

Fitting the New to the Old

Designing new ironwork for heritage settings: Part 1

An abstract from the presentation given by Bethan Griffiths at the Victoria & Albert Museum
14th November 2019

Bethan Griffiths

The first thing to appreciate about new work within a heritage setting is that **it is not prohibited**.



Sound Waves Doors: A design that reflects the current use, as a music venue, of these Grade II listed buildings Photo Bethan Griffiths

Despite the extra care and attention given to conserving heritage, it is perfectly acceptable to enhance a heritage setting with new work, be it traditional or contemporary in design.

However, designing new work within this context is not straightforward as there are additional aspects to take into consideration, including existing legislative and policy framework as well as guidance, for example:

PRIMARY LEGISLATION

Planning (Listed Buildings & Conservation Areas) Act 1990

PLANNING POLICIES

National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) section 16 (Conserving and enhancing the historic environment) and local government plans which outline what is permissible

SUPPLEMENTARY GUIDANCE

National Planning Practice Guidance (NPPG) and Historic England's publication series aimed at further illustrating the application of the planning policies

NOTE:

It is important to understand this guidance, as all applications for new work need to demonstrate how the project relates and conforms to the policy objectives.

In addition, knowledge and appreciation of Conservation Principles is a fundamental requirement. This may seem strange, given that we are talking about creating new work rather than repairing old, but what applies to the heritage itself, also applies to its surroundings. Understanding how to recognise and appreciate the existing heritage - specifically its significance - and ensure that this is conserved, is vital to the success of any new design work which aims to enhance the whole. All of this is important because a successful new design within a heritage setting will need to demonstrate, for example, how the proposed project both recognises and enhances significance.

Naturally this limits the possibilities of what will be permissible, identifying a boundary within which to work, but this is positive also as it focuses attention on what fits. A bit like giving a structure to a jigsaw by completing all the edge pieces first. However, achieving designs that fit within the boundary need not be complicated or difficult.

The following is the briefest of introductions to just five key points. I believe that keeping these in mind is crucial to getting any design process started in the right direction.

1. CHARACTER

An assessment of the character of a setting is critical in establishing a good design brief and the aesthetic direction for new work. In the case of heritage settings, the brief must come from the surroundings. The architectural context or landscape is your client and you must respond to this for both conservation work and new work. Good design picks up on the architectural conversation. Bad design, or a lack of design, ignores it and as a result becomes argumentative.

2. SIGNIFICANCE & VALUE

The ability to recognise, understand and value the significance of the heritage in question is a fundamental requirement. Significance can, for example, be in relation to a specific object or a streetscape or even in association with a person or event. It's the sum of technological, historical, aesthetic, or social values for past, present or future generations. It provides information on which informed decisions can be made. You can't design sympathetically without understanding it, yet it does not in itself dictate the design direction.

(To find out more about significance read the Conservation Principles in the recommended reading list).

3. RESPOND TO A SETTING

Responding to a setting is about achieving a design that reinforces, rather than detracting from, significance. Think of it like storytelling because it's through the story behind your design, and what it represents, that the proposal will be evaluated and justified.

continued →

4. SYMPATHETIC DESIGN

This is the most commonly referenced, yet also the most misinterpreted and misunderstood concept. A sympathetic design does not necessarily mean it has to be a traditional one. A contemporary approach also has the potential to be sympathetic. Best conservation practice states that 'New work should be easily identifiable.' In other words, new work should be 'legible' from historic work. This can be achieved in different ways, obvious or subtle, for instance a discrete date stamp on a reinstated traditional design, or more visibly through modern aesthetics and style. There is no generic right or wrong as to which design direction should be taken, as replicating a particular style may be absolutely the right choice in one context and yet not in another. The point to remember is that each project needs to be assessed on an individual basis and it is the quality of the design, and specifically how it responds to its setting, that makes it a sympathetic design.



Lucknam Park: A traditional main entrance layout given a contemporary twist, with an updated fresh take on traditional ironwork

5. IMPACT & ENHANCEMENT

When working on an ironwork project it's all too easy to see it as an isolated object and forget how it relates aesthetically and practically to its overall setting. Evaluation of the impact of the design and the enhancement it offers is essential to gaining permission for its installation.

With these key points in mind from the outset, you have the ability to establish the design brief and aesthetic direction. For example, whether the style is going to be traditional or contemporary.



Roberts Park Bandstand: An unusual opportunity to create a distinctive bandstand as a focal point in Saltaire World Heritage site

NOTE:

If new work is the reinstatement of missing architectural detailing or features, then the methodology for this must be carried out in line with Conservation Principles and Conservation Philosophy (to find out more see the recommended reading list) which necessitate, for example, that the work be underpinned by thorough physical survey and archival research.

To leave you with one final thought; based on the reality that there is no 'one size fits all' approach; it should be no surprise that new work in heritage spaces will always stimulate debate. Whether the design is discreetly traditional or boldly contemporary, there will always be vehement advocates for and against the outcome. A bit like Marmite – you either love it or hate it!

PUBLICATION PLANS

This is such an important area of design, with so much scope and potential, that it is impossible to offer a generic approach. Although there is guidance available on the wider subject, it needs to be interpreted in relation specifically to ironwork. With this in mind, the NHIG proposes a publication on the subject, with a range of examples illustrating various successful design approaches. This will offer a practical guide to those creating new designs for heritage settings. We believe such a publication will become an essential tool for any contemporary artist blacksmith working in historic settings. NHIG are, therefore, in the process of starting to raise the funds to make this possible.

In the meantime please do see my recommended reading list below.

RECOMMENDED READING

While full of valuable information, do note that the following are all written generically for conservation as a whole. Therefore, in reading them, you need to acquire the skills of identifying what information is relevant and how to interpret it in relation to the design of new ironwork.

CONSERVATION PRINCIPLES

There are several to read with the International Council on Monuments and Sites (ICOMOS) underpinning all others including:

'*Conservation Principles*' by Historic England

'*Policies and Guidance*' also by Historic England (essential reading for understanding significance)

'*Conservation Principles*' by NHIG (an easier to read version in relation to ironwork).

CONSERVATION PHILOSOPHY

Again, several to look at including for example; ICOMOS, The Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings (SPAB) & The Institute of Historic Building Conservation (IHBC).

'*New Design in Historic Settings*' by Historic Scotland

'*New Design for Old Buildings*' by Roger Hunt & Ian Boyd in association with SPAB

Historic England's publication series aimed at illustrating the application of the planning policies including:

'*Managing Changes to Heritage Assets*'

'*The Historic Environment in Local Plans*'

'*Managing Significance in Decision Taking*'

'*The Setting of Heritage Assets*'

To be continued. . .

In part 2 Bethan writes further about the design process and discusses the terms: 'Restore', 'Replicate' and 'In the spirit of'

Fitting the New to the Old

Designing new ironwork for heritage settings: Part 2

Bethan Griffiths concludes her overview of the talk she gave at the NHIG AGM 2019

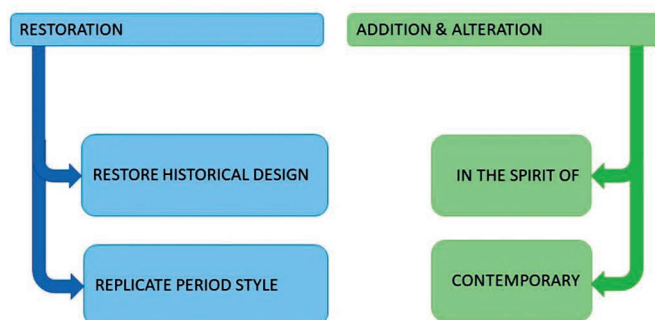
Bethan Griffiths

Part one, in Artist Blacksmith issue No157, briefly covered the following five points.

1. CHARACTER
2. SIGNIFICANCE AND VALUE
3. RESPOND TO A SETTING
4. SYMPATHETIC DESIGN
5. IMPACT AND ENHANCEMENT

While not an exhaustive list, they illustrate what I believe is crucial to getting any design process for new work in a heritage setting started in the right direction. With these key points in mind from the outset, you have the ability to progress the project by establishing the design brief and aesthetic direction, for example, whether the style is going to be traditional or contemporary. The answer will vary depending on the project and context given. As we've already established, there is no generic approach, so how do you therefore go about creating and justifying a proposal for new work within a heritage setting?

As each project is unique, this is not an easy topic to illustrate. To assist understanding, a simple framework is helpful, and the following is the format I use.



Projects may not always neatly fit into a specific category, but that isn't the point. Instead, the intention of this framework is simply to give a starting point so that the process of analysis and assessment can get underway. Also, it is important to recognise that in historic settings, contemporary design cannot be looked at in isolation. Therefore this overview includes the full picture so that informed decisions can be made.

It might be helpful to elaborate on some of these terms and their definitions in relation to this article.

RESTORATION

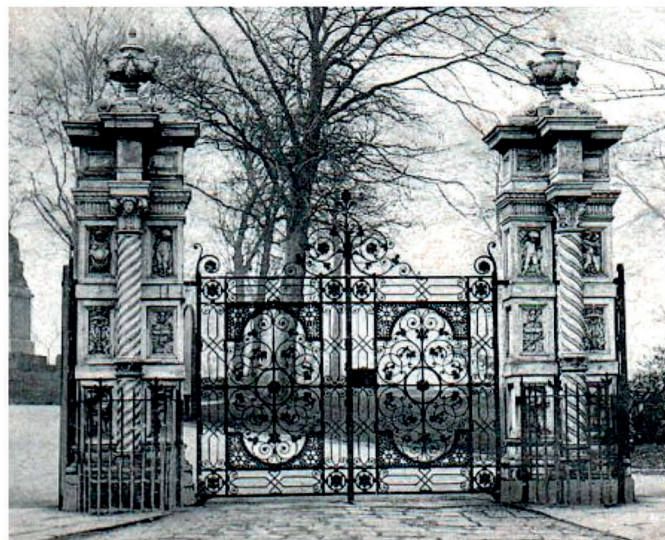
This is the reinstatement of missing work with the objective of authentically re-creating the former appearance of an interior, building, street or landscape. Restoration as a design direction is about establishing a better impression of how a particular space was designed and therefore how it was originally intended to be perceived. It is not a re-imagining, or tweaking, of what we think or would have preferred it to be. It is important to be clear that the concept of authenticity; as the transmitter of the values and significance of cultural settings, is the key component in the process of any restoration.

This approach is especially relevant where the majority of the original historic features are present with only specific elements missing. For example, if all the railings to a front entrance are complete but the gates are missing.

There are two different ways of achieving this:

RESTORE HISTORICAL DESIGN

The direct reproduction of an original design. This relies on high quality evidence of what was once there, so is only relevant where there are references available to make an exact copy, for example physical remains or archival images.



RESTORE HISTORICAL DESIGN

Weston Park, Grade II listed South East Entrance. The original gates were stolen and the design reference for their replacement was an historic photograph. Designed by Chris Topp and made by Topp & Co



RESTORE HISTORICAL DESIGN
A detail from the replacement gate

REPLICATE PERIOD STYLE

Barnes Park Grade II entrance

With no direct historical references to copy, the design of these new gates was accomplished by combining a knowledge of the design style of the period with elements from the original railings that could be incorporated. Designed by Bethan Griffiths and made by Topp & Co



REPLICATE PERIOD STYLE

An imitation of a period fashion. This relies on historical reference material to inform the design process and is used where there is no original evidence to copy. This approach is relevant where the majority of the original historic features are present, with only specific elements lost, for example a missing pair of gates in an otherwise complete historical entrance.

NOTE

- *Within the context of this article, do not confuse 'restoration' with 'repair', although the terms are often used interchangeably, as the definition of repair here is that it is the physical refurbishment of a specific object.*
- *Without an original design to copy, it is important to distinguish the replication of a period style, from the restoration of a historical design, so that all decision makers understand they are commissioning a 'modern interpretation of a period style' as opposed to an authentic historic design.*
- *For any 'restoration' design to be carried out successfully, it is essential that those working on the project have a thorough knowledge of historic styles and period detailing combined with experience of traditional techniques and materials. Only this breadth and depth of understanding can provide a reliable authentic result.*
- *Where design authenticity is in any doubt, general good practice is to simplify the new restoration rather than add conjectural decoration and detail.*

ADDITION & ALTERATION

This allows for appropriate innovation or change. It is about adding new original designs that enhance value and character of the history of a place by telling their own story. It views additions as just one phase in the timeline of a property's development.

The focus is on managing change. This is based on the philosophy that good new design is essential in ensuring the life and sustainability of old buildings, creating environments that are practical and desirable for today's society. This approach is inclusive of the values of owners and local communities, as their preferences can be more easily considered. It therefore allows for maintenance of the material heritage balanced with contemporary needs and tastes, as it does not obsessively imitate historical references.

This is a particularly useful approach where there is no clear historical evidence, or reference, for the new work and where the desired objective of a historic setting is to not only maintain the existing character, but to allow for its evolution through the introduction of well-designed additions.

Again, this approach can be sub divided into two:

IN THE SPIRIT OF

This is about using the style, ethos, and historical references of a specific period as inspiration, but instead of directly copying as with restoration, using them in a more modern way to give them refreshing new life. It is an opportunity for a unique piece, which while being influenced by historical emblematic references, is a mark of its time. If done correctly this option has the potential to achieve a classical feel which is timeless rather than fashion or trend led.

continued →

IN THE SPIRIT OF

Shrewsbury Cathedral Grade II

The ironwork design is based on a pointed quatrefoil, which was inspired by, and in reference to, the Cathedral's gothic interior by the famous architect EW Pugin. Designed by Bethan Griffiths and made by Topp & Co



CONTEMPORARY

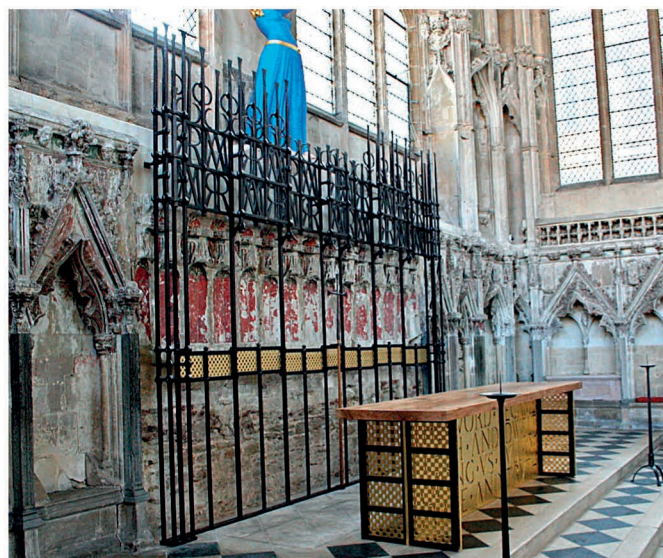
New original work that utilises our modern-day approach to design. Not bound by any specific historic style references, the designer is free to find their own response to a setting. If done well it has the potential to create a dialogue between ancient and modern that lifts the value and meaning of both.

NOTE

- It is not appropriate to sacrifice old work simply to accommodate the new. Therefore, the ability to recognise, understand and value the significance of the heritage in question is a fundamental requirement before any design work commences.
- This approach requires a well-developed and holistic vision of how the new and old parts will perform together long into the future.
- Contemporary design is often associated with modern process and techniques of manufacture but ensuring craftsmanship in the construction is important and will help the piece become valued for generations to come.

In conclusion, creating new work for a heritage setting, be it traditional or contemporary in style, requires more than the craft skills to work, and the ability to design, with iron. While these are of course vital, new proposals are much more likely to gain approval and result in successful schemes, if they are designed with an understanding of the significance and wider context of the heritage asset in question.

Only time will tell, as times and fashions change, but get your design right and you may just have created your own piece of Heritage for the future!



CONTEMPORARY

Ely Cathedral Grade I

This completely original reredos design, with complimenting altar, frames what little remains of the original masonry decoration that was destroyed as part of the English Reformation. In doing so, it both respects and responds to the historic significance of this setting. As a focal feature, it also provides an important enhancement to the space. Concept by John Maddison with technical concept development by Bethan Griffiths and made by Topp & Co

