

# Independent advice on building matters



**Alan Piper** Consultancy

# Surveys and Feasibility

## **To begin at the beginning...**

Every project needs to start with a survey – but what kind of survey? To help you settle your requirements, here are some pointers based on information we have been asked to gather on past projects.

## **Seeking Advice**

When appointing consultants, much time and effort goes into box-ticking selection processes, but too often there is a lack of focus about what you want them to go out and do. The right brief at the start is crucial – ask the right questions!

As a chartered architect with considerable experience of existing buildings, I aim to provide an independent review of the state of a building and how it can be adapted for more effective use.

The most common needs are for condition surveys to help organise repairs, and measured plans in order to make better use of available floorspace.

For an estate or campus, a sample survey may be sufficient, rather than checking every flat or room. For older buildings, it is often helpful to unpick different phases of construction or extensions, which may require different treatments.

Although most building surveys are standard in scope, remember that they can be customised to suit your specific needs. Instances have included compiling a database of a borough's properties let to community groups, whilst a legal case required identifying all the past uses and lessees since a Victorian shopping parade was built.

## **Cracking up**

If there are manifest defects, particularly if they affect neighbouring property or the responsibilities are disputed, then any survey report should fully describe the extent of cracks or other failures, and try to identify the causes. Supporting photographs and location plans will probably be needed too.

Be clear about repairs, whether you need detailed proposals, cost estimates, or just an indication that replacement is overdue.

## **Feasibility – will it fit?**

Usually, the aim of this stage is to confirm that the proposals will fit within the space available, and to provide a first stab at the likely costs. It's vital to identify access limitations and Town Planning constraints early on. There may be lease conditions or covenants to overcome.

## **Ways to Success**

Build upon earlier research – if we are supplied with previous reports, it helps us add value, instead of just repeating what the last consultant did. Building surveys should be broad enough in scope to pick up a range of problems beyond those that you were already aware of. The survey results then need to be shared within the authority. Feasibility studies need to range widely enough to pick up new ideas as well as risks. If there have already been public consultations or proposals from other stakeholders, let us see those inputs too. We may then find the key to unlocking new resources, rather than just presenting you with another bill.

## How can we help?

- Building condition surveys.
- Lease plans and “as built” drawings.
- Feasibility studies for adapting or extending existing buildings.



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# Conserving our heritage

## Heritage Assets

Communities often campaign for a landmark building to be listed for its historic interest, but listing is only the start. The greatest challenge is finding ways for that building to earn its keep. Yet with the right uses and presentation, it can be a focal point for regeneration and a real asset to the surrounding community.

Things have been changing in the Heritage field in the past year or two. Eminent bodies which seemed for so long to retain a 19th century gentleman's aversion to "trade" have now come out strongly in its support. At last there is widespread recognition that Heritage and Business can work together. Many towns have the potential for economic revival based on their Heritage assets – listed buildings, historic sites and the wider background provided by conservation areas.

## When you need Friends

The initial impetus to retain a landmark building often comes from local enthusiasts organising themselves into a Friends group to support it. This was brought home to me a few years ago when the Friends group for an Edwardian library asked me to prepare an application for Listed Building Consent to restore some of the original signage.

Friends can contribute practical help or attract extra capital funding, but be aware that this will be for enhanced services or extra facilities rather than to maintain the Council's core service.

National Lottery funds and charitable trusts have been important resources for voluntary groups to



draw upon, but such funders are rightly reluctant to subsidise the public sector. Lottery funds in particular will expect to see well-developed business plans to convince them that any rescued building or amenity can survive in the longer term. Any realistic bid will demand collaboration between all the local interests to consider what range of services and attractions will be practical. Some of these may spin off as community projects or social enterprises in their own right, attracting other funding streams.

## **Making Conservation Areas Work**

We have had Conservation Areas in our towns for over 40 years, but they have tended to restrict development rather than promote it. Many of the early conservation areas were Georgian squares and the like, where the priority should be maintaining a uniform character. Others are parks and gardens where the presumption should be against cluttering them with extra buildings. However some now cover commercial town centres, and the need here is to balance commercial vitality with maintaining the distinctive character.

What is often forgotten is that the fascinating jumble of Victorian, Edwardian and Art Deco in many centres is a product of an era before town planning controls were even invented.

Councils find it easier to apply uniform design policies across the whole borough, but each conservation area needs its own guidelines which identify what is special about it. Better still if there can be a vision of how it can be improved and nurtured. For historic town centres, the key is encouraging variety while respecting the scale and context – a big new block will always dominate, whatever its style or choice of colour.

## **Here to Help**

Heritage funders have realised we live in a more complex world, but councils or community trusts promoting projects will still need advice and support



to turn their ideas into firm proposals. We can best help you with:

- Building condition surveys.
- Conservation reports.
- Applications for Listed Building Consent or planning permission.
- Feasibility studies and space planning for existing buildings.

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# Making the most of our public buildings

## Planning for Change

Many public authorities are trying to reduce the number of buildings that they occupy, either to generate cash or to reduce overheads in future years.

Such plans usually depend on shuffling around people and services in order to free up a building or two for sale or letting.

There may even be ambitions to adapt an older building to host a new initiative or re-launched services.

However, hasty changes or disposals can lead to problems further down the line. In two recent cases I found that past sales of land behind premises had eliminated a vital fire escape route, requiring internal replanning to provide a safe alternative, thereby losing some useful floor-space.

## Office Planning

Was your office layout planned or did it just evolve? As architects, we can help to make it more efficient, but the best results are obtained when a client takes a wider view of delivering an effective service.

An easy mistake is to focus only on how many workers you can fit into a given space. This leads towards “hot desking” solutions which frankly are only effective for staff who spend a lot of their time out “on the road”. Even then it can be tricky if everyone tends to be back in the office at the same time of day. There will often be scope to plan layouts more efficiently, but making workers feel like battery hens may reduce morale and effectiveness.

For all the promises of digital technology, in practice a lot of office space still gets taken up with filing cabinets and book shelves for reference material. All office space is not equal, so it's better to concentrate files and stationery supplies in the less attractive corners or byways, enabling staff workstations to move closer to the windows.

## Other Users

If you envisage sharing space with other agencies, remember to allow extra time for assimilating their requirements too. Different management styles or operating needs can bring unexpected problems so early consultation with prospective partners is vital – don't find out too late that your activities are incompatible!

Remember too that reception areas and enquiry counters are opportunities to convey key messages to your service users. Any facelift scheme needs to be followed through with regular “house-keeping” to ensure that displays are current and that furniture is clean and sensibly arranged.

## Extending Use

The typical council's range of buildings extends well beyond offices to many other uses. There may be scope to increase the usage of existing public buildings, with a wider range of functions under one roof, adding evening or weekend activities, or complementing a seasonal use with something else for other periods of the year. It's all about making more use of the past investment and fixed costs that are already there. At the same time, you need to be mindful of placing extra burdens on the customer-facing staff, and some combinations of uses may be impractical.

## Making it Work

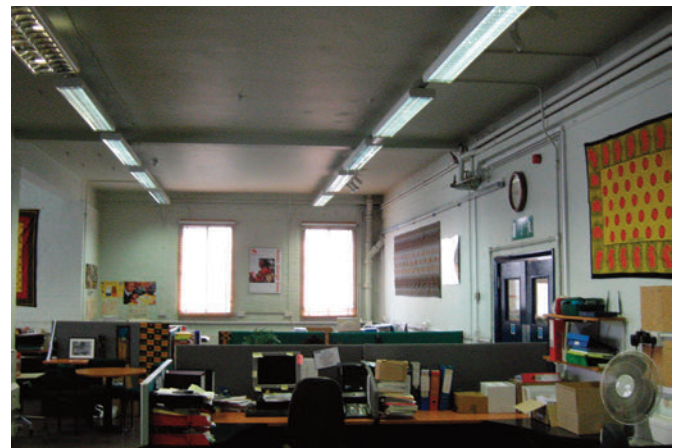
But before you commit to this approach, has anybody checked that the buildings can cope with the new expectations?

Can all the proposed activities fit within the space, or will you need to extend? Can access be improved while keeping sensitive areas secure? What major repairs are needed in the years ahead? Will the new uses need planning permission or other consents?

As a minimum, it is essential to identify critical parts of the proposals, and the likely lead-in time to obtain necessary approvals.

Perhaps the main design effort will not be started until funding is firm, contingent on selling a redundant site, for example.

If you don't have the time or budget for a detailed study at present, maybe I could help you with a quick appraisal to see if your concept could work with the premises that you have?



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# Sustaining Regeneration

## Seeking the Right Mix

Local authorities have tended to shape their regeneration plans around large-scale developments, swayed perhaps by the size of the investment promised and hoping to transform their town centre in one hit. However, even if you can attract a major player to build in your town, their focus is likely to be on the most profitable use of the day, to the exclusion of the other uses that keep a town viable and attractive.

To sustain local confidence that a town centre is being regenerated, even small or temporary projects can have a big impact if they bring back variety and activity to prominent sites.

## Filling Gaps in the High Street

Traditional high streets have long been under pressure from supermarkets and out-of-town retail parks. Recent years have also seen gaps created by the extinction of several familiar retail chains that anchored our high streets.

Charity shops have served us well in keeping old shopping parades alive, but the recession has opened up gaps faster than they can be filled.

Yet for many organisations, a ground-level shop in a town centre location is far better for serving the public than the commercial office suite or rundown mansion where many council departments, charities and professional services are actually based.

Shop premises offer more scope for full disabled access, and central sites can be close to public transport. In contrast to the cafes and takeaways





that most shopping parades now depend on for survival, there would be less demand for late-night use, so less cause to annoy residents of the flats above. Be realistic too, and accept that some shopping frontages are now too peripheral to survive and can be allowed to become residential.

## Attracting Visitors

A proven way to boost town centre trade is to attract more visitors. Only a few centres can do this by offering more and bigger shops - most can no longer compete on their retail offer alone. Other possible approaches are to promote entertainment, arts or heritage destinations within your town centre. Yet to sustain the flow of visitors, provision must be made for the whole visitor experience, from website information to the parking and toilets. Remember too that a busy evening economy brings its own issues.

## Enlist Grassroots Support

The local community can be a major resource for renewal. Grass-roots community groups are often bubbling with ideas and have access to funding streams which councils cannot reach, as well as adding "sweat equity" and positive publicity which may attract more investors. Efforts need to be made to involve smaller local businesses – there may even be scope for a Business Improvement District. Many communities are exploring Neighbourhood Planning as a more inclusive approach to regeneration.

## Make Space for Enterprise

Much business space is obsolete, or has been built as a planning obligation with scant regard for the needs of its users. Older industrial premises have

been the main casualties of the drive for town centre housing, reducing the scope for new businesses to set up, or for growing firms to stay. We need to see more councils encouraging craft, creative and media enterprises, and safeguarding the premises for them to operate in.

Rather than dispose of redundant buildings when the market is slack, it may be better to focus on generating "revenue" income from rents or hire charges. Other owners are discovering the benefits of "meanwhile" uses which keep property in use and even generate modest rent income. Far better than coping with vandalism or security costs for empty buildings while you wait for the recession to end!



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Alan Piper draws on 45 years experience in public and private sectors, and with community projects. A background in building design is tempered by respect for older buildings and understanding how they can be adapted to serve modern needs.

Based in Brixton, the Consultancy is well-placed to advise on urban regeneration and renovation projects in and around Greater London.



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