Town Centre Urban Design Guide

Stockton-on-Tees Borough Council describes its ambitious document

Background
The Borough of Stockton-on-Tees, in line with the current national economic picture is in a challenging period for economic growth. As the economy begins to recover, the assets within the town centre must be built upon to ensure that a new and exciting era of positive change brings growth. There is real potential to attract new investment, businesses, residents and visitors through a strategic and integrated approach to the town centre’s regeneration.

Previous strategic work undertaken by the council suggested the need for a planning policy to be developed ensuring that the authority has the power to guide development into the most appropriate locations, resist applications that do not benefit or support the key development priorities for the town centre, and give potential investors comfort that the council has a robust strategic vision for the Stockton Central Area.

Guiding Vision
The Guide aims to deliver positive change that will revitalise the town centre by establishing a strong network of buildings, streets and spaces that delivers both quality and meets the needs of Stockton-on-Tees Town Centre and its users.

The objectives of the Urban Design Guide are:

- To provide overarching urban design principles for Stockton-on-Tees Town Centre through a sound understanding of the historic development and existing environment, building on the Conservation Areas & Historic Environment SPD;
- To provide detailed guidance on the design of buildings and the spaces that connect them taking into consideration context, grain of development, local distinctiveness, use of spaces, scale, massing, materials, and hard and soft landscaping;
- To identify areas of opportunity for sympathetic and appropriate development;
- To provide a framework for connectivity including public transport and linkages with the riverside and gateway sites, analysing the links and spaces that connect the centre with the wider suburban setting.

Consultation played an essential part in the development of the guide, specifically consultation with the planning department and key stakeholders. Close working relationships with these areas ensured complete buy-in from those who will seek to use the guide.

Initial consultation suggested that design guides are sometimes considered as being a hindrance to the planning process or a reason to inflate the cost of development or improvements. Good design doesn’t necessarily mean expensive design; good design guidance is about providing the appropriate tools for the right context.

Going Forward
The Council’s ambitious plans for the regeneration of Stockton town centre are underpinned by this guide, which as a document was delivered entirely by the authority’s own in-house urban design team, using local knowledge and expertise to promote the appropriate conservation and enhancement of the town centre’s built environment.

We believe this has been a unique project for a local authority, and as a result the guide has been a catalyst for a £38m investment plan within the town centre, including £17m public realm improvements (again delivered by our in-house design team) which started on site in September 2012.

The guide also supports the delivery of a current Heritage Lottery Funded Townscape Heritage Initiative Scheme, which seeks to improve the built form heritage and bring vacant floor space back into use, thus contributing to the town’s future economic growth. It is intended that the Design Guide will eventually be formally adopted as a Supplementary Planning Document (SPD) as part of the Local Development Framework process to support and ensure good design within the town centre’s built environment.
REVIVING THE TOWN’S MARKET PLACE
Kettering Borough Council shows its sensitive intervention

Historically, Kettering’s market place had been enclosed by built-form on the three sides of the square. However, this sense of enclosure had been eroded by the demolition of the previous buildings on this site in the early 20th century. The human scale of the space was lost, leaving an open, desolate, rarely-used area, with a small car-park and public convenience block dominating the southern side of the square.

Our aim was to regenerate this forlorn, miserable area of town within the Kettering Town Centre Conservation Area, whilst respecting the surrounding listed buildings, including the prominent Grade I listed – Parish Church, and other buildings of architectural interest.

Against commercial advice, which advocated a mix of commercial/retail with office space above, we approached the revival of this area by building two restaurant units with ten residential units above and resident basement parking below. Whilst not slavishly copying the design of the properties that once stood upon this piece of land, it was intended to recapture the spirit of those structures and their relationship to the adjacent church of SS Peter & Paul.

The buildings are now complete and the market place environment has been improved by recreating the historic form, using quality materials and modern build methods, to establish a friendlier, more intimate, and therefore more widely-used, space. The view of the church and its spire is enhanced by being framed by the new properties, whilst families and shoppers linger on the terraced stone auditorium. One of the two restaurant units is already occupied by Prezzo, with indications of strong interest in the remaining restaurant unit. The area has gone from one of desolation to one of vibrancy and joyousness, which frequently echoes to the sounds of children’s laughter.

LESSONS LEARNED
The importance of a strategic vision: the restaurant quarter was seven years in the making; the design has evolved, and improved, but the vision has remained the same: to create a lively, welcoming place that is surrounded by high quality buildings that animate the edges of the space and draw people into the restaurant quarter.

‘You said, we did’ we spent a long time consulting with local residents, traders and interest groups and have delivered what we promised to deliver for them.

Partnership working: we have worked very closely with our restaurant quarter neighbours, in particular the Parish Church, to ensure that they understood the vision for the space. Our discussions resulted in their removal of physical barriers between the Market Place and the church forecourt. We continue to work together on projects in that area.
City Park
City of Bradford Metropolitan District Council reviews its bold design

City Park is a major new public space in the centre of Bradford. It comprises water features, trees, stone sculptures, a pavilion building with facilities, bespoke lighting columns, a new bus canopy and interactive lasers. At the heart of City Park is the UK’s largest city centre water feature, a 3,600m² ‘Mirror Pool’ which boasts more than 100 fountains, including the tallest in any UK city at 30m high.

FROM ASPIRATION TO DELIVERY
The concept for a new city park with a large body of water as its focus dates back to 2003. A masterplan for the city centre by Aloso Architects identified the site as the natural heart of the city. It is located at the lowest point of the bowl in which Bradford sits and where its valleys and historic routes converge and meet.

Further work was undertaken to translate the visionary nature of the masterplan into a deliverable scheme, including engaging with the community at several stages. In 2007 a consultant team led by Gillespies was appointed in partnership with multi-disciplinary teams from Bradford Council, to develop the detailed design and delivery of the park. The scheme was funded by Bradford Council, Yorkshire Forward and the Regional Transport Board and was completed in January 2012.

CONNECTING THE CITY
The park is surrounded by a variety of city centre destinations. These include the National Media Museum and cultural quarter, the central shopping area, the university and college, the transport interchange, City Hall, and various civic uses, offices and hotels. Prior to the scheme, the site was a major bus route which dissected the city centre and impeded pedestrian movement between these destinations.

There was concern that the large body of water originally proposed in the masterplan could also interrupt pedestrian flows. In response to this the design evolved into a mirror pool where the water levels can be lowered to reveal pedestrian pathways through the space (dividing the water up into three smaller pools). This allows people to move easily in a variety of directions, connecting the city centre together.

Another issue to address was the city centre ring road (Princes Way) which effectively cut the site off from the learning and cultural quarters to the west. This was a poor pedestrian environment dominated by vehicles, safety barriers and inconvenient staggered crossings. The scheme has transformed this part of the ring road to create a more human scale environment. The barriers have been removed, the pavements widened, landscape and street trees added, and a wide new super crossing installed to enable easy and direct pedestrian access.

The relationship of City Park to the ring road needed careful consideration. Strategically placed landscape mounds, trees and hedges have helped to reduce the noise and visual impact of the traffic whilst still retaining pedestrian permeability and visual links between the park and wider city.

A DIVERSE, VIBRANT AND FLEXIBLE SPACE
The park offers a stimulating sensory environment. The pool is designed to provide different moods depending on the occasion or time of day. It can be a calm, reflective pool with occasional ripples, or a lively and dynamic space with fountains and erupting geysers, and it can be transformed again at night with atmospheric lighting. Also when walking through the park the spatial definition of the space constantly changes and different views are revealed creating visual interest and variety.

The design of the pool seeks to encourage people to engage with the water. One of the overwhelming successes of the scheme is undeniably the way in which local people have embraced and interacted with the water. It has introduced new activities to the city centre such as paddling, playing in the water and relaxing on the boardwalk. This has helped create a space which facilitates an active social life and feels like the heart of the city. This is further supported by the ability to drain the pool to create a flexible space that can be used for diverse events such as markets, theatre productions and community festivals.

A QUALITY PUBLIC REALM
The park is constructed from high quality natural materials which will enable it to stand the test of time. These include sandstone flags, porphyry setts, granite cubes and a hardwood boardwalk. The design and pattern of the floorspace helps to create unity with the surrounding buildings contributing to a harmonious cityscape and a space that is distinctive to Bradford. The materials and street furniture, such as the lighting columns, are arranged in a way which helps to define the different parts of the park.

The public realm extends to the roof of the pavilion building which includes grassed areas to sit providing views out over the park. The pavilion itself houses the water tank and equipment for the fountains as well as free public toilets. There is also a fully fitted changing place with a hoist ensuring facilities are accessible to all.

The whole park has been designed to be accessible by a wide range of users. This has included careful consideration of the levels and using materials, colours and textures to signify different types of space, including a tactile edge to the pool.

Management arrangements are in place to ensure that the quality of the space is maintained. This includes a daily programme of cleaning the park early in the morning and draining the pool at night.

LESSONS LEARNED
A lesson to take from the project is the importance of keeping hold of the vision and maintaining the ambition and commitment to quality in delivering the scheme. Numerous challenges had to be overcome but partnership working, cross party political support and buy in from the local community and business community were key in bringing the scheme forward.

The result is a park that has at once become an iconic space for Bradford, synonymous with the image of the city, but it is also very much a social space where people from all the district’s communities come to meet, interact, relax and have fun.
LISTENING TO YOUTH VOICES
The Partnership of South Hampshire (PUSH) encourages more involvement

South Hampshire is planning for substantial economic growth in the next twenty years. With that growth will come new houses: houses built in our existing communities and upwards of 20,000 in new, self-contained communities. This is being planned and managed by ten local authorities working together in the Partnership for Urban South Hampshire (PUSH).

As with any growth, the plans are contentious: public meetings are full of those concerned about the impact of these new homes on them. But the voices that shout loudest are usually over thirty years of age, and often against change. The ones who don’t attend meetings or exhibitions are those who have a real stake in the future of South Hampshire – young people under eighteen who will grow up to live, work and raise families here.

‘What’ – asked our councillors – ‘do the youth of our region want from new communities?’ PUSH commissioned Space, Place-making and Urban Design (SPUD) to find out. They asked them to work with five schools in the parts of the region likely to experience growth, to design the places that they wanted to live in.

Each school group undertook a period of investigation into their locality, exploring both their positive and negative experiences of those places. This enabled them to identify aspects that they felt were in need of improvement or change and also to understand the practical issues and context in which change might take place.

As a team, each group agreed the focus and theme to prepare a brief from which they would develop proposals for change. Students were encouraged to extend their research through direct contact with the professionals involved in planning and development in their areas, sharing their experiences with their peers. In total, 75 young people from across the sub-region took part, and at least one now wants to be an architect and one an urban designer!

The presentations have been repeated at council meetings across the region. They’ve also been published in a booklet sent to all the PUSH councils, with copies for planning committee members and their officers (www.spudgroup.org.uk/#spud-youth/vstc2-current-activity). The councils have committed to ensuring that, as detailed planning begins for new development, so they will look at how best they can give young people a voice.

We appreciated having our views heard for once, by the local councillors

The project has given our young people an appreciation that they can and should have a say in planning and designing new communities in their area. But perhaps most importantly the young people, through their maturity and imagination, have begun to persuade councillors that they should be given a real voice in designing their future.

For 2012/13, PUSH has committed money to developing this approach further allowing us to embed a youth voice in our approach to urban design and planning for growth. We plan a programme of sessions for young people in Winchester and Southampton, in each case giving 15 youngsters the chance to learn about urban design over 20 evenings per group, and use their experience to plan the future of their cities. Once again, we’ll present their ideas to local councillors and let young people have a say in their future. Our aim is to make these events a regular part of all our councils’ debates about development and planning.

We thought hard about how we could incorporate sustainable design into our ideas. Reusing the existing buildings, designing a ‘green’ community centre and reclaiming the High Street...
The Chain Street area is historically important to the social development of Bradford as it was the location of the first major council housing scheme (1909). The residential properties were tenement blocks of a cottage style influenced by the Garden City movement. The site sits at the point where the regeneration zones known as The Learning Quarter, the city centre and the World Mile and Markets meet. Current works at the University to create a sustainable student village are starting to ripple regeneration into Goitside where two students housing schemes have been created. On a similar basis it is envisaged that the mirror pool development in the city centre will bring regeneration to the area.

The Chain Street comprises four discreet but interdependent sites with a separate solution identified for each:

- **Two storey linear terraces of bed-sitters** with some architectural merit were re-ordered vertically creating modern social housing, standard family housing.
- **‘U Block’ flats** were demolished to form a mix of private and social housing. The dwellings had a 3 storey form that responded to the surrounding city centre scale.
- **Where the pedestrian route through the linear park changed direction, a small urban square was introduced, overlooked by a new extra-care residential development,** and
- **This site has two distinct sides to it. One fronts Westgate which is a busy main road connecting the centre through to the themed shopping area of the World Mile. This developed into a commercial frontage with apartments above. The rear half was proposed as family housing fronting the surrounding streetscapes.**

The park will include play space within its landscaped setting to provide for the children living in the family houses. The linear park form evolves into a more formal square, where it passes through Site C. All public spaces are well overlooked by the adjacent buildings that engage with the green space.

The Framework identified the need for a radical transformational strategy for redevelopment of these sites, while knitting the development into the existing historic city centre streetscape. The strategy seeked to evolve Dutch urban models of locating family housing within the city centre along landscaped corridors which link into more traditional residential communities. The proposed development form and architectural language was deliberately modern, with the aim of challenging and transforming perceptions of the area and providing a development catalyst for the wider regeneration of the Goitside area.

The overall development respects the area’s history and social context whilst providing a flagship regeneration project raising the profile of the wider Goitside conservation area. The Housing and Communities Agency supported the delivery of social housing, enabling an early start on site by InCommunities. The private housing elements of the scheme were funded through the provision of £1.2 million of gap funding support from the Council.

**LESSONS LEARNED**

- **Identifying a demand for family housing in the city centre**
- **Aspirational design quality is needed to transform perceptions**
- **Extensive broad consultation from outset led to delivery drive engagement with the Framework**
- **Developing innovative strategies for using public owned assets to rive transformational regeneration**
- **Retaining and remodelling the best of the publicly owned assets to drive the quality of the Conservation Area, whilst not being afraid to demolish other buildings and replace them with high quality contemporary design**
- **Having established a demand for housing, the scale of the houses should be appropriate for their city centre location. This requires a unique design solution rather than standard house types that are designed for suburban sites**
- **Utilising the best elements of the existing streetscape can deliver a best value solution through the use of the existing infrastructure.**
South Norfolk Council sets out its key principles

The guide mentioned the local distinctiveness of South Norfolk and required that design proposals respond positively to this, it became clear that there was a need to emphasise that good quality innovative and contemporary design solutions could also be appropriate; this was addressed with additional photographs and a number of case studies to illustrate a variety of contemporary building types, as examples of good design. There was also a very positive response to the interactive, electronic version and further website links were added to a wide range of additional documents and best practice guidance to allow instant and comprehensive access to appropriate information.

The Place-Making Guide SPD was formally adopted in September 2012 and will be a significant aid to applicants, developers and designers towards achieving high quality and sustainable development throughout South Norfolk. It will also assist elected members and officers in pre-application discussions and the evaluation of such proposals in accordance with the National Planning Policy Framework.

Key lessons were learned during the preparation of the guide, particularly through the stakeholder workshops and the public consultation stage, and the document was amended in response to feedback received. Lessons included the need to ensure a holistic approach to appraising and understanding the site and its context, particularly in relation to ecology and biodiversity so that appropriate consideration is given to issues such as green infrastructure during the design process, and the guidance was strengthened to achieve this. Although the guide mentioned the local distinctiveness of South Norfolk and required that design proposals respond positively to this, it became clear that there was a need to emphasise that good quality innovative and contemporary design solutions could also be appropriate; this was addressed with additional photographs and a number of case studies to illustrate a variety of contemporary building types, as examples of good design. There was also a very positive response to the interactive, electronic version and further website links were added to a wide range of additional documents and best practice guidance to allow instant and comprehensive access to appropriate information.

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