will be more or less schools hitting the top spot at design review stage seems of less importance, though the signs point to there being more buildings coming through that are on a par with Cotham and Stockwell Park. With the outcome being better-designed schools, grumbles about grade deflation may not be a major concern. But there'll always be the quip beloved of exam pundits through the ages: 'It was harder in my day'. ■

Architect's Statement

Stockwell Park High School, London, by Sheppard Robson

'Stockwell Park High School is a secondary school in one of the most deprived boroughs in London, Lambeth.'

The scheme visually breaks down boundaries between the internal and external environments through its use of full-height glass. The enhanced visibility gives the site a permeable impression, offering an insight into the school without compromising its security.

The proposed building weaves around the existing mature trees, providing a fluid form that responds directly to its setting, embracing the cluster form as the building block for year-group teaching spaces.

The main circulation spine cuts north-south through the plan – providing a direct route through the building – to produce a strong and clear diagram.'