

# 155 URBAN DESIGN

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REFLECTIONS ON  
URBAN DESIGN



URBAN  
DESIGN  
GROUP



## NEWS FROM THE UDG CHAIR

Welcome to the summer issue of *Urban Design*. Life has changed unrecognisably for all of us since the last edition with the onset of COVID-19. It will not be quite the same again and neither will urban design. The pandemic presents several urban design challenges, but also a huge opportunity to rethink our built environments.

### HISTORY, HEALTH AND URBAN DESIGN

In dealing with the pandemic it might be worth taking a moment to cast our minds back a century or two. It is only in the past few decades that we have lived in relatively epidemic free times, and even then only in western countries. The whole of the 19th century was haunted by the spectre of typhoid, cholera, typhus and tuberculosis. As a result, the life expectancy of people living in industrial cities such as Liverpool or Manchester was shockingly around 30 years.

There were many initiatives to improve public health, such as the Health of Towns Association of the 1840s, and a host of acts and building regulations. At the time, disease was thought to be spread by noxious vapours or 'miasma' in the air. Therefore the introduction of more light and ventilation in buildings was among the main objectives of public policies. For example, in Scotland the Burgh Police Acts contained requirements for the minimum width of streets, maximum height of dwellings (proportioned to  $1\frac{3}{4}$  the width of the streets), and limits to the number of homes in tenements. These stipulations were explicitly to prevent

overcrowding, ensure light and ventilation and reduce the spread of infectious diseases.

As we live through the pandemic today, many of us in the UK are benefiting from Victorian and Edwardian urban design: wide streets, trees and generous parks. Most planning authorities in the United Kingdom will likely owe the basis of at least some of their present day policies to those standards laid down in the 19th century. Perhaps now is the time to see how we, as urban designers in 2020, can build such a lasting legacy to society.

### THE LAST THREE MONTHS AND THE YEAR AHEAD AT THE UDG

Over the last three months we have been engaging with our members and other built environment professionals worldwide to discuss and influence the best urban design response to the pandemic. Some commentators have speculated that the urban idea is finished, and that the only future is the low-density suburb where the car is the principal means of transport. This is nonsense. In the current situation and with the need for physical distancing, with streets closed to cars and limited public transport capacity, the walkable, cyclable, localised and people-friendly neighbourhood is more valid than ever. The UDG has been hosting a wide range of events and discussions to give people a forum to exchange their ideas and seize this once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to change the urban environments for the better.

UDG events have covered how high streets, housing design, the public realm and the planning system can all be shaped for the better as a response to the pandemic. We have explored opportunities for 'life-giving streets and spaces', where the UK streetscape is reimagined with wider pavements and fewer cars, in order to allow walking, cycling, commerce and socialising to happen at a safe distance. Perhaps most pressing of all, we have outlined how the current COVID-19 crisis is an opportunity for an urban design reboot. How we design cities today will save lives tomorrow. In the lockdown, cities across the world have seen air quality at its best in decades; wouldn't it be great if we could keep this trend long-term and address climate change with a far more sustainable approach to urban design?

Until we are safe to meet up again, our events will remain online. At the time of writing we have webinar events planned on assessment toolkits, urban design adaptability, towns and cities for children, and the economics of cities. We have also launched a weekly webinar series ideasSPACE, a less formal platform to discuss how we make the much needed changes for people-friendly places. Join us on Thursday evenings at 5.30pm BST. You can find recordings on our YouTube channel thanks to UrbanNous. If you have an idea that needs space to explore it, let us now.

Fingers crossed we hope to be able to see you again face-to-face for events later in the year, including our National Urban Design Group Conference and the Kevin Lynch Memorial Lecture. However, we will switch these events online if required and will instead look forward to seeing you on screen.

### GET INVOLVED

I would like to remind members of our three objectives: to be relevant; to be cutting edge; and, to be fun. As ever, if you have an idea for an urban design event, or would like to get more involved, please do get in contact with us at [administration@udg.co.uk](mailto:administration@udg.co.uk) ●

Leo Hammond, Chair of the Urban Design Group and Associate Director at Lambert Smith Hampton

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## DIARY OF EVENTS

Until further notice it will not be possible to run live events with an audience at The Gallery. There is however an online programme of events.

Please check the UDG website for details [www.udg.org.uk](http://www.udg.org.uk)



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# Unknowns

The three months since the publication of our last issue have seen the world transformed to an extent none of us could have imagined. It is a truism to say that had those in power had the required imagination, we might have been better prepared for the pandemic, but we are where we are and as built environment professionals, we should be looking to the future.

What kind of future? Comments and predictions abound, some doom-laden warning of Armageddon, others optimistic and looking forward to a golden era. Through lockdown, the air has become cleaner, traffic has disappeared from urban streets, the price of oil has collapsed and carbon emissions have been reduced; people are cooking more and finding pleasure in forgotten hobbies. Cycling is suddenly seen as the solution to transport problems and policies that couldn't get through for years, are suddenly implemented overnight. At the same time the economy has tanked, not just in this country but globally, unemployment has reached levels unknown in a century and some industries may never recover.

So how can we predict and plan for the future? Some want to prioritise jobs and the economy; others see an opportunity to tackle climate change comprehensively once and for all. In virtual debates, while some have seized on the opportunities to ban private cars from urban areas, others fear that more people will use their cars to commute in order to avoid crowds in public transport. Pessimists see the danger of resurgent sprawl as people might not want to live at high densities; optimists point out that more than ever people will want to avoid commuting and live near their jobs. But will jobs stay where they are now, in concentrated areas, or move to

homes? Will there be new building regulations that require some form of outdoor space for every dwelling? And will industry still rely on remote and complicated supply chains or bring back manufacturing and therefore diversify employment but create other problems?

The questions are infinite but for the time being, we have very few answers. The signs are mixed: pop-up cycle lanes on the one hand, a return of traffic and car park spaces filling up on the other. It would be foolish and potentially dangerous to pretend to have the answers. We have heard many times that we must 'listen to the science' but there is no such a thing; there are sciences and scientists and they will be working at finding out possible solutions, whilst politicians will listen to those that better suit their goals.

Built environment professionals can be part of the solution but they are not alone; they will have to listen, to watch and to collaborate. We have been here before, not exactly in the same way of course. Things will certainly change but how, how much, when and for whom, we don't know... ●

Sebastian Loew, architect and planner, writer, consultant and joint editor

## HOW TO JOIN

To join the Urban Design Group, visit [www.udg.org.uk](http://www.udg.org.uk) and see the benefits of taking out an annual membership.

**Individual (UK and international)** £55  
**UK student / concession** £35  
**Recognised Practitioner in Urban Design** £85  
**Small practice** (<5 professional staff) £275  
**Large practice** (>5 professional staff) £495  
**Education** £275  
**Local Authority** £100  
**UK Library** £90  
**International Library** £120

## The Multi-level City

10 March 2020, The Gallery,  
Cowcross Street, London

This event was a follow-up to a previous one that concentrated on what happens below ground, what Elizabeth Reynolds of Urban calls 'underground urbanism'. The idea this time was to see how the various levels of a city could be interconnected, and whilst the evening didn't really answer this question, it dealt with what happens below ground, at street level and high above.

Reynolds started below ground noting that most cities, London included, have no planning policies for the subsurface, except some related to basement developments. Major infrastructure is below ground but there is no clear strategy to deal with it. Cities like Beijing, where many people live underground, plan for this shallow layer. She suggested that we should think about the hidden resources available (e.g. geothermal energy) and develop design guidance to ensure that underground spaces will be safe, comfortable, inspiring, inviting and enduring.

With Giles Charlton of Spacehub, we moved to the ground level, a bit above and a bit below and the examples shown, mostly in the City of London, attempted to interconnect these levels. First was a scheme that transformed London Wall Place, part of a monolithic post-war redevelopment that separated pedestrians from motor traffic by creating high-level walkways and leaving a dangerous and unpleasant environment at ground level. The new scheme recreated connectivity and permeability, introduced greenery, and enhanced the heritage. The high-level walk is still there but it is much more welcoming and the ground level is now well used. Other examples shown included St. Alphage Garden, also by London Wall, and Bishopsgate Goodyard. In all of these, there was an attempt to connect the various levels of public space.

From the ground level, we moved to high above with Christian Bocci of Weston Williamson and Partners' presentation on vertical living in major cities. One of his main concerns is whether tall buildings should be isolated or in clusters. Clusters add greater value and can create their own aesthetic, but can also become over-dense and create serious problems at ground level. He has studied London's clusters and reflected on how to deal with them in the future. One interesting



idea is that the vertical journey in a tall building could be designed to resemble the horizontal journey of commuters in the city, with a similar number of incidents of interest en route.

This last idea was challenged in the debate that followed by one member of the audience pointing out the difficulties of reproducing a city's historic layers in a single contemporary building. Other questions related to legal rights to the underground and to the levels of contribution that should be expected from high rise developers to compensate for the demands that they place on local authorities. ●

Sebastian Loew

## Designing a City for all Londoners

2 March 2020, Rich Mix creative hub,  
London

This event organised by the London's Mayor coincided with the launch of his (now postponed) electoral campaign and the publication of a booklet summarizing City Hall's Good Growth by Design (GGD) programme. This programme aims to create 'a city that is environmentally sustainable, economically inclusive and socially vibrant'. It was chaired by Sadie Morgan, one of the Mayor's Design Advocates (MDA) who also opened the proceedings.

Jules Pipe, Deputy Mayor for Planning, Regeneration and Skills summarised the GGD programme, focusing mainly on public spaces and ensuring their inclusivity. He also referred to on-going research on housing design and on the circular economy. City Hall is preparing a draft charter on London's public realm and one on design review panels.

A panel discussion on housing design followed chaired by Jo Negrini, Chief Executive of the London Borough of Croydon, for whom 'good design is fundamental for future planning'. Debbie Jackson, Director of Built Environment at the GLA stated that design

is at the centre of the solution to the housing shortage as it combines the optimisation of site capacity with good quality. Alex Ely, Director of Mae Architects, made a welcome reference to the Place Alliance Housing Audit and introduced the *Good Quality Homes for All Londoners* SPG. It deals with optimising site capacity through site analysis, looking at existing residential types and it provides a toolkit to calculate the capacity for each individual site. It also develops codes and model templates for infill sites. Representing developers Andy Reid, Design Director of Fairview, reiterated the importance of moving from trying to maximise the use of a site to optimising it.

After a break, architect Sunand Prasad (also a MDA) emphasised the importance of the circular economy and how design had an important role in achieving it, particularly in large developments. Fiona Scott (MDA) dealt with the challenges of London's high streets and town centres, and suggested that we learn from existing examples and develop adaptive strategies. Dinah Bornat, MDA on Making London Child Friendly, spoke about designing not just for play, but for independence, and showed King's Crescent in Hackney as an example of what could be done.

Hilary Satchwell (MDA) of Tibbalds mentioned the Mayor's vision for social integration and described Tibbalds' research on social infrastructure, a highly complex ecosystem that includes physical, social, formal and informal elements, is place-specific, and



both fragile and resilient. Holly Lewis (MDA) dealt with London's industries and the need to intensify the use of industrial land through the clever and imaginative management of sites. The following panel discussion chaired by Tom Holbrooke, Director of 5th Studio, concentrated mostly on the Public London Charter which focuses on public space, its provision, management and regulation.

The event covered much ground and dealt with a range of topics which could keep the Mayor's office busy for a number of years. How many of the objectives will be fulfilled remains to be seen, particularly since they are not all under the GLA's control. ●

Sebastian Loew



Image credit Richard Johnson

## The National Design Guide Symposium

25 February 2020, Nottingham Council House

Such was the demand for tickets for this event that it was held in the resplendent Nottingham Council House instead of the Urban Room at 38 Carrington Street. The day was split in two sections: the morning introduced and covered the *National Design Guide* (NDG) released by the Ministry of Housing Communities and Local Government (MHCLG) in October 2019; and the afternoon explored assessment methods and the delivery of quality design. A range of topics was debated from housing problems to the engagement of communities in delivering the guidance.

Robert Huxford opened the morning session challenging attendees to produce an appropriate anagram for the 10 categories within the NDG. Nigel Turpin followed by welcoming the event to Nottingham and warned that sometimes what planners approve is not what is produced in the final scheme. He then described how Nottingham City Council was trying to avoid this through a rigorous set of design guides and heritage strategies.

Jenny Thomas of the MHCLG referred to two key documents: the first, the Building Better, Building Beautiful Commission's report *Living with Beauty*, whose 45 recommendations were released in January 2020. The second, the *National Model Design Code* which is to be used alongside other planning practice guidance and design tools. Jane Dann of Tibbalds then focused on the context of the NDG, which having been thoroughly road-tested before being released, aims to be short and succinct. The 10 characteristics in the guide have consciously not been numbered to avoid an order of priority. These characteristics also contribute towards the

3Cs: Character, Community and Climate. Clare San Martin supported the introduction of the NDG by looking at urban design in practice, and focused on the question of why we cannot make good streets the norm. Clare's overall message was that a collaborative approach is essential to successful design, as previously mentioned by Nigel Turpin.

After a break, the second morning session centred on context. Clive Fletcher of Historic England spoke about identity-centred design, praising the work undertaken at Carrington Street, Nottingham, which aims to transform one of the main pedestrian gateways into the city whilst being sensitive to its urban heritage. Jon Phipps followed by looking at urban design since 1953 and showing that guidance themes haven't changed drastically from the garden city models. He concluded that quality was essential, but it had been compromised by the scrapping of the mandatory architects' fee scales in 1982. Now, only developers and delivery models that are not committed to maximise profit can produce great places. In other cases, rules are worthless. Luke Engelback followed by looking to the future of context through nature and the climate crisis. He encouraged designers to think globally and act locally, and to look for nature-based solutions addressing the three 'E's': Environment, Economy and Equality. A question and answer session that centred on the adoption and enforcement of the NDG ended the morning session.

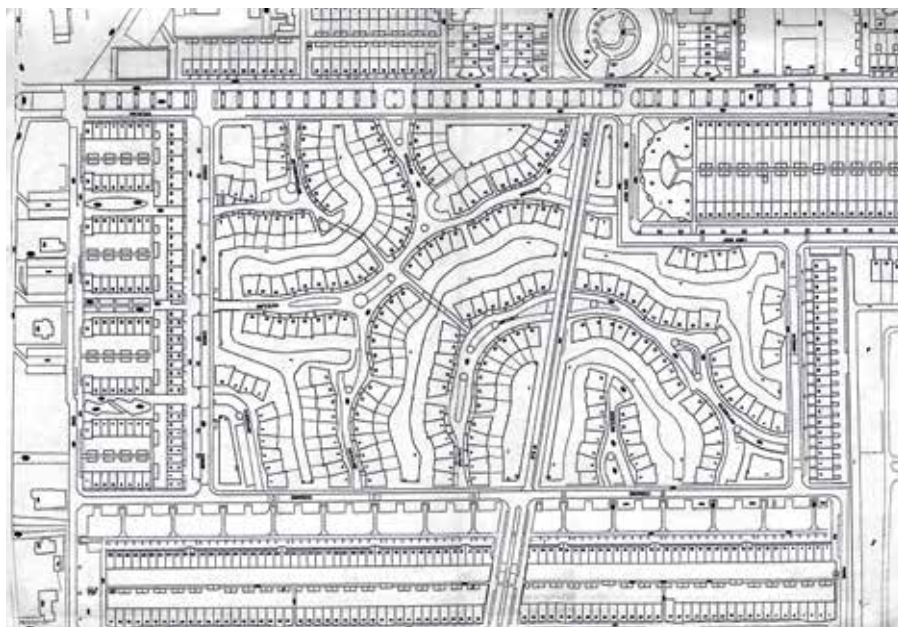
In the first session after lunch, Matthew Carmona presented the findings of the *Housing Design Audit for England* that he and colleagues at University College London had conducted, which hit the national news in early 2020. The audit focused solely on external housing design, not the internal, and showed how far the industry must go to improve from its current state of 'mediocrity', even though there had been an improvement since CABE's housing audit of 2006, which found a higher percentage of poor housing. The new audit shows 'a minimal and patchy improvement over 15 years' and states that 'Whilst welcome, given the very low base on which these results were built, such a minimal improvement is disappointing'. The event continued with David Rudlin of URBED covering the government's response through the Building Better, Building Beautiful Commission. David stated that 'the word beauty still grates at times, but it has been useful in drawing a wider constituency into a discussion about aesthetics'. He echoed Matthew's call for changes in the UK planning system from discretion to regulation, from use-based to form-based design. David recounted that in Helsinki, when local authority officers were asked how they made developers stick to what they said they were going to do, they did not even understand the question. The UK is the only country that does not put codes into law, he stated, and following our European neighbours' planning

processes would be beneficial. Dan Roberts of Homes England closed the first half of the afternoon session by admitting that in 2018, Homes England started from a very low base regarding quality standards, a problem that was being rectified through their 5-year plan towards design quality, which would run in tandem with design quantity. He finished by saying that although the current development model isn't completely broken, developers want a 'transparent approach, so that they know they are being treated fairly'.

Laura Alvarez of Nottingham City Council started the second session of the afternoon with an overview and explanation of the *Nottingham Design Quality Framework* (DQF) and Co-PLACE, including the objective of Flexible Policy working alongside grassroots planning. The DQF resulted from an audit carried out between 2013 and 2018 that looked at design products and processes. Much that had gone wrong came from a lack of site analysis. Grassroots planning is being undertaken as part of Nottingham's crusade to become the first carbon neutral city in Europe by 2028. Community engagement and open participation are important because they can have a direct impact on 12 of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals. Laura stressed that simplicity is the key, otherwise people will not understand or engage with it. The Co-PLACE initiative is 'a non-for-profit partnership initiative based at the Urban Room that aims to bring everyone up to speed with the skills and tools required to meet the new community engagement standards'. The community engagement subject continued with Penney Poyzer of the Nottingham Good Food Partnership who described their involvement in co-authoring *Nottingham's Wellbeing Design Guide* which covers six key criteria: Nature first design; Productive green spaces; Food growing spaces; Closing the food loop; Things to do together, and Places to eat together. Penney explained these criteria and how they can be implemented, through examples like Bulwell Forest Garden. She finished with a powerful message from the people of Nottingham: 'we want change and we want it now'.

Robert Huxford concluded the event with an amusing anagram for the 10 NDG categories: LIMP BRUNCH. A final panel debate covered a range of topics from how the industry needs to ensure quality becomes the imperative design driver; why do developments have to be exceptional to make beautiful places, to much more. The day was interspersed with breaks which provided excellent time for further debate and discussion. A big thanks is due to Laura Alvarez and others for organising the event. ●

Chris Worsfold, Lecturer, Nottingham Trent University



De Dijk, Rijswijk,  
The Netherlands  
Architect, Ashok  
Bhalotra, Kuiper  
Compagnons,  
Rotterdam.  
Source of plan:  
Gemeente Rijswijk

## My Favourite Plan: Graham Paul Smith

De Dijk, Rijswijk by Ashok Bhalotra

### WHY I LIKE IT...

This is a housing project developed alongside the Dutch Vinex Programme 1995-2005 and specifically an area called De Dijk. I had taken a group of urban design students to visit Wateringse-Veldt Vinex to the west of here, and on returning to Den Haag, we travelled along the new Strijplaan. A long, straight, single-lane dual-carriageway with road-centre end-to-end parking, many trees, speed humps and waste cassettes was intriguing. We stopped to look down to a water area, a large oxbow dyke. Some seven areas of water were conceived in this plan. The architect, Ashok Bhalotra, also designed Kattenbroek, Amersfoort.

The linear formality of the whole plan is necessitated by the shape of this last site on the edge of Rijswijk. Development sketches and paintings indicate that the area with dykes is a counterpoint to the shape of the site. The whole area is a *woonerf*, a shared surface.

The open market terraced, wide-frontage houses are 150-200m<sup>2</sup> in size with three, four and five bedrooms in a mix of two and three storeys. They are built on the edge of the curving streets with a 2m set back. Streets are narrow with a minimum carriageway of about 3m and as little as 7m between facing houses. Gardens step down to dykes behind the houses. The back-to-back separation distance varies from 20m to over 30m, giving a spacious private open area and balancing the relatively narrow public space on the street where children can be found playing. A cycling-walking path strikes

across the plan towards the town centre. The curving street shapes are a reminder of the original *woonerf* experiment 5km away in Leeuwendaal.

### WHAT TO LEARN FROM IT...

Might housing developments be designed to lessen car use? Connectedness is key. A new place needs to 'grow the town' and be located on, or between, existing public transport routes. Then, within the new place, other strategies can help, e.g. residents could be obliged to buy a peripheral parking space, as in Vauban, Freiburg. Or like here they can walk over 100m to park by choice. The design affects the convenience of using a car, unlike the current rear parking court orthodoxy.

Three types of car parking are available here:

1. Within the town houses: the fan-shaped plan of most houses provides a garage, a front door and part of a living room overlooking the streets.
2. Marked on-street parking spaces: in the residential streets and mostly around the perimeter of the area, and road-centre public parking, west of De Dijk, using the dual carriageway.
3. Squeezed onto the house frontage: special permission was required to legalise unmarked parking spaces in this *woonerf*. Drivers must manoeuvre completely off the road which helps dissuade them to take some car trips.

De Dijk was designed for 160 per cent parking provision, 100 per cent in garages plus an additional 60 per cent as on-street public provision. When the residents moved in, the municipality found that around half of them used their garages as storage. Thus, the initial lived-in parking provision was perhaps 100 to 120 per cent. The alternative is a lengthier walk to the more generous public parking provision. ●



### Current position

Freelance urban design consultant, Member of UDG Executive Committee, (co-opted), Oxford Civic Society (Transport Working Group), and CycloX, the cycling campaign of Oxford.

### Experience

Formerly Principal/ Senior Lecturer in Architecture, Oxford Brookes University and Joint Centre for Urban Design Part-time Lecturer in Fine Art, Goldsmith's College, London Teaching, consulting, writing and contributing to urban design, architecture and fine art

### Education

Diploma in Art and Design, St Martins College of Art  
M Art, Royal College of Art  
MA (Urban Design), Oxford Brookes University

### Specialisations

The layout and design of movement in public space, the experience of people within it and the levels of risk they are exposed to. Treating the highway as a 'seam' rather than a barrier, a place connecting people and activities. Challenging the orthodoxy which sees the highway as predominantly for motorised vehicular movement.

### Ambitions

Seeing safe and sustainable transport delivered, within a responsive environment.

## Towards an Urban Renaissance

Final Report of the Urban Task Force  
Chaired by Lord Rogers of Riverside

Urban Task Force

### Urban Design Library #34

*Towards an Urban Renaissance.*  
*Final Report of the Urban Task Force*  
*Chaired by Lord Rogers of Riverside.*  
Urban Task Force, 1999, E & FN Spon

There are two ironies when comparing *Towards an Urban Renaissance* with its closest contemporary analogue *Living with Beauty* (2020), the report of the Building Better Building Beautiful Commission (BBBBC) chaired by the late Sir Roger Scruton. Both are reports from government commissions led by controversial advocates for better design. Both chairs were closely aligned with the conflicting ideologies of the commissioning body: Rogers is a Labour peer; Scruton was a fiercely right-wing philosopher. Both address poor quality urbanism.

These are not the ironies. The first is that, despite Rogers being a Modernist architect and Scruton a profound traditionalist, both start from a rose-tinted description of a past era, what the Urban Task Force (UTF) calls 'the best urban tradition', stretching from Ancient Greece through Renaissance Florence to Georgian London. The BBBBC asks: 'What stops us building as beautifully as the Georgians and Victorians?'

The second is that the government would not allow Rogers to use the word beauty because it was too subjective, whereas the whole purpose of the BBBBC is to inject beauty into place-making. This was what Rogers wanted too but he was compelled to use words like 'design excellence', 'quality' and 'creativity', which weakened the force of his argument.

This tells us that urban design and place-making are never purely technical. The genesis of the UTF was political. It emerged from the same crucible of ideas as New Labour's other policies for the transformation of Britain after Blair's election in

1997. Three Cabinet ministers, John Prescott, Chris Smith and Lord Falconer, had a passion for improving the built environment, which gave political impetus to the UTF. The UTF included leading professionals, academics, local government representatives and business people, and had many expert advisers. What resulted was immediately influential: it certainly influenced the next 13 years of my career and those of many other urbanists.

The strength of *Towards an Urban Renaissance* lies in its far-sighted focus on three relatively new drivers for change: the information technology revolution, the threat of climate and ecological change, and changing demographics and lifestyles. Recognising that places would inevitably have to accommodate these trends, the UTF took a holistic approach to using them to improve cities.

The key was to abandon the low density suburbanisation that characterised 20th century urban growth. Cities should again become compact and walkable. People would choose to live in cities because of their easy accessibility, secure and attractive places, diversity and vibrancy: describing an urban renaissance to reverse the hollowing out of inner cities with which past governments had struggled.

Unsurprisingly given Rogers's background, the UTF's headline recommendations led with design: the creation of a national design framework, disseminating key principles, and mandating masterplans. The first chapter of full recommendations dealt with designing the urban environment, including ten urban design principles and a spatial masterplanning checklist which, while not especially radical, were undoubtedly unfamiliar and alien to the average volume housebuilder. An important role promoting good design was proposed for the newly formed Commission for Architecture and the Built Environment (CABE).

Its holistic analysis, looking at urban lives through lenses like planning, finance, the economy, homes, movement, land reclamation, skills and stewardship, meant that the UTF was not a one trick pony. It made numerous recommendations across these canvasses. This was a strength and a weakness: a strength because the UTF defined the urban renaissance as a whole-system project; a weakness because gaining government support for dozens of often far-reaching and contentious changes is not easy. It will be interesting to see if the BBBBC has the same problem.

Reviewing a report to government like *Towards an Urban Renaissance* is tricky. Most of its content is sound advice. Some is of its of its time. Perhaps the best question is: did it work?

Yes and no. Many design recommendations were implemented. CABE was an effective influencer of design quality. Government focused much of its investment on regenerating inner areas, restoring declining urban neighbourhoods and growing existing settlements in regions with high demand.

National design advice was published and integrated into the planning system. Other recommendations, such as establishing an Urban Policy Board, didn't get far.

Cities like Manchester and London really did see an urban renaissance. Young professionals in the new IT and creative sectors chose to live in smart, modern apartment blocks in once shabby *milieux*. Some of this would have happened anyway but the urban renaissance gave confidence to developers and local authorities, backed by government policy and funding.

Probably the greatest disappointment was that while developers of prime urban locations like London's King's Cross grasped the UTF's message, it never convinced the major housebuilders. They went on building low density, monotonous, car-based estates.

The Conservative/Lib Dem Coalition government formed in 2010 did away with CABE, the agencies delivering urban renaissance projects and the words 'urban renaissance'. Fast forward to now: a Tory government desperate to increase housebuilding has registered that one major barrier is the exceptionally poor quality of new estates, boosting opposition to their construction. Enter the BBBBC, with its mantra, echoing the UTF that we used to do this better and should be doing it better now. In its interim report, the BBBBC acknowledged work done by CABE. Much of what it recommends is from the same playbook as the UTF, although it would be politically inexpedient for it to say so. *Towards an Urban Renaissance* may be on the shelf but its influence is still being felt. ●

Richard Simmons, Visiting Professor at The Bartlett School of Planning, University College London

#### READ ON

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# Climate Change Global Digest

The Coronavirus has had big effects on movement and lifestyles, and therefore on our energy consumption and carbon emissions. There has been a lot of coverage of air pollution drops across countries during the pandemic. Here we provide some useful links on this topic as well as other aspects, highlighting the opportunities for urban designers to help take the good from this crisis.

## RESETTING THE BASELINE

### Air pollution

Maps of air pollution show the lowest levels since records started and illustrate the opportunity to reset the targets we have in place for future reductions. The Ends report illustrates the daily pollution levels for a number of high streets and centres across London, alongside the same data for last year, indicating the significant drop being experienced in these locations.

[https://www.endsreport.com/article/1678367/london-lockdown-covid-19-controls-impacting-air-pollution-levels-capital?mc\\_cid=cf0910ce09&mc\\_eid=99370e1d5d](https://www.endsreport.com/article/1678367/london-lockdown-covid-19-controls-impacting-air-pollution-levels-capital?mc_cid=cf0910ce09&mc_eid=99370e1d5d)

The Scottish Parliament Information Centre has compiled pollution data for cities in Scotland, each of which have seen just as dramatic drops as London.

<https://spice-spotlight.scot/2020/05/07/guest-blog-has-the-coronavirus-covid-19-lockdown-reduced-air-pollution/>. The UK Atmosphere website <http://www.ukatmosphere.org/> is a great resource to understand the changes in air quality in urban, suburban and rural locations throughout the UK.

### Energy use

It isn't just air quality that has been significantly affected by the lockdown. Energy use has also diminished. Overall energy consumption in the UK has dropped by a fifth. The National Grid has provided a useful commentary on the reduction and the additional challenges this has caused. One particularly

interesting aspect that has been exacerbated by reduced demand, is the difficulty that an electricity system designed around fossil fuels has in dealing with higher percentages of renewable energy generation. This might make it more attractive in the future to design developments to be more self-sufficient in energy with on-site renewables, rather than rely solely on the decarbonisation of the grid.

<https://www.nationalgrideso.com/news/what-does-lockdown-mean-electricity-great-britain>

### Other

Urban wildlife has been having a field day during lockdown, with many animals venturing out into the quieter streets and less polluted neighbourhoods. Across the world, lockdowns have enabled wildlife to take more control and be more visible, and as The Conversation article indicates, this period in the UK has been especially beneficial to birds, hedgehogs and butterflies.

<https://theconversation.com/coronavirus-what-the-lockdown-could-mean-for-urban-wildlife-134918>

## KEEPING THE GOOD FROM THE CURRENT CRISIS

Crucially, drops in air pollution and energy consumption demonstrate that we have an on/off switch, or perhaps a dimmer switch. Previously, we had only used this sort of switch in a minor way, for major events such as the Olympics. Now the switch has been used countrywide, in both cities and rural areas, and has enabled (or in many cases forced) people to think differently about their choice of movement mode.

Many authorities are working hard to both accommodate new social distancing requirements in the public realm and to encourage the more sustainable movement behaviours adopted during lockdown to be continued or built upon. Examples include the reallocation of carriageway space to pedestrians or cyclists as well as Traffic Regulation Orders to close roads to vehicles.

<https://www.sustrans.org.uk/for-professionals/urban-design-and-planning/re-allocating-road-space-to-make-walking-and-cycling-safer-during-covid-19-and-beyond/>

Barcelona has grand plans to pedestrianise over seven miles of streets and build 13 miles of bike lanes.

[https://www.lavanguardia.com/local/barcelona/20200425/48704357907/barcelona-espacio-coches-aceras-carreles-bici-desconfinamiento-coronavirus.html?facet=amp&\\_\\_twitter\\_impression=true](https://www.lavanguardia.com/local/barcelona/20200425/48704357907/barcelona-espacio-coches-aceras-carreles-bici-desconfinamiento-coronavirus.html?facet=amp&__twitter_impression=true)

Likewise Milan is turning 35km of streets over to cars and pedestrians.

[https://amp.theguardian.com/world/2020/apr/21/milan-seeks-to-prevent-post-crisis-return-of-traffic-pollution?CMP=share\\_btn\\_tw&\\_\\_twitter\\_impression=true](https://amp.theguardian.com/world/2020/apr/21/milan-seeks-to-prevent-post-crisis-return-of-traffic-pollution?CMP=share_btn_tw&__twitter_impression=true)

In London, the Streetspace for London strategy will see major re-allocations of space throughout the city:

<https://tfl.gov.uk/travel-information/improvements-and-projects/streetspace-for-london>

More generally, the Committee on Climate Change wrote to the Prime Minister in May outlining six key principles for rebuilding the UK economy once the Coronavirus crisis has passed, many of which are relevant to urban design and planning:

<https://www.theccc.org.uk/2020/05/06/take-urgent-action-on-six-key-principles-for-a-resilient-recovery/>

## FUTURE GENERATIONS BILL

In the midst of the pandemic, the Future Generations Bill put forward by a cross-party group of MPs and Lords is working its way through the parliamentary system. If successful it will mean all projects will need to appraise themselves against their contribution to/takeaway from future generations.

[https://www.edie.net/news/11/Bill-requiring-UK-policy-makers-to-consider-long-term-environmental-sustainability-introduced/?mc\\_cid=cf0910ce09&mc\\_eid=99370e1d5d](https://www.edie.net/news/11/Bill-requiring-UK-policy-makers-to-consider-long-term-environmental-sustainability-introduced/?mc_cid=cf0910ce09&mc_eid=99370e1d5d)

This could provide a brilliant framework for broadening the time horizon on how the benefit of individual projects are assessed and will be a great support to urban designers' work. ●

Jane Manning with Julie Fatcher, Joanna Wright and Mitch Cooke



UK Atmosphere



Ends report



SPICe Scotland



National Grid



The Conversation – Wildlife



Sustrans



Barcelona



Milan



Streetspace for London



Committee on Climate Change



Future Generations Bill

Key sources of information and further reading. Simply hold your smartphone over the QR code whilst in camera mode and you will be taken to the relevant web page.

# Puerto Madero, Buenos Aires

A regenerated dockland in the capital of Argentina. Its converted redbrick warehouse buildings sit side-by-side with sleek skyscrapers. Trails loop around lakes at the wildlife-rich Costanera Sur Ecological Reserve

In each issue of Behind the Image, one of our contributors visits a contemporary public space from around the world. The photography tries to reveal an alternative perspective on a familiar precedent, famous space or place. These images illustrate how the

public space works in practice: exploring its features (designed and unintended), and the way it relates to the surrounding context. ●

Lionel Eid, George Garofalakis, Rosie Garvey and Alice Strang



A mixed use district: An evolving and popular district with a genuinely rich mix of uses, where employment, residential and cultural buildings sit comfortably alongside one another. Both vertical and horizontal mixing of uses within individual buildings contribute to a varied and active public realm.



Nature in the city: Across the road from the historic docks, the natural spaces of the Costanera Sur Ecological Reserve provide a peaceful contrast to the bustling city. The land was originally reclaimed from the river to build a new administrative centre but the project was abandoned and it has now become a protected area for nature, exercise and places for quiet contemplation.



**Connections:** Landmark bridges make important pedestrian connections across the Dársena Sur River. The Puente De La Mujer swing-bridge, designed by Santiago Calatrava, links a string of small and large public spaces together, leading to the nature reserve.



**Art and planting:** High quality public art, varied planting, street lighting and textured paving materials all add to the success and attraction of the area. Benches in the shade and drinking fountains enhance the welcoming quality of the spaces.



**Rules about scale:** There is a clear and important consistency in the scale of new buildings around the edges of the docks, influenced by the scale of the historic warehouses. These protect the edge of the docks from the more imposing scale of the new tower blocks behind.



**Historic elements:** The retention of defunct mechanical elements such as the brightly coloured loading cranes and use of materials such as cobblestones reflects the industrial character and heritage of the docks.



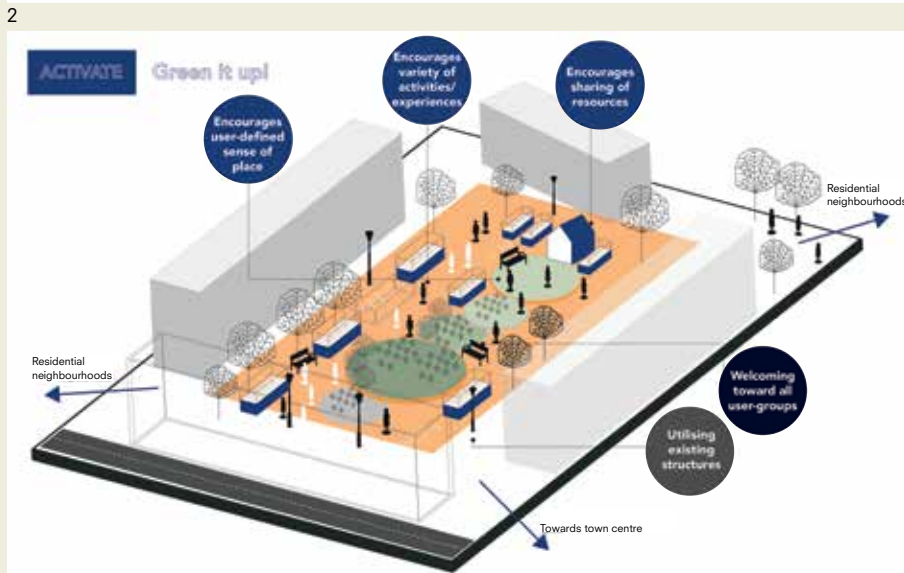
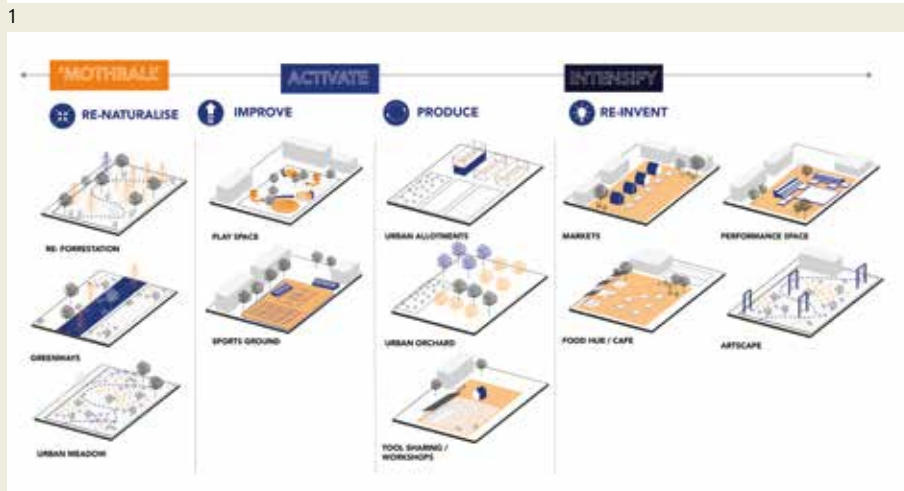
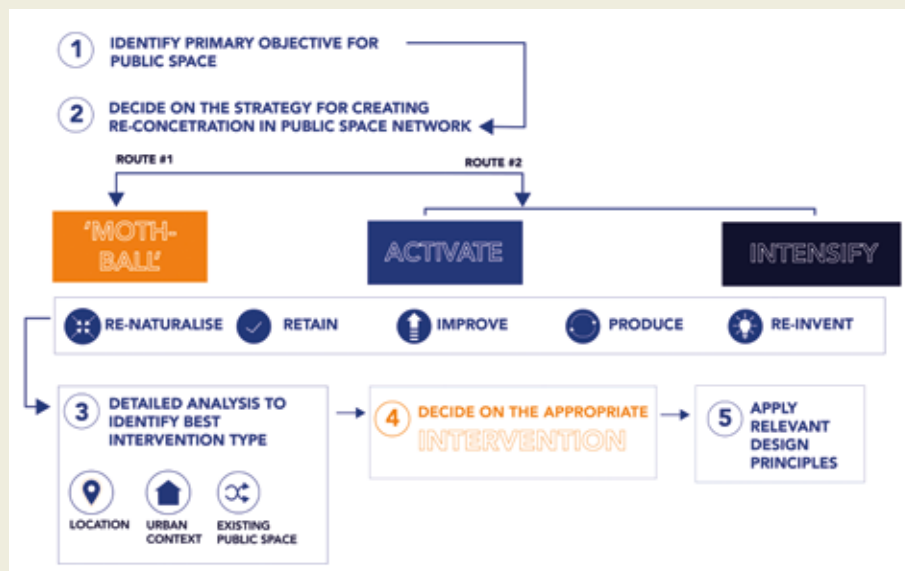
**Valuing 'ordinary' heritage:** Refurbishment and retention of the ordinary brick warehouses has meant that Puerto Madero maintains a distinctive character and a point of difference from other neighbourhoods in central Buenos Aires.



**Reflection:** Buenos Aires is still, in parts, a city dominated by the automobile. Wide avenues and parked cars impinge on pedestrian and cycle connections between this area and Puerto Madero. Prioritising clear pedestrian and cycle routes through simple public realm interventions would help to strengthen the area's connection with other popular, adjacent parts of the city.

# Shrinking Cities: Interventions in Underused Public Spaces

Eva Aitsam tests strategies for dealing with decline



Despite predictions of overall urban population growth, several cities are facing the opposite phenomenon of urban shrinkage, which has stark socio-economic and spatial implications, including increased unemployment, housing surplus, vacant buildings and the dilution of public spaces. Whilst place-making strategies are widely available, they are largely orientated towards cities with a growing population or are specifically focused on a narrow target group (e.g. the elderly or children). There is a distinct gap in understanding how underutilised, dilapidated and neglected public spaces in shrinking cities can be re-purposed through informed decision-making, in order to add vibrancy and ensure that they are in sync with the changing socio-demographic reality of these areas. The project addresses this through developing robust criteria for the identification of appropriate high-level strategies and specific design interventions to increase place attachment, encourage collaborative governance methods and allow for flexibility in the interpretation of urban futures.

## THE CASE OF KOHTLA-JÄRVE, ESTONIA

This project was prompted by the existing urban context of the small town of Kohtla-Järve in Eastern Estonia (population of 35,395 in 2018). In the last three decades, urban shrinkage has severely affected the functioning of the town as well as other smaller towns in the region. If depopulation and ageing trends continue, the town's population is predicted to decrease by 32 per cent by 2030. Spatially, urban shrinkage has caused several buildings to become neglected and redundant, and the originally generous public spaces (a remnant of the Soviet-era planning) to become underused and dilapidated due to the scarcity of resources to manage it. This in turn has resulted in the hollowing out of the urban grain, significantly affecting place identity and attachment, and has accelerated the dilution of the local community. This polarisation has been furthered by old governance tactics where a lack of civic engagement reinforces negative connotations that these are hinterland and peripheral areas. Due to the lack of capital and investment, the development of these areas is lagging behind compared to other parts of Estonia, and well-funded transformations of shrinking towns like Kohtla-Järve are neither possible

- 1 Roadmap to identifying relevant intervention
- 2 Proposed interventions typologies
- 3 Proposal for allotments
- 4 The existing context

nor realistic in the absence of a clear economic driver. Furthermore, the municipalities have the added challenge of dealing with a lack of financial resources and expertise, and have often abandoned the basic maintenance of public spaces, let alone developed and improved them. These challenges are not unique to Kohtla-Järve; a similar pattern can be found not only in other cities and towns in Estonia, but also in the wider context of Eastern Europe.

### A STRATEGIC FRAMEWORK FOR UNDERUSED PUBLIC SPACES

Whilst there are no easy solutions to the multi-dimensional issues of urban shrinkage, this project argues that it is imperative that we review strategies to change the spatial patterns of these places. This project addresses this by proposing a multi-step approach to aid focused decision-making on how to strategically identify and apply interventions to this diluted network of underperforming public spaces, and thereby create a re-concentration of uses and activities.

Both literature and case study reviews reveal that strategies addressing this urban condition are very limited. In the face of urban shrinkage, major transformative change is not possible due to constrained resources and a lack of investment. Therefore, instead of quantitative change, this project identified strategies focused on qualitative improvements.

Two options are proposed to create spatial re-concentration: (a) mothballing some public spaces (1), and (b) activating and intensifying others (1-5). Building on these core objectives, the proposed design framework identifies five key strategies:

- 1. Re-naturalise (mothball)**, which focuses on peripheral areas, and reduces severely underused, neglected or abandoned public spaces through re-naturalisation, in order to concentrate activity elsewhere in the space network
- 2. Retain**, which retains neighbourhood spaces as part of the wider network of public spaces, if they are in good condition and well-used
- 3. Produce (activate)**, which focuses on neighbourhood or edge locations, and activates spaces to provide energy and food for the neighbourhood, help in poverty alleviation and encourage social interaction through communal activities
- 4. Improve (activate)**, which focuses on

neighbourhood locations, and activates spaces as places for play or leisure to tackle isolation and encourage social interaction through community activities and sharing

**5. Re-invent (intensify)**, which focuses on the town centre, and creates re-concentration and activity through more intensive use as a social destination space for cultural, leisure and sports activities that allow for community engagement.

After identifying an appropriate high-level option (a or b), detailed analysis of the area and its context help to identify an appropriate design intervention for a specific site. This is accompanied by a set of key design principles and tools. Therefore, the main idea behind the framework is to directly link the understanding of the existing context and condition of these spaces to the proposed intervention, and thereby build informed and consistent decision-making into the process.

### APPLYING THE FRAMEWORK

The framework was tested on five sites in Kohtla-Järve, Estonia to illustrate how this strategy could be applied to varying public space conditions, ranging from intimate courtyards to extensive open space. An example of applying it is summarised and illustrated here.

#### ACTIVATE: GREEN IT UP!

The chosen site is in a residential area near the town centre and comprises a courtyard space surrounded by 1960s slab blocks on all four sides. It is dilapidated but is also pleasantly surrounded by semi-mature trees, and offers informal routes between the blocks of flats. Based on its location (residential neighbourhood), urban context and public space typology (a courtyard), the high-level objective for the space consists of its activation and the appropriate strategy identified is the creation of a productive neighbourhood space to provide energy and food, help in poverty alleviation and encourage social interaction through communal activities. Urban allotments were identified as an appropriate detailed intervention type for this site. The width of the courtyard allows for sufficient daylight for this use. As the courtyard is overlooked on all sides, it has natural surveillance.

This exercise illustrates that a chain of linked decision-making can significantly help



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in identifying the most appropriate strategies for individual sites, and thereby avoid reactive *ad hoc* proposals which fail to address the wider spatial implications of urban shrinkage.

### LIMITATIONS

The author acknowledges that due to this being a theoretical exercise, testing the framework in real life and through a conversation with the local community will probably reveal additional principles and methods to be used in the process.

The second limitation of this theoretical project relates to the dangers of over-generalisation. Whilst the framework sought to add nuance and detail to relevant categories, it is clear that taking a cookie-cutter approach to decision-making can have the opposite effect from the intended outcome. It became evident in the application stage that whilst the framework provided a useful high-level step-by-step guide towards decision-making, the design of the detailed interventions cannot be prescribed in minute detail, as it would destroy the creative and innovative aspect of the process.

Lastly, it is acknowledged that collaborative management and implementation are just as important as the planning and design process. However, it was not within the scope of this project to address this in detail, as it warrants separate research to do it justice.

### CONCLUSIONS

Urban shrinkage is widely identified as one of the negative side-effects of globalisation. This therefore requires us to fundamentally reconsider the urban planning toolbox. Previous spatial planning approaches have been reactive, instead of actively seeking forms of intervention that relate to shrinkage, and specifically its effects on public spaces. Instead of repeating the unsuccessful attempts that go against the *force majeure* of urban shrinkage, there is an opportunity to use public spaces as test-beds for 'smart shrinkage'. These can establish strategies to catalyse place identity and social cohesion, and add vibrancy and excitement to places that are left out of the wider strategic decision-making processes. ●

Eva Aitsam, major research project for MSc in Urban Design and City Planning, The Bartlett School of Planning, University College London

# Perfecting Placemaking – The Importance of Great Design

Hugh Petter, Anthony McNamee and Charles Anderson  
argue for greater concern with design quality



to live, work, learn and play. These are not dormitory towns for people to sleep in before getting up and commuting into a city centre or neighbouring town, and the golden thread that connects all of them is the role of great design.

These developments are defined by their detailed designs, that are created collaboratively with local stakeholders and generate a sense of belonging, inclusion and cohesion. They have gone back to the roots of place-making that can be dated back to the 19th century, where pioneers such as William Morris, Joseph Rowntree and Sir Ebenezer Howard came up with the concept of garden cities, which prioritised well-designed and highly biodiverse green public spaces, walkable and pedestrianised places, as well as incorporating flexibility to allow communities to evolve. The designs of Morris, Rowntree and Howard fundamentally reflected the ideals of what people considered to be the perfect place to live and grow, such as a proximity to nature and being part of an active community that promotes physical and mental well-being. Designing neighbourhoods should be about creating a place that individuals can call home with high quality houses in an environmentally friendly place, rather than just another accumulation of concrete boxes or steel frames.

Finally, great design in place-making should enhance streets, green spaces, parks, infrastructure and homes, rather than see them as burdens to be selected at the least cost. It should appreciate how features such as trees, street furniture, the position of street lighting, electrical charging points and the accessibility of retail and residential areas, all play a fundamental role in the formation of the community. Design should allow for evolution. Well-designed places should prioritise a mixture of uses that are positioned across a community development, as opposed to creating separate zones for business, retail and housing. This can add significant value by expanding the economic possibilities of an area in a way that's beneficial to both society and the environment.

## HOUSING AND GREAT DESIGN

At the heart of any community are homes, and it is crucial for architects (and developers) to ensure that homes embrace social diversity and are environmentally conscious.

Over the past few decades, the UK's population has soared, and housebuilders have been under continuous pressure to meet the targets set by the government to cater for this rise. Mass production has characterised housebuilding in the UK for the past 100 years, a theme that is not being abandoned with the government's latest target of 300,000 homes by the mid-2020s.

At the same time, expectations have changed, and the country now finds itself in a housing crisis that is characterised by a rapidly growing population and a surge of low quality housing. Quantity over quality is a simple solution to a complex problem (housing need), and is indicative of a narrow focus on the short term (from government) and profit-now thinking (by some landowners and developers). In the next 10 years, no one wants to see a collection of soulless, poorly designed dormitory towns, designed purely for commuting into big cities like London, Birmingham and Manchester. If the current Coronavirus crisis is teaching us anything, it is that the future of work may be from home. With that in mind, it becomes even more fundamental to reconnect with the golden thread of great and locally inspired design that characterised our past, and can deliver places where a person does not just simply live or survive, but where communities live well and thrive.

## A CRISIS OF QUALITY

Understandably, there has always been a tendency to answer the need for housing by simply boosting supply, which has often required substantial state support

and specific legislation to enable the mass production of towns, but has rarely really focused on quality. The result of this has been a succession of residential developments of mediocre design and characterised by the poor integration of basic necessities such as storage, bins and parking, as well as a lack of flexibility for changing infrastructure.

The pure focus on numbers has only resulted in housing that falls far below current aspirations. For example, in the last few years, far too many people have found themselves in a new home that still needs to be completed or worse, rebuilt. It was recently reported that 63 per cent of UK adults are worried about the quality of their home, and they should be, as over 50 per cent of new homeowners say they have suffered problems with their new property, including complications with the state of construction and barely finished fittings. Reality is diminishing the hopes and aspirations of many, and good design is the key to reversing that trend.

## THE MODEL FOR GOOD DESIGN AT COMMUNITY LEVEL

This is not to say that all developments in the UK are plagued with bad design, far from it. The model for great place-making and great design does exist, and there are a number of examples in England where community developments are flourishing, such as Derwenthorpe, Cecil Square, Nansledan, Park View, Wynton, Houlton and Poundbury, to name a few. These places are all economically, socially and environmentally sustainable and have been designed for people

- 1 Poundbury aerial view, photograph by Dylan Thomas
- 2 Cecil Square housing, Stamford, photograph by Dylan Thomas
- 3 Woodstock street scene, Source Blenheim estate
- 4 Poundbury street scene, photograph by Dylan Thomas

The key to embracing socially diverse communities is designing developments that allow for 'housing of choice'. All too often affordable homes are treated as inferior to market rate units, a fact reflected in design, positioning and specifications. However, a high-quality affordable home will attract the right tenants and providers and can be a foundation for social mobility. Many of the community developments highlighted at the beginning of this article stand out because affordable housing is completely integrated with the private market housing, making it impossible to distinguish between the two. In particular, Derwenthorpe was recognised as Inside Homes' Best Affordable Development in 2017, as it achieved more than 30 per cent affordable housing and embraced truly socially mixed communities through a tenure-blind model.

Residents' levels of satisfaction increase when housing design has considered people's different needs. In Derwenthorpe, 69 per cent of the residents were 'very satisfied' with their homes (above the 59 per cent national average) and this was largely due to social and environmental achievements during the design process. All homes were designed with high levels of insulation, water restrictions, low-energy fittings, mechanical ventilation and heating from a communal heating facility powered by a combination of biomass and natural gas. Due to steps taken during the design process, Derwenthorpe is now recognised as one of the most socially and environmentally sustainable communities in the 21st century.

### BUILDING COMMUNITIES AROUND GREEN SPACES

Green spaces are ranked highly in the Design Council's list that urban planners need to implement to improve mental well-being, and they are crucial to support biodiversity, recreational activities and social inclusion. They should never be seen as a cost in community developments, rather they are the building blocks that architects and planners should work with. Instead of taking a window-dressing approach and developing public squares with ornamental trees, planners need to think about the wider incorporation of green spaces. This is another point to note in the current COVID-19 crisis, where tens of thousands of people do not have access to adequate green space.

Nansledan is the future, as it has led an evolutionary leap in the provision and use



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of green spaces. There the architects and planners have incorporated kitchen gardens and 'edible streets' into the design process, which can provide the community with access to fresh food and encourage sustainable living.

### STICKY STREETS

A common mistake has been to think of streets in a new development as simply the space between the garden and the road used by the postman... People want to walk, and are walking more and more frequently. If designed well, prioritising flexibility and practicality, streets can rediscover their role from a passable area into a public space that invites people to stay, acting as a hub for commercial, cultural and social interaction.

It is crucial to create streets that facilitate a diverse set of activities and are dynamic over time, and ease economic, environmental and social changes. People use streets for leisure, to meet others and to appreciate scenery; in order to promote vitality, a well-designed street requires a sensible approach to enhance the many activities that take place there. For example for a safe and comfortable street experience, pedestrians need appropriately lit spaces, inviting building facades, shaded places to rest and walk, and wayfinding signs.

In locations such as Poundbury and Nansledan, a new (or rediscovered) phenomenon known as 'sticky streets' has been incorporated into the design: streets are consciously designed to attract people and create places that go far beyond just passable areas and become public places that invite people to stay. They twist and turn around the town, simultaneously slowing traffic, making it walkable and drawing the attention of those who wander them to their architectural beauty. This is just another example of innovative design that has made these developments unique and much sought after.



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### FUTURE PROOFING

Great design allows for evolution to take place. In the future, designers need to anticipate new uses and infrastructure requirements. For example, electric vehicles (EVs) will need to recharge at multiple locations and will eventually require an urgent update to infrastructure design. A key factor in creating resilience in a development is building in flexibility. However this is far from straightforward: EVs can be recharged in multiple locations and depending on the urban context, planners need to decide whether to focus on a centralised provision, private provision or both. There is a wider point in referring to EVs in particular, in relation to anticipating new uses: the solution does not have to be complex, the key is to design flexible and adaptable spaces.

### CHANGING TACK

Over the years, we have seen too many examples of developments where the aspirations of locals were never met by the product that they were landed with. The UK's population continues to grow, and it is vital that planners adopt a patient approach in the design process of place-making, to avoid past mistakes. Those who can must ask themselves: why do we so often need regeneration projects in this country? If the developments had been well designed to begin with, those who live in them would thrive.

Poundbury, Nansledan and Derwenthorpe are just a few of the examples that show what is possible when we prioritise creating communities and quality as well as quantity. The government's goal over the next 10 years should not only be to produce hundreds of thousands of homes, but to ensure that in 20 years' time we will have a new breed of great places to learn from. ●

Hugh Petter, Director, Adam Architecture, Anthony McNamee, Associate, and Charles Anderson, Partner and property expert at Farrer & Co



May 2020, people queuing for banks to open, Hackney, London. Photograph by Claudia Schenk

# Reflections on Urban Design

This issue's topic was due to be on Housing Design Quality beyond the South East of England. Unfortunately well before the lockdown, the topic editor let us down and we had to change gear. Fortunately our resourceful Editorial Board came to the rescue and we have put together a series of reflective articles which are most appropriate for these uncertain times. They look at the past, the present and the future of urban design, taking in the various initiatives and reports of the past year, and speculate about how cities and the built environment professions will have to change once the pandemic is over.

*A Housing Design Audit for England* and the Building Better, Building Beautiful Commission's report *Living with Beauty* are two documents that have occupied us for the last few months: one shows how poorly the housing development industry has performed, the other gives indications of what the priorities should be. Both deal with design in a broad sense, well beyond aesthetics. In their articles, Geoff Noble and Matthew Carmona approach these reports from different points of view, as does Louise Thomas who focuses on the importance of character analysis and refers additionally to another recent document, the *National Design Guide*. In a similar vein, Tim Haggard deals with rural areas and looks at the role of the countryside in a post-pandemic world, in which place design, whether in cities or in green fields, will be more important than ever.

For a while, climate change has been the other major preoccupation of the world, and we know that there isn't a single answer to the complex issues involved. Judith Ryser's article describes three London developments, each one with a different controlling agency, but all with rather timid expectations. In contrast, Christopher Martin offers a radical approach aimed at changing people's behaviour whilst having fun. Jane Manning, on the other hand, considers the changes that professionals will have to address and incorporate in their practice, in order to implement a much-needed circular economy.

Looking at a post-pandemic world, Richard Crappsley fears a reaction against urbanism and urban living and a reverse of the policies of the past 30 years. He suggests however that opportunities to embed resilience in the design of cities are open to us. Finally, having looked at urban design's evolution over the past century, I suggest that health and well-being have always been at the core of the profession, no matter what changes of direction have taken place, and that it will continue to be so.

Putting this issue together started as a challenge, but has ended up being very satisfying because without prompting, the contributors, each coming from independent viewpoints, have built a coherent argument for urban design's future in what will be a new and different environment. ●

Sebastian Loew

# The Eye of the Beholder

Geoff Noble reflects on the Building Better, Building Beautiful Commission's report and asks what it might mean for urban designers



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**T**ake almost any treatise on architectural history or theory and you will soon run into a familiar triangle of values. Originally codified in the first century BC by the Roman scholar and engineer Vitruvius as *firmitas*, *utilitas* and *venustas*, they were revived in the Renaissance through the writings of Alberti and Palladio, and have come down to us in English by Sir Henry Wotton (via Palladio) as ‘firmness, commodity and delight’. In other words, a prerequisite for good architecture is that buildings should be solidly built, perform well and be pleasing to the eye. This notion has never been abandoned.

With government attention on the last of these concepts, we are firmly back in the beauty business. There may be no lack of evidence of the woeful quality of much new development, but is a renewed focus on aesthetics the answer? And if so, what does that mean for urban designers, often working on a bigger canvas?

## CHANGING TASTES

The risks of leaning too much on aesthetic preferences are not hard to discern. Art history shows us how perceptions of beauty, whether in portraiture, the human figure or landscape, can differ radically, shifting through time and across cultures. Architecture is far from immune from these judgements. Taste is personal, always subjective and it can change rapidly. Style alone is no mark of quality.

In 1836, *Contrasts*, Pugin's broadside against the barbarities of classicism, was underpinned by the author's fervent religious faith. Pugin was followed by John Ruskin's 1849 essay *The Seven Lamps of Architecture*. In the chapter dedicated to the Lamp of Beauty, Ruskin argued that all forms taken from natural objects are the loveliest and those which are not must be ugly.

As evidence for the prosecution, most classical ornament is found wanting, unlike the flowing, organically inspired qualities of Gothic design. Initially highly influential, Ruskin's prescriptions gradually yielded to an eclecticism of styles, followed by a further reaction, resulting in the Arts and Crafts movement and the Queen Anne Revival.

By the end of the 19th century the pendulum had swung again. In North America the City Beautiful movement was an effort to codify design according to Beaux Arts principles, with the classical orders, formal geometries and axial planning to the fore; Baroque was back. Then in the early 20th century, Le Corbusier, the International Congress of Modern Architects and the Bauhaus introduced another profound shift, which led to the so-called International Style. And so on.

A generation ago in Britain, the pronouncements of the Prince of Wales stirred a yearning in some quarters for the values of a long-lost, pre-industrial idyll. Today however it seems that Brutalism is back in vogue and once-disdained buildings by Goldfinger, the Smithsons, Lasdun and Luder are more widely appreciated. Even Post-Modernism is back in the fold.

1 The City Beautiful: Daniel Burnham's 1909 Plan of Chicago, showing the influence of Baroque Rome. Source: Wikipedia Commons

The wheel of fashion may take us unaware, but none is exempt. In 1933, the young John Betjeman published his polemical study *Ghastly Good Taste, Or A Depressing Story of the Rise and Fall of English Architecture*. In its closing pages, the author dismisses most architecture of the previous 70 years and takes a swipe at the Victorian architect Richard Norman Shaw: 'Of this gentleman's work, the less said the better. He was a facile, expensive and pretentious architect, who, like many of his followers, had a facility for catching rich clients'. *Ghastly Good Taste* was republished in 1970. In the new edition Betjeman (by then a stalwart of the Victorian Society) kept his text on Shaw but found room for a footnote: 'Who, I now realise, was our greatest architect since Wren, if not greater'.

### DIFFICULT DECISIONS

Industrial buildings, nearly always utilitarian by definition and repetitive in form, often impress by their monumentality or technical bravura – the functionalism of cooling towers, railway tunnels, motorways, blast furnaces and colliery winding engines all have their enthusiasts. So do wind turbines. But where are those edifices on the scale of beauty and the beast?

Historic buildings do not escape the critical gaze. There are powerful arguments for repurposing the existing stock, extending the life of old buildings and conserving the embedded energy that they represent. Even here, however, there are philosophical and aesthetic arguments about the degree of restoration. The removal of generations of soot from the sandstone façades of Edinburgh New Town allowed shadow and light once more to reveal the subtle modelling of the classical facades. But some were not convinced, mourning the loss of patina; one critic likened the New Town's scrubbed fronts to 'geriatric nudists'.

In the dialogue about architectural beauty, words can get in the way. Labels such as pastiche, modernist, contemporary, traditional and brutalist are loaded with meaning, and often used pejoratively, as bludgeons in the style wars.

### ENCOURAGING BUT UNORIGINAL

The Building Better Building Beautiful Commission report *Living with Beauty* published in January 2020, adopts a remarkably broad interpretation of beauty: 'It includes everything that promotes a healthy and happy life, everything that turns a collection of buildings into a place'. Generally, the report tries to steer clear of stylistic preferences, although at one point it asserts that planners have been 'intimidated' into accepting a narrow orthodoxy of modernism rather than embracing more traditional approaches.

On the whole, most of the Commission's 45 recommendations in the report are sound, if largely unoriginal propositions: the levelling of VAT in favour of retrofitted buildings, and better training (including urban design training) for councillors and planners are amongst them. The Commission leans toward a more rules-based planning approach and favours design codes, both national and local. Champions for place-making are recommended, including a Cabinet minister. The report promotes the virtues of area assessments and characterisation and of course, asserts that we should be planting more trees. Public engagement and the stewardship of the environment are strongly advocated. The report rightly identifies the problems caused by car-led development and acknowledges the need to encourage higher densities ('gentle density') in order to achieve good places. But the challenges and the opportunities of high-rise development are largely ignored.

The Commission calls for beauty to be legally enshrined in the planning system. But how do we draft or enforce laws for taste, or even good manners? This is not a new dilemma: in an essay on art in 1841, the American philosopher Ralph Waldo Emerson saw the difficulty: 'Beauty will not come at the call of a legislature, nor will it repeat in England or America its history in Greece. It will come, as always, unannounced, and spring up



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between the feet of brave and earnest men'. Gender presumption apart, Emerson's observation holds true.

### LANDSCAPE COMPARISON

Perhaps we are on safer grounds with landscape. Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONBs) have been on the statute book since 1949 and are currently protected by the Countryside and Rights of Way Act 1990.

Current government criteria for 'natural beauty' may include the following:

- landscape quality, where natural or man-made landscape is of good quality
- scenic quality, such as striking coastal landforms
- relative wildness, such as distance from housing or having few roads
- relative tranquillity, where natural sounds, such as streams or birdsong are predominant
- natural heritage features, such as distinctive geology or species and habitat
- cultural heritage, which can include the built environment that makes the area unique, such as archaeological remains or historic parkland.

Setting aside the evidence that all of UK's countryside bears man's imprint to some degree or another (making it thus of questionable naturalness), there seems to be a common understanding of places of high scenic value. Can we find an equivalent checklist for beauty in the built environment, and if so, what would this mean for urban designers?

It has been said that a garden weed is no more than a plant in the wrong place. For urban designers, a bad building may often be a building in the wrong place, regardless of its architectural pedigree,

2 Renzo Piano in High Holborn, London: brash intruder or a breath of fresh air? Photograph by Geoff Noble

one that ignores its neighbours or fails to contribute to the public realm. The use of the building might be unsuited to its location, particularly at ground level; its exterior may fail to signal its purpose; its design might be incapable of future change.

If Vitruvius taught us anything, it is that 'delight' cannot be separated from 'firmness' or 'commodity' and that the art of place-making is a complex, challenging but ultimately rewarding endeavour.

Scale is key, of course, but it is more than a matter of height; just as important is the relationship between buildings and people walking by, and between volume, density, plot dimensions, patterns of movement and the animation of outdoor spaces. These considerations, all familiar to urban designers, stretch well beyond the usual constructs of beauty. An understanding of character, rightly championed by the new Commission, should be much more than how a place looks; it should result from a rigorous analysis of how it has grown, how it works and why it matters today. This will provide the grounding for truly contextual planning and architecture that are much more than skin-deep. ●

Geoff Noble, independent heritage and townscape consultant

3 Rotterdam:  
yellow and black  
factory during  
daytime. Source:  
Victor Garcia,  
Unsplash



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## Character Matters

Louise Thomas calls for urban designers to define character more clearly to help planning and design processes

**W**ithout doubt, the majority of *Urban Design* readers will have had an introduction to or an education in urban design which included starting the design process for a site by analysing its context. The process of slicing the urban fabric into layers such as movement, land and building uses, urban grain, historical development and assets, and townscape features, is a classic urban design technique, but it often fails to grasp the nettle of what this analysis means for the design proposals that will follow. What information do we take from the contextual analysis that will genuinely inform new development? At this pivotal point in urban design decision-making, are we looking for evidence that will guide future designers, or merely for hooks to show how proposals relate to their context?

1 Longwick, Bucks:  
a development well-  
received locally as it  
responded well to the  
site and local character

These are perhaps ethical issues about urban design practice. But they have become more critical as house builders have been given a freer hand in the drive to increase housing delivery and local authority budgets have been reduced, and as communities have been empowered to get more involved in planning and setting briefs for new development in their areas.

### TYPOLOGIES AND CHARACTER

Typologies, as opposed to house types, are the building blocks of development, bringing together context and character, as they show the basic rules of development and layout for a locality, informed over time by climate, materials, patterns of living and working, travel and more. They include the layout of streets or roads; topography and responses to it; the form and nature of local open spaces; the types and uses of roads, streets and lanes; the types of green and natural

features; the types of landmarks and views that structure the area; streetscape details such as boundaries, setbacks, landscaped areas, lighting; and, buildings' massing, features and materials.

Yet identifying local typologies is seen as a somewhat academic exercise, not essential in the context of masterplanning a large edge-of-town scheme for house builders, or a dense urban infill proposal for developers. The reasons for their dismissal could be given as dealing with far higher density requirements, different building materials or lifestyles, more complicated waste disposal and parking arrangements, or greater vehicle widths. We now acknowledge, however, that observing and working with the local climate for example is more significant than it has been for generations. Perhaps following the COVID-19 lockdown, we will start to question the density levels at which people live in cities, how they travel, and the source and disposal of goods. There is still much to learn from historical precedents, and as globalisation has homogenised many cities, local character is now big business for the tourist industry: why else do we travel to other places, if not to see historic settlements or places that are beautiful or different to our own contexts? So, local character does matter, and identifying local typologies, buildings and streets enables the nebulous idea of local character to become more tangible.

### IDENTIFYING CHARACTER

There are established ways of identifying local character using guides and toolkits designed to help practitioners and communities to set out with clipboards and record what they see. In September 2018, at a Historic Towns and Villages Forum (HTVF) seminar on Understanding Local Distinctiveness, delegates assessed the usefulness of three of the best known toolkits in a workshop session. These toolkits are Planning Aid's *How to prepare a character assessment to support design policy within a neighbourhood plan* (undated), *The Oxford Character Assessment Toolkit* (2009), and Historic England's *Understanding Place, Historic Area Assessments* guide (2017).

Interestingly, the findings from this workshop were that while the Historic England guide poses the most thoughtful questions and prompts, it does not provide a template to take away, and therefore it is hard for non-expert audiences to use on a practical level. The Planning Aid toolkit is clearly aimed at community groups but offers little help in drawing conclusions from survey walks and observations, so that identifying key issues or recommendations to take forward remains an elusive process. Also, as it addresses urban and suburban contexts, there is little for rural communities to glean about the landscape and their relationship with it. The *Oxford Character Assessment Toolkit* is similarly very urban in its perspective, with a perhaps dauntingly beautiful city illustrating the sample features to look for. This toolkit also introduces a scoring system to its qualitative assessment, which is a step too far for many of those trying to identify what matters. In summary, these toolkits are not perfect and, for any audience, they need a degree of professional expertise or interpretation to make them valuable and offer useful outputs.

When we look at the people who are aiming to identify and work with local character, it is clear that communities are its champions, but they need a helping hand to draw conclusions that can guide future development. Public and private sector-led urban design commissions rarely allow for this degree of local analysis. Design and access statements, for instance, often provide local photographs, but these are usually of landmarks rather than the ordinary places in-between.

### NEIGHBOURHOOD PLANNING

Eight years after 17 Neighbourhood Planning Front Runners set out on the path to greater involvement in planning, there remains a great willingness by communities and local authorities to engage in and support neighbourhood planning. As in



Trees and woodland



Hedgerows and private planting



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Lakes and Ponds

plan-making at any level, a key step is to develop an evidence base from which to develop policies; for neighbourhood plans this includes a local character assessment that both looks at the wider physical, social and economic context and at the visual character of the local area.

Yet undertaking a local character assessment is a difficult process, and for many groups getting beyond a policy that states that new development should be 'in keeping' with the local area, is almost impossible. Explaining what is meant by being 'in keeping' with local character is on the tip of their tongues, but breaking it down into the constituent parts of the built and natural environments, is new territory and involves a rigour that even many urban designers do not use. Some communities outsource this stage of the work to consultants, using grant funding and district or parish precepts, to overcome this but for others this stage of the work remains overlooked or inconclusive.

### THE CHALLENGES FOR NEW DEVELOPMENT

While toolkits can draw out the character of places and help to identify its component parts, the range of development responses to local character suggests a lack of confidence, or perhaps the industry's apathy. Large-scale new housing sites usually seek to differentiate themselves from their contexts with a veneer of new style-based character, or worse still, a lack of any identifiable character derived from or special to that place.

Elsewhere, pattern book-based developments seek to replicate an architecture which may never have been there, or exists only as a very small part of the original settlement (such as in Poundbury, Dorchester). In other new 'old' places,

2 Extract of the Planning Aid assessment toolkit, which is not very helpful on landscape issues



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character does not seem to come from anywhere local, as if the local context has no value and needs to be replaced (such as in Upton, always identifiable due to its oddness).

Of course this is not just about architecture or architectural veneers; street widths and alignment matter enormously to character, as do relationships with the landscape; this is true even in places with seemingly indistinct post-war buildings, but where a special relationship with the setting underpins its *genius loci*. The research study for the UDG on *Comparing House Builders' Approaches to Urban Design* (Hayward, Samuels and Thomas, 2015), clearly showed that in some areas of the UK, developers recognise the value of good design and would like more interaction and guidance on the context, and how that should influence future proposals, early on in the design and development processes.

### NEW TOWN CHARACTER

Milton Keynes is often caricatured as a place with no character, but a current HTVF project with Milton Keynes Council and the City Discovery Centre, funded by the National Lottery Heritage Fund is about New Town heritage. This wide-ranging project working with communities looks at the diversity of character to be found in these misunderstood towns. This is about valuing in-between places in terms of how they were designed originally and why, how they work today, and what factors should shape decision-making in the future. The project is developing a New Town Heritage Toolkit to help communities to identify and assess local character, some of which may be unique to British New Town design and planning.

Not surprisingly, there are very strong feelings in parts of the city about the sanctity of its original principles, but as gradual change is already taking place, this project looks at often overlooked places and neighbourhoods, and encourages local people to identify their value, liveability and heritage, and form views about their future.

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**This is not therefore a call for historicism, but for place and harmony, and for new development to contribute more to its surroundings and its communities**

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### CHARACTER AS IDENTITY

This is not therefore a call for historicism, but for place and harmony, and for new development to contribute more to its surroundings and its communities. Take a look at the Building Better, Building Beautiful Commission's *Living with Beauty* report, *A Housing Design Audit* and the *National Design Guide*: they all recognise the relationship between quality or beauty and character, context and identity.

Understanding heritage, identities and cultures is a key drive amongst national funding bodies in order to reconnect people with their surroundings, find value in and celebrate them, rather than turn their backs on them. Character must be better understood and explained to those around us, and urban designers are uniquely placed to do this. Developers will shy away from doing this as they already have their own measure of what works (based on construction costs, logistics and property values); similarly, architects can have ulterior motives to ensure they have a free hand and fewer design constraints; while planners (like the public) are not confident with the details of form. As character is part of urban designers' genetic make-up, explaining its significance is our responsibility. Let's hope that the new National Design Code Template to be commissioned this year, will also emphasize the importance of character. ●

Louise Thomas, independent urban designer, and executive director of the Historic Towns and Villages Forum

3 Existing development in an Oxfordshire village

4 New development in the same village

5 Poundbury, Queen Mother Square, has a very different character to both the wider town and its earlier phases. Photograph by Ivor Samuels



# A Design Quality Unit for England – Marmite to Manna?

Matthew Carmona argues for the creation of a new design quality organisation

In February this year, in a joint letter to the Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government, a coalition of organisations called for the setting up of a new Design Quality Unit for England. The call follows the report of the Building Better Building Beautiful Commission and the publication of *A Housing Design Audit for England*. Collectively, the Academy of Urbanism, Civic Voice, CPRE, Design Council, Place Alliance, Trees & Design Action Group and Urban Design Group argued that:

- For decades we have been systematically failing to deliver good quality urban design across England, particularly new residential environments.
- There is a need for systemic change in the way that we design and deliver the built environment, and – building on recent initiatives – there is a once-in-a-generation opportunity for the government to show real leadership and ambition in this regard.
- To help drive the culture change that we need will require focus, capacity, leadership and resourcing and this should start by setting up a dedicated new Design Quality Unit for England.

The next question is, what form would such a unit take?

## THE ELEPHANT IN THE ROOM

Whenever such a thing is mooted, the elephant in the room is CABE. The Commission for Architecture and Built Environment existed for just over a decade and, as exhaustive research at UCL has shown, was singularly successful in helping to raise design quality up the agenda, nationally and locally. It did this without formal powers, relying instead on its ability to persuade, cajole and encourage others that design was important and worthy of time and investment.

At the time of its demise – an almost accidental casualty of the post-financial crisis cuts in public expenditure – even the Department of Culture, Media and Sport Minister responsible for taking the decision through parliament was apologetic, arguing that the work and the principles that it embodied should continue. Ministers in Department of Communities and Local Government were said to be absolutely incandescent at the decision to close CABE, but were unable to stop it as they were not its sponsoring department.

CABE, of course, was Marmite – either loved or loathed. In attempting to drag the country up from the depths of poor design that its own Housing Audits of the mid-2000s graphically revealed, it made enemies. Some were industry executives and their apologists, whom we continue to hear from, trotting out the same tired old arguments that if they can sell it, that

1 The value of good urban design across the country is incalculable, the cost, minimal



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is good enough. Others were designers and developers who had received a poor review, and didn't like being told what to do by what they saw as a paternalistic London-centric coterie.

Yet despite the criticisms, the overwhelming evidence is that CABE was highly influential in helping to drive up design quality. Whilst other nations have spent the last ten years learning from and improving on approaches pioneered by the organisation, England has again fallen behind.

### TURNING MARMITE TO MANNA

Understandably there is likely to be little interest in returning to the past. CABE was for and of its time, and even if it had survived, it would have evolved and perhaps been unrecognisable today. The aim should be to address the challenges, whilst avoiding the criticisms, and in the current climate, not spending too much public money! To crudely combine popular and biblical references, how can we turn Marmite into manna?

I would suggest adopting four principles:

- First, any new unit should focus on what was referred in the joint letter as the allied missions to 'monitor', 'challenge' and 'inspire', and ultimately to assist in the delivery of better design. In other words it should have no formal regulatory or statutory role, but should use the range of soft advocacy, persuasion, enabling and information tools to focus on the national culture of design quality.
- Second, since the demise of CABE, a viable market has sprung up in the delivery of design review services, complemented by many local panels. Whilst practices are varied and variable (and sometimes in need of improvement), there is little apparent need or desire for a government-funded national design review service. Omitting design review from its remit would avoid many of the criticisms that led to the loss of support for CABE.
- Third, any body should be sufficiently independent of government to be able to give authoritative and trusted advice to government, industry and the nation, whilst being confident that its funding will be sustained, even when it needs to be critical.
- Fourth, it should be small and agile at its core, bringing in expertise as required from around the country to deliver its priorities. As the joint letter argued, at all times it should work through partnership and a networked approach across professional, industry, government and civil society stakeholders and help to facilitate and support bottom-up initiatives as much as top-down systemic change.

### POSSIBLE MODELS

We could envisage a number of models for such a unit:

- **A unit within the Government** – The Government has already invested in some welcome design capacity within the Ministry of Housing Communities and Local Government, led (under the Chief Planner) by the newly created Head of Built Environment and Head of Architecture. This small but vital team within government could be expanded and further empowered to more forcefully pursue the design agenda. Working within

2 Just because there is a market for poor quality design, does not mean it is acceptable

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**Any new unit should focus on... the allied missions to 'monitor', 'challenge' and 'inspire', and ultimately to assist in the delivery of better design**

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government, however, such a unit could not also be independent of it, and inevitably would have to work within the constraints of the government machine and the close confines of governmental policy.

● **An arms-length unit of the Government** – In essence this was the CABE model or the Royal Fine Art Commission (RFAC) before that. A key benefit of this approach would be the potential closeness to government and the authority that provides, again at the risk that its independence is compromised through a complete reliance on national government for its funding (as CABE found). Of course quangos of various forms still exist across government, and organisations such as the UK Statistics Authority and the Office for Budget Responsibility have important roles in both monitoring and auditing key sectors and in holding government to account. The wider context, however, has been a reduction in quangos in recent years, and a new one may feel just too much like the old CABE model.

● **A partnership with the Government**

– Given the fourth principle above (the need to work across national and local government, industry, the range of built environment professions, and to reach out to the community at large) a more innovative and inclusive model might involve a partnership approach. Under such a model, government might work with stakeholders to pump prime a new unit, on the proviso that financial liability would reduce through time as other public and private sources of funding are developed alongside. Such a model would help to sustain a truly independent and cross-sectoral unit, less subject to the whims of one sector or another (and of government). This is the model that organisations such as the highly respected Institute of Fiscal Studies work under, and a similar arrangement for the built environment shouldn't be too hard to envisage. Its authority, of course, would be dependent on its ability to convince government and others of the rightness of its arguments, and on the ability of quite different organisations to move

beyond confrontation and to come together. Its partnership ethos would extend across the country, with a mode of operation that engaged all regions and drove a country-wide journey to better design. This would be my favoured model.

● **A unit outside the Government** – A final model might be a cross-sector alliance completely outside government. The challenge with this model is in bringing such a diverse sector together and encouraging it to collaborate in a meaningful manner without the authority and resources of government. In a much reduced way, the alliance behind *A Housing Design Audit for England* showed that this is possible (from the Home Builders Federation to the CPRE), but in such a fragmented sector as the built environment, the important role of government in oiling the wheels of culture change should not be underestimated. It was the strong commitment that CABE received from government throughout its short life that explains why it was so much more effective than the RFAC had been over its much longer one.

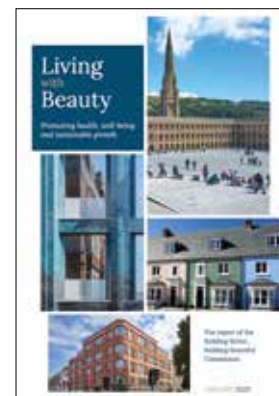
### A NO-BRAINER

Each of the models has potential benefits and drawbacks, and whichever is chosen, would not please everyone all of the time. But that is surely the role of such a unit, to challenge and strive for improvement, and not simply to accept substandard outcomes because there is a market for them, or because that is what we have always done.

The cost would be truly minimal. Assuming a staff of 20-25 for a budget of say £2 million per year, this would represent just two per cent of the market value of the average (by size and



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3 and 4 Place Alliance's *Housing Design Audit for England* report and the Building Better Building Beautiful Commission's *Living with Beauty*

quality) housing scheme audited for *A Housing Design Audit for England*. Surely a no-brainer if we really care about design quality.

The analogy with manna is stretching it, but if we set it up right and engage all parties in an open and accessible way, then perhaps we can get more people to like Marmite more of the time! ●

Matthew Carmona, Professor of Planning & Urban Design, The Bartlett School of Planning, UCL, Chair, the Place Alliance



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### A PASSION FOR PLACE

The Countryside Charity (CPRE) with UCL Place Alliance recently published the *Housing Design Audit for England* on the quality of new development in England. It revealed that far too much mediocre and poor development was being built (75 per cent overall), but the outcomes for rural greenfield sites were even worse. While understanding how planning decisions are reached is difficult for many professionals, let alone the public, people absolutely care for the places they live in. In urban areas the details rather than the principle of development matter most, whereas in the countryside it is the principle, as people oppose proposals on greenfield sites with their Stop CRAP or No to CRAP campaigns. Sadly, much of it, is...

Two groups who often seem opposed but could make this a common cause are:

- Design and planning professionals who help to get things built, and who may or may not have a passion for good urban design and the quality of the built environment, and
- Countryside campaigners with a passion to protect nature and the countryside for its own sake.

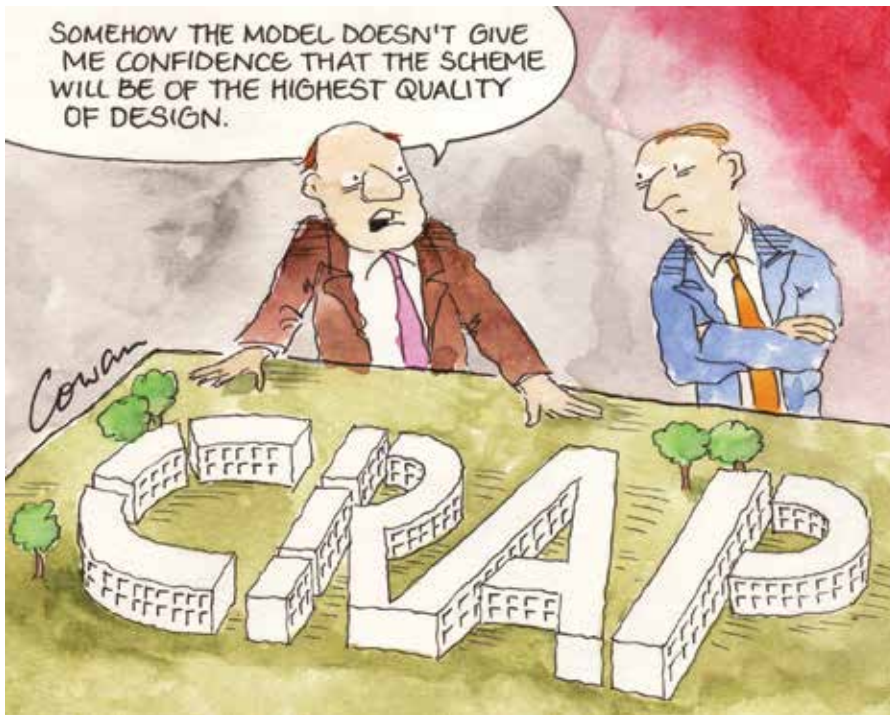
The first group includes many planners and engineers working on large greenfield projects, comfortable in the knowledge that they are doing what the government says, building many more homes. The majority of urban design practices are drawn into this work, probably engaged

1 Hemel Hempstead, Hertfordshire: land allocated for housing

# Town and Country Design Split?

Tim Hagyard wonders whether urban designers are self-isolating

**A**re town and country becoming more divided, speaking different languages to different audiences, and part of a cultural separation evident in other aspects of society? More seriously for readers of this journal, is urban design becoming too much part of one, but absent when needed from the other? It may just be professionals following where the work is, but if so, what can be done to bring people together for better place-making everywhere and within the context of genuine planetary sustainability?



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in masterplan visions to raise the tone of applications and of course, to help win that vital planning permission. Urban designers help the public, professionals and politicians to work together and to enjoy the prospect of better people friendly places. That's their strength. They aren't afraid of change; if new communities on greenfield sites are needed, so be it; they are excited about that. Urban designers are not NIMBYs.

Countryside campaigners include a broad coalition of whom CPRE is a small but influential part with about 60,000 members. The Royal Society for the Protection of Birds has more than a million members, and the National Trust over five million. These conservation groups are also joined by movements such as Extinction Rebellion, which are alarmed at catastrophic climate change. The latter is far larger and is passionate to conserve what is beautiful and valued in the countryside. Its members feel that nature should take precedence over consumption, and see themselves as preserving it for future generations. For them, the bar for any new development in the countryside should be set much, much higher.

### STUDIES IN TOWN AND COUNTRY

Town and country are inevitably and rightly different worlds, but when I studied for a Town and Country Planning Masters Degree back in the 1980s, the divide was less obvious. We read the journal of the Town and Country Planning Association and studied the garden cities and their great ambition to combine the best of town and country living, which even introduced roundabouts.

In 1926 CPRE, drawn from country-based civic societies alarmed at the impact of the car, ribbon development and advertisements for petrol stations cluttering the countryside, was highly influential. The Town & Country Planning Act 1947 subsequently brought in some of the world's most effective legislation to control advertisements and countryside development. The Act, ahead of what we now understand as urban design or place-making, also enabled the purchase of land at existing use value, to provide housing especially for those on low incomes. This core activity was integrated with the local authorities' planning functions. In the 1950s and 1960s, the political race to build homes in larger numbers than ever, using new technologies and high-rise Modernist designs destroying established communities in the process, went badly wrong and did long-term damage to the public's confidence in planning.

2 CRAP cartoon by  
Rob Cowan

### A HISTORY LESSON

The orthodox attitude of planning since the 1980s has been to follow the market, rely on the private sector and just build more; a level of 'group-think' has set in. NIMBY became the pejorative of choice from the time that Nicholas Ridley, as Environment Secretary popularised the term to undermine opposition to building in the countryside. Objectors have been caricatured as selfish, dashing the home-owning dreams of the young: an argument that still does the rounds 40 years later. The CPRE report *Space to Breathe; The State of the Green Belt* (2019) showed that of the housing units built in the Green Belt, only 13 per cent were affordable, so under current definitions are essentially unaffordable to the young.

While there may have been a grain of truth in people's resistance to change, the NIMBY label was unfair to the majority of countryside campaigners, who mostly wanted to resist unsympathetic sprawl and to put the character of the countryside, nature and the planet first. They have also been proved right in questioning whether a focus on raw numbers and land supply is the best way to meet housing need. Homelessness and the affordability gap have worsened markedly since the 1980s. The Right to Buy legislation and the state's effective withdrawal from guaranteeing a genuine social housing choice have removed a correcting influence on the housing market.

### CAMPAIGNING FOR TOWN AND COUNTRY DESIGN

Urban design has had much success over the last 30 years but conversations now are more about 'urban and rural' rather than 'town and country'. So, the appeal of urban design doesn't always resonate with rural areas and for various reasons, the discipline has tended to have a big city metropolitan bias.

CPRE campaigns to bring back a 'brownfield first' presumption in national policy, for genuinely affordable housing and the re-use of empty property. Current unprecedented levels of large uninspired volume housebuilder projects on rural sites are the antithesis of what countryside campaigners seek. Less than 10 per cent of urban design consultancy work is spent on mixed use brownfield development when this is exactly the kind of work that brings the greatest benefit to existing places, and does least harm to the countryside. Urban developments produced some of the best scores within the Housing Audit, partly as urban authorities tend to give more priority to urban design.

In rural areas, the skills of urban design are no less applicable or relevant and some notable good examples of work exist, such as the Dorset's *Traffic in Villages* report. Some practices regularly work on village neighbourhood plans, but



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generally such commissions are rare. Neither do local authorities have the urban design resources to offer. As a consequence, plans end up being control documents, whereas with greater urban design input they could be proactive and creative visions of places.

Is one problem that we always talk of urban design without realising this may fail to connect with the world of country? Is there even prejudice that rural areas are self-satisfied backwaters and a hotbed of NIMBYs? After a year with CPRE, meeting volunteers and members of the organisation, I have found the term urban design to have little recognition, although people are very receptive to a planning focus on place and distinctiveness.

The irony is that there is a huge amount of work for urban designers to do in villages, smaller market towns, and rural landscapes. Their approach is contextual: it is about rural design and being sensitive to character, scale and form. Villages and towns require a place focus just as much as any urban area, but for various reasons urban design isn't reaching them. Might it be partly due to the brand or the terminology? Is there a better way to communicate that represents 'town and country design' or 'urban and rural design'?

### RESETTING OUR PRIORITIES FOR TOWN AND COUNTRY

As I write, the COVID-19 pandemic rages through our ill-planned defences; one outcome could be more public support for long-term planning in all areas of life, appreciating the value of greater resilience and the capacity of support systems, and prioritising quality of life.

As a countryside campaigner and urban designer, I would hope to see a national plan and levelling up across the country, a focus on the main priorities of people and places ahead of market demand, housing as a basic right, and investment steered towards left behind places, empty town centres and abandoned or underused land and building stock. Smart policies that are less concerned with the vested interests of land and property are needed.

In transport, we know that a fundamental modal shift is required to address the climate emergency; this creates the best opportunities for improved place-making and healthier lifestyles. Logically, we have to apply what we've known all along: investment in clean green public transport and active travel, and land use planning that facilitates diversity and reduces the need to travel. In Hertfordshire, CPRE are pressing the County Council to progress the option of an east-west light rail system, as part of a strategic planning approach to improve a traffic-choked belt of poorly linked urban areas. In the Oxford-Cambridge arc, a similar priority for rail and public transport, not road building, is sought by CPRE.

Changes will require proactive and well-resourced local authorities that take a design-led approach; Nottingham is a good example. Local authorities must be given more control over

Right to Buy, the ability to borrow for building and to assemble land; they also need more design skills and resources that can support local neighbourhood work. A reset in national planning policy is also required; the NPPF's 'presumption in favour of sustainable development' means that on the basis of housing land alone, permission is granted to build sprawling car-based developments because they are, perversely, deemed to be 'sustainable development'. With reset priorities I would seriously question the need for garden towns, garden villages or eco-towns. Our energy and focus should be on reinventing, rebuilding and enhancing the places and communities where people already live.

These are the issues that co-benefit town and country and can get us singing from the same hymn sheet. Urban designers need also to be 'rural designers'. Urban designers can hardly be blamed for taking commissions for greenfield sites, but they need to show as much passion for the place value of the countryside and landscape as they do for the places where people live. So maybe this is a time for urban design to get a fundamental green reset, to recognise the false gods of growth and GDP, and align more explicitly with the evident environmental limits of the planet.

The future countryside will be radically different but is best left in its primary role as a carbon sink, for water retention, food, biodiversity and as a place of retreat for all of us. It needn't be sacrosanct but any greenfield development should be exceptional and a last resort, and not build in car dependency.

Countryside campaigners need to embrace the value of urban design and realise that protecting the countryside isn't about pulling up a drawbridge to city migrants, and that by addressing social and regional inequalities and the quality of life in cities, the pressure for countryside sprawl is addressed. Urban design, or place design, is for everyone and everywhere, urban and rural, town and country; it is a practice that can help bridge the divides in both our thinking and our society. ●

Tim Hagyard, urban designer and Planning Manager for CPRE Hertfordshire  
The author has written this article in a personal capacity. The views expressed are his own and do not necessarily represent a formal or settled view of the Countryside Charity

3 Letchworth, Hertfordshire, the world's first garden city and Britain's first roundabout



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# Hedonistic Urbanism

Christopher Martin suggests ways to connect self-interest and societal good

**B**ehaviour change programmes have for some time been relied on to encourage people to do things that, rather obviously, they aren't currently doing. This is often a difficult task, as people 'normally' have reasons for behaving the way that they do; behaviours are, in essence, the result of an environment which has invited them to act in certain ways. This reflects the fact that places shape our behaviour, and that behaviour over time becomes culture: the way we do things.

Right now, globally in terms of cities, we are not in a good place. We have an inactivity crisis, where doing nothing is one of the biggest killers in society. We have growing urban loneliness and mental health crises. And, we have a climate emergency. The way we have shaped cities has played its role in the development of these crises, and the way we shape cities going forward holds the answer.

If we are to fight these crises and accommodate the forecast rapid urban growth, we need to use the space between buildings as a catalyst to solve them, rather than principally to serve the needs of a commodity, as we have done for most of the last century. As people have lived for a long time in places where the space between buildings has been formed to suit the needs of the car, their behaviours have been shaped accordingly, with the result that this way of life is now viewed by many as their culture. Changing behaviours is therefore a great deal more challenging, as people do not see improvements in urban design and transport schemes as making cities better and trying to tackle crises; they see them as an attack on their culture. For this reason, we need to rely more on design, and approach projects with the understanding that design and behaviour change aren't separate things. We need to compel people to change by making what's best for cities and for society, a far more attractive choice. In short, we need to marry self-interest and societal good.

How do we change behaviours through design and get people to choose the things that society needs them to choose? Human beings change their behaviour when they want to change their behaviour. This has been neatly highlighted over the last decade by the *Annual Copenhagen Bike Account* which shows overwhelmingly that people don't choose to cycle in Copenhagen because it is cheap, or because of the environment, or because it is healthy – they cycle because it is the easiest and quickest

thing to do. This comes down to human physiology: a 'law of least effort' applies to cognitive as well as physical exertion and asserts that if there are several ways of achieving the same goal, people will eventually gravitate to the least demanding. In the economy of action, effort is a cost, and the acquisition of skill is driven by the balance of benefit and costs. Laziness is built deep into our nature.

Our gift and responsibility as designers is to focus our attention and expertise on harnessing design to tackle the most pressing urban crises of the day and to harness the power of design to fight the crises that we are facing, such as the climate emergency. The UN gave us 12 years to take action against climate change, to keep global warming at a maximum of 1.5 degrees, beyond which the risks of drought, floods, extreme heat, and poverty for hundreds of millions of people will significantly worsen. This 12-year deadline is longer than the time it took Apple to get the concept of a smartphone in the hands of more than half the world's population. No legislators were needed to drive this meteoric rise, just the intense allure of compelling design that changed people's behaviour through making something desirable and enjoyable. Just as companies harness the power of design, we as urban designers should see the urban crises as the greatest design challenge in history.

An interesting example of using design to influence behaviour and solve urban crises comes from Stockholm. The city wanted people to drive slower, and we know the benefits of controlling vehicles' speeds in urban areas. To get people to do this, they didn't employ the usual techniques, such as speed bumps, other traditional methods of traffic engineering or promotional/advertising initiatives. Instead, they understood that they were not trying to slow down vehicles, but rather trying to get the people driving to do so more slowly. With this understanding, they were able to target human behaviour. The city installed radar cameras to measure the speed of vehicles, which is common enough. However, while drivers travelling above the speed limit were issued with an automatic fine, those below the speed limit were entered into a lottery for a chance to win a portion of the fines from the speeders (up to U\$3000). With this, average speeds fell from 32km/h to 25 km/h.

Before, people were clearly acting out of self-interest and driving at a speed they considered more beneficial to them, irrespective of the others around them. Following the scheme, it was in most people's personal interest to act in a way that was better for all, and consequently they did so. I would argue that this scheme is a great example of marrying self-interest and societal good. It is similar to the UK

1 Rotterdam: good quality, convenient and effortless cycle parking

scheme for charging for plastic bags. Five years ago, most people never thought about taking their own bag to the supermarket; now the true cost of our actions has been better connected to our choices, and has influenced our behaviour. Plastic bag usage in the UK has fallen by 86 per cent, which is quite effective!

We have to work more with the human condition if we want to compel people to change. I propose that we should be designing cities according to the principle of hedonistic urbanism. Hedonistic urbanism understands that people often act in their own self-interest, but it aims to marry self-interest with societal good by developing urban interventions that compel people to naturally choose what is best for the city, best for society, and best for them, by making what's best also the easiest, most enjoyable, and most fun option. This way, we don't get parallel behaviour change programmes, we get people queuing up to do good.

We need more people to walk, cycle, and take mass transit in cities. We need this because it is space efficient, beneficial to our health, good for air quality, good for the environment and climate, best for the economy, and because it is more convivial, social, and human. So how do we get to that point? I have 11 asks for how we design urban areas to get us there.

### 1 MAKE IT INVITING

Invite people to walk more, cycle more, and take mass transit more by making it far better than driving. And this means working hard to make it good as well as making driving totally dull. Walking down the street and spending time in cities should be an absolute ball. Key to this is that you have to give people things to walk to, and this is often a principal failing of many new developments, as shown in the recent *Place Alliance Housing Design Audit for England*.

### 2 PUT WHAT WE NEED FIRST

Human beings like it when they are put first. If we prioritise people doing what is good, we will inspire more people to do it. So things like a simple side street: stop breaking up the journey of people walking to wait for cars when crossing a side street; change the relationship and make vehicles wait to cross the pedestrian space when exiting a side street.

### 3 MAKE IT EFFORTLESS

If we need people to do something, make that the most effortless and make what we need people to stop doing, a pain in the neck. So be sure to put pedestrian crossings right where people want to cross and not 30 metres down a side street to improve conditions for vehicles, where pedestrians won't use them. Equally, if it snows or if it's icy, grit and clear the pavements and cycle tracks first, before car lanes. Then, if people need to get somewhere, they'll pick the one you prioritised. We have historically gone to extraordinary measures to make life easy for cars in cities, invariably undoing the very joy of cities. Imagine what kind of places we'd achieve if we went to the same lengths to make life easier for people walking up a hill to a metro station.

### 4 MAKE IT GREEN

We have to soften streets for environmental reasons as well as shade, shelter and relaxation. And when we create green space we have to connect people with it. It is not an object to just look at! Nature is something that has to surround us and draw us in. And through greening we have to manage surface water in a far more sophisticated and mutually beneficial way, understanding that the sea starts on our streets, so we need SuDS to attenuate water, slow down its progress to the sewer and clean it along the way.

### 5 JOIN IT UP

We have to think about whole journeys: the way of travelling that is the most advantageous for society and places as a whole, must be the most seamless! So, bike parking has to be treated in the



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way that car parking has been treated for the last 50 years, with decent buildings, repair stations and valets, all accessed by cycle in ramps. Alongside this, make the quality of car parks the same as most cycle parking areas today, tucked away in a ridiculous corner, where the chances of your car being there when you get back are about 50 per cent.

### 6 MAKE IT GOOD FOR CHILDREN

Only if we make serious invitations to all ages and all abilities will we get everyone feeling comfortable doing something. It is common to hear that people are not walking, cycling, taking public transport or relaxing in public spaces, because they have children.

We must design out the excuses by making it the best thing to do with kids.

- 2 Camden, London: a brilliant reminder that what you end up swimming in is what we put on the streets  
 3 Bilbao square: make it good for children to enjoy  
 4 Inactivity crisis

Plan and design cities so that children can walk by themselves safely from their home to the local shops, buy a popsicle and get back home before it melts. This is the idea of the Popsicle City.

#### 7 MAKE IT DIVERSE

If it taught us anything, the Habsburg Lip created from too much inbreeding within a gene pool, taught us why diversity is important. It is healthy and it makes places more interesting. Let us create diverse places which means working with local people from the get go. Speaking with communities, before deciding what to do in order to learn and to co-create, will shape cities that reflect their complexity and beauty.

#### 8 MAKE IT EQUITABLE

When we think about the Equal City, we have to think about access inequality, climate inequality, shade inequality, opportunity inequality, income inequality, age inequality, health inequality, mental health inequality, and so on. But the complexity with equality means that no single issue reigns above others.

#### 9 MAKE IT SUSTAINABLE

There is a well-known quote that sustainability is like teenage sex: 'lots of people say they're doing it; few are doing it and those that are doing it aren't doing it very well'. We know what sustainability is. We know what is sustainable. We just need to start, and want to start doing it, and well.

#### 10 MAKE IT ENJOYABLE

Think about that word: enjoyable. Whatever you're designing, put yourself in the place you're designing, at the exact point your mouse is hovering over, and think 'am I going to genuinely enjoy being there?' 'Might I end up proposing to the love of my life there?' If planning a seating area, what could you do to make it that little bit more appealing, interesting or compelling? For public transport, reimagine bus stops as useful and enjoyable moments in people's day, places to pick up a new book, buy a coffee, collect dry-cleaning, or buy fruit and veg.



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#### 11 MAKE. IT. FUN.

Human beings do so much because it is fun, even if they sometimes regret it. Harness this and invite people to have fun doing good. Take everyday objects and invite play. Make walking, cycling, and public transport the most FUN way to get about. If you don't mark out a 100m sprint on the pavement people won't have a race. Mark it out and they might. Waiting for a 'green man' can be fun and sociable. Why not install interactive games at pedestrian crossings that make it just that?

If cities need people to walk, cycle, and take mass transit more, make it fun. Make it a pleasure. ●

Christopher Martin, Co-Founder + Director of Urban Strategy at Urban Movement

5 Rotterdam: Invite people to have a little fun going about their daily lives. All images by Christopher Martin

# Urban Design and Climate Change

Judith Ryser evaluates three London areas for climate change mitigation

**W**hat can urban design contribute to climate change and under what conditions? The many pledges at the UN Climate Change Conference COP25 Paris Agreement to reduce greenhouse gas emissions to zero by 2050 give urban design the opportunity to advance its own options. For some time, urban design has incorporated sustainability and ecological principles in its approach and focused on climate change as the next logical step. This encompasses how human activities affect climate change, how mobility and the built environment contribute to pollution, notwithstanding the moral responsibility of confining ecological footprints. Data on the effect that the devastating Coronavirus pandemic will have on pollution levels will provide invaluable information about the actions needed to achieve the 2050 target.



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## FROM SUSTAINABILITY TO CLIMATE CHANGE

The sustainability objectives of urban design are well documented by academics and practitioners, and implemented in most masterplans and urban design schemes. How can urban design now incorporate the challenge of climate change and, most critically, how can it ensure that its solutions are future-proof? Producing climate change resilient urban design may require similar efforts to implementing people-friendly urban design principles. Urban designers have to face objections from the development industry, landowners, the road lobby, public authorities, NIMBYs and politicians. Among these powerful interests, the political decision-makers are key to the long-term success of climate change mitigation and adaptation.

In democracies, the path from an urban design idea to its realisation is lengthy and involves a complex set of actors and conflicting interests. Politicians who want to achieve their ribbon-cutting projects during their term of office are tempted to curtail this process, supporting other powerful players on whom they depend for implementation. A Business Improvement District (BID) is one of many instruments for such a short-cut. A Development Corporation is another tool to accelerate large-scale developments and attract investment. Both imply relinquishing at least some planning powers to agencies often contested by local communities and civil society at large. Assuming that consensus can be reached about the necessary actions to combat climate change, successful implementation is by no means easy. Even if short-term results can be achieved, their survival is not guaranteed. Long-term staying power necessitates supportive and resilient institutional conditions.

Three large-scale London developments are discussed to examine their respective contribution to sustainable urban design and future-proof climate change resilience. Each has a different long-term agent in charge: a business coalition, a landowner and a public quango respectively. They are the BID in Victoria, the regeneration of Marylebone by the Howard de Walden estate which owns most of the land and properties, and the Queen Elizabeth Olympic Park controlled by the London Legacy Development Corporation.

### VICTORIA BUSINESS IMPROVEMENT DISTRICT

Westminster City Council negotiated the conditions of the Victoria 110 acre BID, established in 2010 and endorsed by the then London mayor Boris Johnson. Information about its activities, management and achievement is rather succinct. The BID 2015-2020 renewal proposal lists the 2010-2015 achievements as: increased safety, a cleaner and greener area, and Victoria as a destination, showcase and prosperous economy for all. Added for 2015-2020 are sustainable prosperity and the public realm, albeit increasingly in private hands. While a user survey put more green spaces as a top priority, no new green spaces seem to have been proposed or realised. Instead, two public streets were annexed by the Nova development, designed by PLP Architecture and built during that time, which won the Carbuncle Prize 2017. One was turned into a hard surfaced pedestrian square with restaurants; the other was closed to the bus route which had to be rerouted onto main roads over five sets of traffic lights, clearly adverse to climate change objectives.

The BID's *Green Infrastructure Audit Best Practice Guide* published in October 2013 aimed to incentivise local businesses to contribute to greening. The following is what has been achieved in ten years: most prominently, a 350m<sup>2</sup> green wall on the side of The Rubens Hotel created in 2013 comprising 12,200 pollinator-friendly plants, with financial support from Mayor Johnson's Greening the BIDs programme. John Lewis and Partners established a rain garden at its headquarters in Victoria Street to reduce flood risks. The pocket Diamond Garden adjacent to the Queen's Gallery has been refurbished, and a small living wall was affixed to the refurbished Westminster City Hall. The Victoria BID's *Public Realm Technical Report 2015* produced by Publica, contains detailed maps with the local public spaces,



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almost all preceding the BID by many years.

Not surprisingly the BID's objectives aim to satisfy the businesses which finance it, although security, street cleaning, urban furniture in public spaces, and public events benefit customers as well. Nevertheless, Westminster City Council finances the majority of interventions in Victoria and Transport for London remains the major public realm developer, extending the underground station, reorganising the bus stops in front of Victoria railway station and rearranging the traffic layout.

Victoria BID has issued a third extension proposal for 2020-25 that includes the production of a Neighbourhood Plan. It is reasonable therefore to assume that the BID will become a permanent feature, replacing local authority planning powers albeit with questionable attention to climate change. One example is the paving over of the recently refurbished Christchurch Gardens, as proposed in the Victoria BID 2020 Business Plan, which is surely contrary to the idea of keeping permeable surfaces for rain water absorption.

### DE WALDEN ESTATE

This Marylebone neighbourhood lies on the western edge of the de Walden Estate and forms part of its oldest settlement around St Mary's Church. Its morphology differs widely from that of the Victoria BID area which was bomb-damaged and redeveloped several times. Unlike the Victoria BID area, the Marylebone High Street and Marylebone Lane area is a destination. Partly running organically

- 1 London Victoria: the Nova development won the 2017 Carbuncle prize
- 2 The Queen Elizabeth Olympic Park: land use map



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above the River Tyburn, it has a fine and varied urban grain, with buildings from various periods at different scales, higher terraces flanking the main roads and mews situated behind them.

Recently, stretches of the streets have been turned into grass and wild flower patches, and trees planted to help reduce air pollution in this early Ultra Low Emission Zone (ULEZ) established by London's mayor Sadiq Khan. Unlike the Victoria BID management, the de Walden Estate is publishing a detailed annual report of its activities and accounts.

The estate has had an uneven history: the large terraces along the High Street were refurbished at the turn of the 19th century, but the revival only took place during the second half of the 20th century when the owners decided to create a distinctive retail environment with its own character, high quality office, residential and medical premises. Valued at £4.6 billion, the estate covers 92 acres, holds the freehold of 850 properties, 11 schools, three hotels and includes two special policy areas, Harley Street (medical) and Portland Place (institutional). Most of it lies in a conservation area with a large number of listed buildings; it claims to retain a village feel. As in the Victoria BID area, its open spaces are scarce and pocket-sized but it has a Royal Park in the vicinity.

Marylebone High Street contains many carefully selected independent shops in small-scale premises. Even Waitrose, which has taken over three frontages, has not affected this urban morphology. A main objective of this development strategy is to avoid having to sell the freehold and thus preserve the long-term integrity of the estate (not always with success). The estate's interventions have contributed to the gentrification of the area, now inhabited by a younger and affluent generation. Something similar is hard to imagine in Victoria, despite the enormous influx of luxury flats. It could be argued that this very long-range history, a sort of archaeology of spatial memory of an urban area, affects its character and its options for the future.

### QUEEN ELIZABETH OLYMPIC PARK

The long-term options of the post-Olympic Games development area – an enormous previously industrial polluted wasteland in East London – may also be influenced by its longer term past. The instrument for its redevelopment is the UK's first Mayoral Development Corporation, a *de facto* planning authority. Its remit goes well beyond the park itself branching out into large swathes of its surroundings, with the previously community-led Hackney Wick area being the most contested. So far, no sporting events have taken root in the park, as the most prestigious ones still converge on the Mall and Parliament Square in central London. The most accessible site of the legacy area is occupied

by the Westfield shopping centre.

The *Sustainability Guide to Queen Elizabeth Olympic Park 2030* aims to provide 'sustainable infrastructure for sustainable lifestyles' and regulates environmental aspects of new, mainly commercial development. The environmental aims are energy conservation and carbon reduction, waste management, water management and conservation, biodiversity, facilitating sustainable lifestyles, transport and connectivity, and materials selection. These issues are also taken up in the Local Plan 2015-2031 which comprises a host of sustainability measures for both new build and regeneration. All new homes are Lifetime Homes, required to meet the 2016 zero-carbon definition, the Code for Sustainable Homes level 4, and to have smart meters. Sustainable infrastructure to discourage car use consists of an extensive network of cycle paths, walkways and public transport access, and the provision of many electric charging points. A district-heating network also supplies sustainable energy to the new settlements. These areas also benefit from their proximity to the large Olympic park and its installations for health and recreation.

Without specifying it, the *Guide* also promises to facilitate sustainable behaviour and turn it into the new normal. However, a Lancet study of 2018 on public health in the repurposed Olympic village concludes that improving the built environment in its own right might be insufficient to increase physical activity.

### CONTRIBUTION OF THE THREE AREAS TO CLIMATE CHANGE ALLEVIATION

Regardless of the type of controlling agency, all three developments invoke sustainability and curbing air pollution in their policies but not climate change as such. All have formulated some guidance to improve the environment, but it remains either very general or takes the form of building performance regulations. Insulating buildings better and discouraging the use of diesel and petrol cars should contribute to reducing CO<sub>2</sub> emissions, but urban design is not envisaged as a specific tool to shape the urban fabric in favour of climate change adaptation or mitigation. The conversion of a few hard road surfaces into beds of wild flowers on the de Walden estate is the closest to an urban design intervention. This leaves the field wide open for urban designers to make their own creative contributions to a more climate friendly urban environment. ●

Judith Ryser, researcher, journalist, writer and urban affairs consultant to Fundacion Metropoli, Madrid

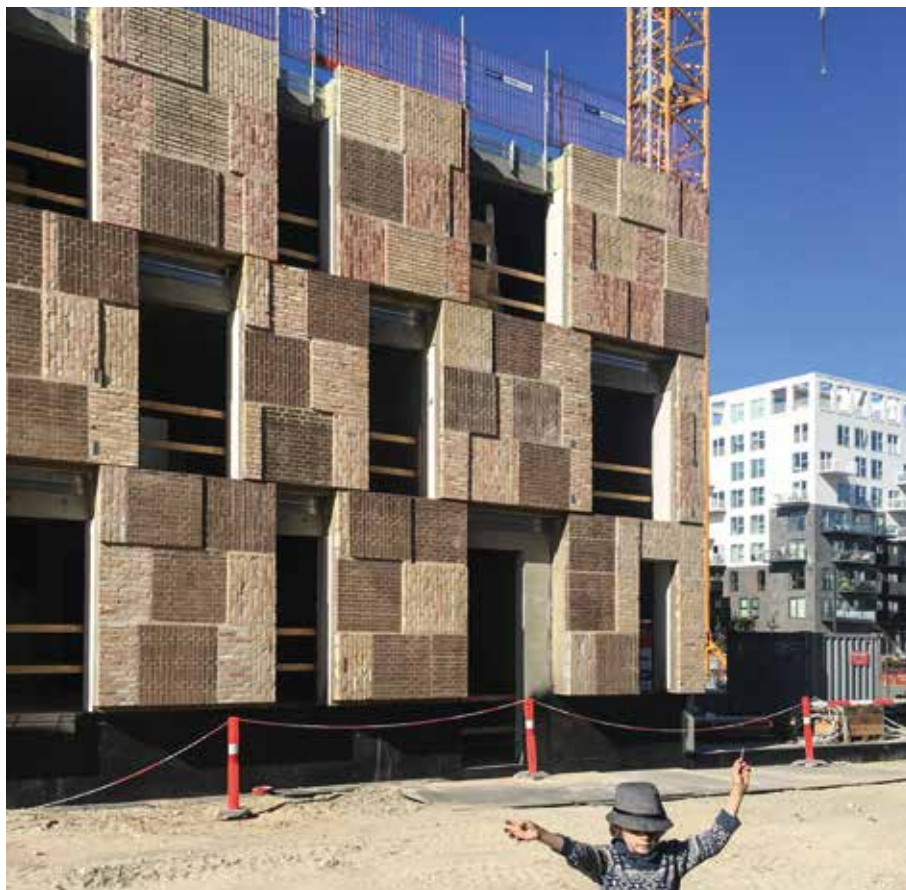
3 London's Queen Elizabeth Olympic Park: access is through the Westfield shopping centre

4 London Victoria: the Rubens Hotel's green wall

5 London Marylebone: greening the street in the SE Walden estate

# Zero Waste Masterplanning

Jane Manning finds that urban designers will have new roles in the circular economy



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**T**he terms zero waste and circular economy are now becoming commonplace in both public discourse and debate in our industry. Zero waste refill shops have sprung up in high streets, and eliminating single use plastics has become a common aim. But what do these principles mean in the context of the built environment and how might they influence our approach to places?

In thinking about what we might call ‘zero waste masterplanning’, it is less useful to think in terms of waste production or recycling rates, but rather more about cooking. The secret of French cuisine (and indeed many other cuisines) is using leftovers or very ordinary ingredients to create something magical. Each ingredient is brought together in a combination which brings out the very best in each. This sense of making the best of what you have has useful parallels for our work.

If we were to take a similarly respectful and thrifty approach to how we masterplan our urban areas, how might this play out? Sometimes our tendency is to identify buildings or spaces which do not work as well as they could, that appear misplaced or inappropriate to current or future needs. These are then included in a map of opportunity sites, which can all too quickly put them into the ‘redevelopment’ category – spaces for us to propose new designs and uses. Even when we do consider refurbishment options alongside redevelopment proposals, the decision is usually a financial one. The embodied carbon

of an existing building rarely features in discussions.

So, what if the concept of an entirely circular economy underpinned our masterplans? How might the design process change? How different would masterplans look? And crucially how much more sustainable and resilient might cities and towns be?

## A CIRCULAR APPROACH TO THE BUILT ENVIRONMENT

The UN Sustainable Development Goal 12 requires nations to achieve sustainable management and the efficient use of natural resources by 2030. With a significant amount of resources tied up in the built environment, our industry will be key in helping the UK meet this target. Ellen MacArthur explains that ‘a circular economy is based on the principles of designing out waste and pollution, keeping products and materials in use, and regenerating natural systems’. As urban designers, we are uniquely placed to realise the move to a circular economy: we work on a wider spectrum of projects and scales, and we often set the tone and vision for a town for the next decades, and can therefore influence the nature of subsequent development and change. We have the knowledge and skills to recognise the strengths in each existing piece of urban fabric, as well as its weaknesses.

The Ellen MacArthur Foundation provides guidance on the circular economy and the role of the built environment. To date the focus has been two-fold: firstly encouraging those planning towns and cities to embed the principles of zero waste strategically, and secondly encouraging those designing new buildings to re-use materials. The Mayor of London has introduced the requirement for Circular Economy Statements; every major application will be required to submit a statement setting out how demand for materials will be minimised, how secondary materials can be used, how new materials are being specified to enable their reuse, and how construction waste will be minimised. The strap line is ‘Designing with Consequence: Rethink Resource Use’.

Missing from these great efforts is an appreciation of how the circular economy could be embedded between planning

1 Copenhagen: the Resource Rows project by Lendager Group is a high density award winning development built from upcycled materials. Photograph by Seier + Seier



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and architecture, at the urban design scale. To-date, the best publication on circular economy and the opportunity for the built environment sector has been prepared by Danish architect developers, the Lendager Group. Their book *A Changemaker's Guide to the Future* grasps the scale of the opportunity holistically and sparks a range of ideas for urban designers (if you've not read it, it is definitely one to beg, borrow or steal).

#### ZERO WASTE PRECEDENTS

A trawl of the internet shows little evidence of urban designers breaking into this space, but perhaps this is because the circular economy is already partly embedded in what they do. Over the last five years, some fascinating schemes have been completed which illustrate just how resourceful we can be with built fabric.

#### IN-SITU RE-USE

In Luton's town centre, The Culture Trust has been buying and refurbishing former hat factories. Their specific floorplates and arrangements have proved fertile spaces for re-use as creative studios, shared workspace, workshops and galleries. Elsewhere, masterplans for large brownfield sites have included the re-use of historic buildings. At King's Cross a former boxing gym was transformed into a restaurant, the German Gymnasium, and the rail goods shed into a home for Central St Martins College.

In Liverpool, the Granby Four Streets scheme illustrates not just how former vacant houses can be brought beautifully back into use as homes, but also public space. The recent completion of the Granby Winter Garden has created a completely new type of space in the neighbourhood, by knocking through two terrace houses to create a community-owned space available for gardening, social gatherings, workshops and events.

At the largest scale, ingenious refurbishment schemes for sprawling retail shopping malls have taken place in North America, transforming them into office headquarters (Mayfield Mall in California), mixed use schemes (Arcade Mall in Rhode Island) or museums (Cinderella City Mall in Colorado). Coming full circle, we are now witnessing a new type of shopping mall, based entirely on recycling and re-use in the form of ReTuna in Sweden. Here the retail units are housed above a recycling centre. Waste comes in at the rear ground floor and is sorted and re-used by the retailers into new products for sale upstairs.

#### NEW BUILD

The Lendager Group's work in Denmark shows how new developments can be built with entirely re-used and recycled materials. The Resource Rows scheme in Copenhagen is a high density residential development recently completed as part of the wider Ørestad Syd masterplan area. The courtyard development re-uses bricks from a former Carlsberg brewery in distinctive modules to create the façade; upcycled wood from the Copenhagen Metro construction project; and, upcycled glass to create 52 greenhouses across the roof gardens. Also within the Ørestad

Syd masterplan, the group's Upcycle Studios is a live-work scheme of 20 units, which ingeniously bridges a transition between a commercial area to the north and residential town houses to the south. The scheme used 1,400 tons of upcycled concrete, as well as upcycled wood for floors, walls and facades produced from industry offcuts.

#### A ZERO WASTE DESIGN PROCESS

At the briefing or tender stage of an urban design project, the mention of circular economy principles could provide an interesting filter to the approach. Such a mention might place greater value on the pre-existing context, valuing the everyday not just the standout pieces in the urban fabric. In Weston-super-Mare, a much-enlarged conservation area has been designated to recognise the value of the historic structure of the town and the overall contribution of each street's townscape, including the undervalued 20th century buildings, as well as the landmark Victorian buildings. A brief may also reflect whether the relevant local authority has declared a climate emergency, with greater impetus for a resource-minded approach to design.

The analysis stage is where a large part of the extra legwork takes place to underpin a zero waste masterplan. The usual analysis already includes a wave of data useful to circular economy principles. Understanding the layers of history of a place and the quality of the townscape, and identifying underutilised space all contribute to a picture of what can be re-used or upcycled.

A slightly more detailed appraisal of the built stock could identify the relative value of each building. By mapping the quality of the urban fabric from a range of standpoints – how robust it is, how efficient it is or could be, and the ease with which it can be adapted to new use – a more evidence-based approach to re-use could be established. Data on embodied carbon and energy performance (EPC scores) can be drawn into the analysis. Such data can also help to provide hard

2 and 3 Luton, the Hat Factory bought and refurbished by the Culture Trust is now a vibrant arts centre. Source: The Culture Trust



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## Urban designers are best placed to establish urban structures which will stand the test of time, adapting to changes in movement modes, land uses and lifestyles

evidence to support the reuse of existing fabric. A typical town centre might embody 50,000 tonnes of carbon in its built fabric and cost £1 billion to rebuild. Alongside a map of the utilisation of space – land uses, vacancy, intensity of use over a week – one can build a real picture of opportunities for greater efficiency. It might become more commonplace to engage conservation architects in urban masterplans to help to inform the scope for building reuse.

A character analysis of an area can identify particularly resilient and useful building typologies, as well as public space types. Revisiting or reinventing these local typologies can help to make future new development both more flexible and more context-led. At a basic level, using the historic street pattern to guide street layout will support a more flexible fine grained urban structure, as well as ensure against the need for major new utilities routes and infrastructure.

As part of masterplans for greenfield development, we may increasingly be called at the analysis stage to look for opportunities to reuse local materials. Whether it be spoil for creating new landscapes as was the case for Northala Fields in London, or concrete from large construction projects, or wood from local industries to build and finish new homes. Increasingly the availability of such opportunities may drive material choices and therefore design.

The notion of embedding flexibility comes into sharp focus for urban extensions or new towns. Urban designers are best placed to establish urban structures which will stand the test of time, adapting to changes in movement modes, land uses and lifestyles. Illustrating to clients the optimum block dimensions to support future flexibility can have a valuable impact, as was the case in the recent masterplan for Northstowe town centre.

### NEW ATTITUDES, NEW SKILLS

An important role for any masterplan is to set the attitude to the physical fabric of a place. If our masterplan visions were underpinned by a strong sense of thriftiness, not just for the sake of viability but for a wider environmental objective, we might be



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less pressured by clients to have bold and glossy vision images and rather more home-spun, pragmatic and innovative diagrams that show how each piece in the masterplan has not just been informed, but made, by its context. Through a circular economy filter, the future solutions for big box sites might not be to demolish and replace them with fine grained, higher density housing. Instead we might find ingenious ways to reuse these large floorplates, or at least break them down and refashion them into manageable pieces.

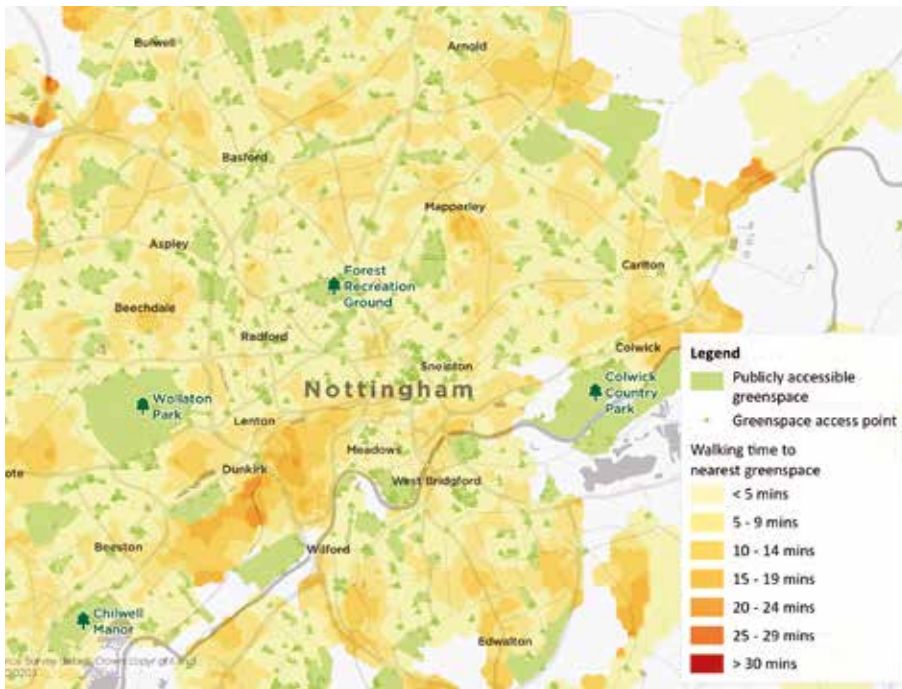
In the near future, urban designers will need to be equipped with a real understanding of how the built fabric can be re-used or upcycled. We will need to advise on the interchangeability between uses and the parameters involved; we'll be able to look at any building footprint and mass, and immediately assess the spectrum of uses it could potentially hold in the future. We will recognise and advise on the value of everything already existing, street patterns, buildings or pavement slabs. We will need to be undaunted by big hunks like shopping malls, but at the same time we will have stronger arguments to support the maintenance of fine grained urban structures. It's an exciting time, when our skills can make us part of the change coming. ●

Jane Manning

4 London King's Cross, the German Gymnasium restaurant has given new life to a former boxing gym. Source: Allies and Morrison  
5 Sweden: the ReTuna centre is the world's first recycling mall. Photograph by Lina Östling  
6 London, the large landscaped mounds of Northala Fields were created using the spoil from the construction of the nearby Wembley Stadium

# Urban Design in a Post-Pandemic World

Richard Crappsley suggests ways for urban designers to defend the future of urbanism



## WE'VE BEEN HERE BEFORE

Throughout history, disease has shaped cities. Famously, John Snow's research into cholera outbreaks in London's Soho led to the Metropolitan Board of Works' massive sanitation programme by Joseph Bazalgette. This not only gave the city a sewer system, but also reconstructed many streets and delivered the Victoria and Albert Embankments.

Between 1918 and 1920, the world faced the devastating Spanish Flu pandemic. Similarly to now, the authorities sought to minimise social interaction to prevent its spread by cancelling public events, closing civic buildings, banning funerals, closing stores or requiring customers to leave their orders outside, and limiting public transport use. Spitting was banned, and the wearing of gauze masks promoted. Contemporary concerns were expressed about crowded and unsanitary conditions in cities and their impact on health. In the UK, social reform and the Garden City movement had already resulted in new garden suburbs. The passing of the 1919 *Housing, Town Planning, &c. Act* (Addison Act) facilitated new house building, partially in response to the attribution of poor health and fitness of military recruits to living conditions. It started a period of construction of planned council estates, many of which were built in peri-urban areas. Alongside state-funded construction efforts, Metroland-type suburban construction on the edges of cities was continuing apace. It is conceivable that along with the war, Spanish Flu had an impact on the collective consciousness and hastened the spread of suburbs during the 1920s and onwards. Those who could left the crowded inner cities for open space and supposedly healthier lives.

In recent memory is the severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS) epidemic caused by the SARS-CoV outbreak of 2002–4. Originating in mainland China, it severely impacted Hong Kong but in a new era of increased mobility, it also threatened the global city network. Management of the outbreak in affected places variously included travel restrictions, the cancellation of public events, the closure of public facilities, and quarantining infected housing. Ultimately

**A**t the time of writing, swathes of the planet's towns and cities are in lockdown or have restrictions on business as usual, in an attempt to curtail the COVID-19 pandemic. It is probable that by the time of printing we will still be living with some restrictions. Moreover, the vitality and functionality of cities will have been severely damaged, potentially for a very long time.

Outbreaks of diseases such as COVID-19 are not new and scientists have warned that due to humankind's impact on the planet, they are likely to become more frequent. Like other relatively recent diseases, Ebola, SARS, MERS, the virus that causes COVID-19 (SARS-CoV-2) is animal in origin. Urbanisation linked to deforestation and industrial-scale agriculture are both responsible for increased contact between humans and animals, and hence exposure to hitherto hidden viruses. The climate emergency also makes exposure to vector-borne diseases more likely. It is not a question of if another outbreak will occur, but when. The more we affect the natural world, the more vulnerable we are to threats from it.

The possibility of future outbreaks could force authorities to reconsider the design, planning and management of urban areas. Concerns are already being voiced in the press about various factors: population density, technology, transportation, food security, housing quality and community networks, plus the huge social inequalities exposed by the pandemic.

This article explores some implications of the pandemic, and ways in which urban designers might help cities to recover and build resilience against future pandemics. It is necessarily conjectural, and based on thoughts about life and work in my home city of London and experiences visiting other cities of the Global North.

1 Map illustrating unequal access to green space across Nottingham (credit: Helen McKenzie, Steer)



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it heightened awareness of both how porous and interconnected global cities are. The outcome, in South East Asian cities at least, was increased surveillance and checks on travellers to enable swift diagnosis and quarantine. In Hong Kong, the crisis helped to raise public health awareness and civic responsibility; perhaps the most significant lasting outcome there has been to a strong antimicrobial stance in terms of behaviour. Reportedly, responses to COVID-19 have been robust, people quickly adapting and adhering to social distancing, working from home, wearing face masks, sanitising hands, cleansing surfaces, and undergoing health checks in public places.

### BUT IT'S NEW TOO

COVID-19 has spread more quickly and widely than SARS, with a huge and immediate impact on cities around the world. Lockdowns have essentially stopped all but the bare essentials of city life. Restrictions on movement and activity may continue for many months, potentially into 2021. When we re-emerge, will it be business as usual for cities? Or will people turn against city life?

One thing is certain: reduced vitality. Many restaurants, pubs and other venues are likely to close permanently, unable to weather sustained closure. Similarly, many physical retail stores might close or move to online only business. Social distancing and government-mandated closures have hastened the rise of on-demand delivery for almost anything. This could be the nail in the coffin for many already beleaguered high streets.

Naturally, people will want to go out after being in lockdown for months, but social distancing may have become the new normal, at least for a period. People may avoid overcrowded places. With retail and cultural offers in many high streets and town centres decimated, parks, squares and even street corners become increasingly important. Where available, we are already using and valuing public spaces much more for daily exercise outings.

Office-based workers could be keen to return to their workplaces, though others may have adjusted to home working and prefer to do so more frequently. Businesses may embrace flexible working practices fully, and the virtual office could finally be here. Office space will still be needed but some businesses might consider reducing floorspace. People working across all sectors will once more embark on daily commutes, but after months of social distancing, many could be fearful of crowding onto public transport. Commuting levels may be lower, at least initially, and where possible people may avoid peak travel. More people may also travel by bicycle or on foot, or look for work closer to home.

2 Signage to encourage social distancing in Finsbury Park, London

Land use demands could change, with an increased need for distributed warehouse space to support greater on-demand deliveries. Concerns around the weakness of a just-in-time approach for the supermarket supply chain may also drive interest in additional space for warehousing.

A serious concern could be people leaving cities, fearful of physical contact and disease, and seeking refuge in lower density suburbs and peri-urban areas. At best, this could be a useful counterweight to the pulling power of megacities, benefitting smaller cities and towns. It could however be a repeat of post-war anti-urban sentiment, where similar migrations decimated inner cities (from which many cities are still recovering). At worst, it could lead to renewed urban sprawl and the erosion of the natural environment, paradoxically increasing the risk of future disease outbreaks while people try to reduce their risk by spreading out. As experts have noted, the peripheries of cities are the locations most susceptible to disease transfers and where both SARS and COVID-19 are thought to have originated.

### AN URBAN DESIGN RESPONSE

What should our response be to these implications, in terms of urban design and city planning, to help cities recover and, importantly, to build resilience for the next outbreak? Here are my thoughts ranging from the strategic to the pragmatic:

- **Defend density:** low density peri-urban settlements are not sustainable from social, economic, or environmental perspectives, and are no more defensible against disease than dense areas. We must ensure that this message is maintained through plan-making and continue to deliver appropriate densities in support of an urbanistic approach. However, we also need to find a resilient, healthier approach to urbanism.

- **Promote polycentrism:** part of the approach should be a renewed focus on polycentrism, with multiple centres providing bases from which local neighbourhoods are served. This would reduce demand on and travel to or from a single core area with centralised services. Multiple centres should provide jobs and key services, and reserve space to enable the storage of supplies to cater for demand during crises. Centres should be connected with a network of priority distribution routes for vital supplies of food, medical goods etc.

- **Neighbourhoods for needs:** local neighbourhood facilities have assumed greater importance during travel restrictions. This has exposed inequalities around access to basic goods and services, notably for the nearly one in ten people in the UK that live in 'food deserts'.



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Basic needs should be met locally, in walkable and cyclable neighbourhoods. This means food shops no more than about 20 minutes' walk away, supported by freight micro-consolidation and distribution depots to maintain supply chains and provide collection points.

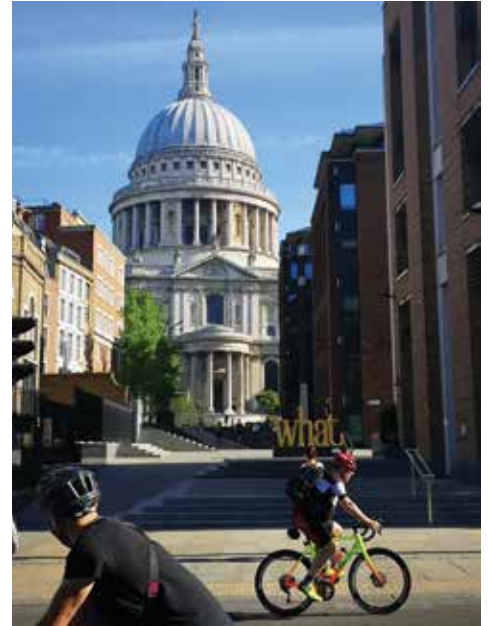
- **Green rights:** sadly, access to green space within the UK is unequal; the most affluent 20 per cent of wards in England have five times the amount of green space than the most deprived 10 per cent. Green space provision has been eroded by cash-strapped local authorities selling off land, despite clear links to health benefits. Arguably green space is more valued than ever, and we must deliver on policy aspirations to provide more, and better green spaces within neighbourhoods.

- **Digital development:** the 19th century cholera outbreaks led to modern sanitation infrastructure. The COVID-19 pandemic has driven demand for digital infrastructure. Due to geographical and socio-economic factors however, digital access is unequal, increasing vulnerability in times of need. Digital connectivity needs strengthening everywhere, providing access for all as a social right.

- **People priority:** during lockdown, streets have become marvellously free of traffic noise, and air quality has dramatically improved. People are walking and cycling for essential trips, and bicycle sales have reportedly increased. We must seek to lock-in these travel behaviours, and positively address issues of road safety, public health, air quality, and climate change mitigation. Now is the time to take bold steps to reallocate road space for walking and cycling and provide more and better cycle infrastructure, and wider footways.

- **Spacing out:** substandard housing has been produced for many years. The recent Place Alliance *A Housing Design Audit for England* report found that new developments suffer from unfriendly environments and poorly designed amenity spaces, with likely negative health and social implications. UK homes have been shrinking in size for decades and are smaller than anywhere else in Europe by a significant margin. Although the Government's 2015 *Technical Housing Standards* describe national housing space standards, their application remains optional. Standards have also been undermined by planning consent relaxation, allowing office to residential conversions resulting in even smaller unit sizes. We must regulate for bigger unit sizes, with well designed outdoor amenity space, to ensure healthy and resilient communities, in times of crisis and otherwise.

- **Community contact:** the sudden regime of social distancing and self-isolation has made many aware of the desire for human contact and the importance of daily interactions with others,



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## With retail and cultural offers in many high streets and town centres decimated, parks, squares and even street corners become increasingly important

however small. New networks have sprung up to support vulnerable members in local communities, both online and in real life. These connections can be the catalyst for stronger communities in the long run. Opportunities could be taken to use newly vacant high street units to create permanent physical hubs for community support activities.

- **Sanitation sensitivity:** finally, a very basic point. We have become complacent about personal cleanliness in cities. We could learn from the aggressive approach taken in Hong Kong towards sanitising public touch-points such as handles and handrails. Moreover we need to once again provide and maintain public toilets, and supplement them with hand-washing or sanitising points.

### WHERE NEXT?

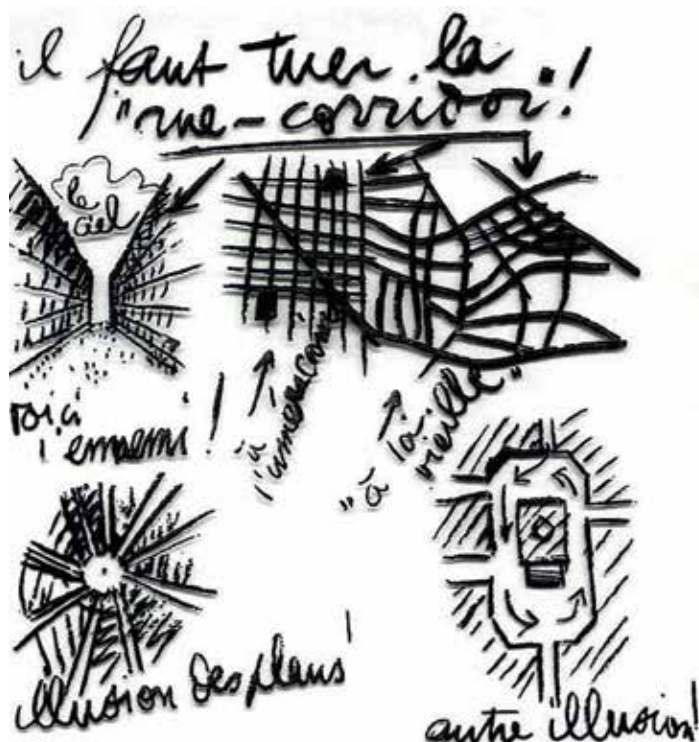
The immediate impact of the pandemic on cities has been catastrophic. The recovery is likely to be long and hard, and some aspects of our existence will never be quite the same. We could see a paradigm shift in how we live, work and enjoy cities. Urbanism may be threatened by fear. We must work to defend urbanism and use this event as an opportunity to embed greater resilience in design and planning, to ensure that next time, we will be better prepared. ●

Richard Crappsley, Principal Consultant, Steer

3 Pocket parks become even more valued during lockdown  
4 Cyclists in an otherwise empty city during lockdown.  
Photograph by Claudia Schenk

# From Civic to Eco Urban Design: *Plus ça change...*

Sebastian Loew looks back at a century of urban design



## MODERNIST URBAN DESIGN

Soon, under the influence of the Modern Movement, a rational approach to the city was sought to respond to a changing society, growing urbanisation, new forms of transport and new technologies. Suburbanisation and sprawl were accelerating and at the same time, planners were trying to offer alternative urban forms that were healthy, humane and progressive. These fairly utopian ideas were not put into effect until after the Second World War when in Britain the New Towns and a vast programme of house building were established.

Le Corbusier was the high priest of the Modernist Movement and his influence was wide-ranging and universal. Although his legacy has been mostly criticised because of his high-rise housing blocks, it was the abandonment of the 'street-corridor' and the placing of 'buildings in the park' which had the greatest impact. The traditional morphology that had streets enclosed by buildings was replaced by a campus style of urbanism with buildings scattered in amorphous green spaces, surrounded by fast-moving roads. This was combined with an increasing separation between urban activities into specialised districts. The impact of this new form of urbanism was very significant, and it was amplified by the increasing use of the private motorcar and the space given to its circulation.

What should not be forgotten (but often is) is that Modernism was promoted in the interest of health and well-being, and that Modernist designers had people in mind. However misguided and whatever simplistic image they had of 'the people', this was intended to improve human lives and public health.

## REACTIONS AGAINST MODERNISM

Poorly designed and badly managed buildings, the demolition of historic and often cherished buildings, the increasingly dominant role of cars, the decline of the public realm and societal changes made Modernist ideas unpopular and led to reactions against them and their resulting designs; tower blocks were the emblematic enemy. A new approach to urbanism was once again needed, and those promoting new ideas, such as Jane Jacobs' and Kevin Lynch's theories, rejected what had come before. Under

**T**his article discusses the changes that urban design has undergone, particularly since this journal has been produced. It suggests that although much has changed, much has also basically stayed the same.

City design is as old as the establishment of urban settlements. From the very first urban remains discovered by archaeologists, cities appeared as defensive and symbolic places where structures were built with deliberation, in other words 'designed'. Their form varied and evolved depending on location, climate, governance, technology, culture, etc. and from very early on regulations controlled the way that a city developed, mostly to protect public health and public order. Frequently, grand set pieces were built to embellish cities, often for ceremonial reasons or to show the power of the state or its ruler. Vitruvius' three architectural principles of *firmitatis*, *utilitatis*, *venustatis* or durability, commodity and beauty applied to the design of cities as well.

Many centuries later following the Industrial Revolution, cities became the motors of economic growth and their development was meant to support it with maximum efficiency. Unexpected consequences led to problems of pollution, congestion and poor health; those that could escape did so, creating sprawl and a decline in the status of the city as a desirable place to live. Towards the end of the 19th Century, social reformers tried to remedy the problems of urban areas; the Garden City movement is the best-known outcome, although not the only one. In many countries, building housing for the working classes in healthy and well-ordered neighbourhoods became a major objective. In the US, the City Beautiful movement aimed to make cities more liveable and orderly, thus encouraging civic pride and social cohesion. Greening the city was included in all these reformist ideas.

1 The 'Kill the corridor street!' instruction by Le Corbusier had a huge impact on 20th century urban design

the influence of social sciences, planning shunned Modernist aesthetics, whilst architects tried to find a new, more acceptable language.

These changes however were not universally accepted. The 1970s were a period of conflict, progress and reaction, the latter culminating in the infamous Circular 22/80 of 1981, deregulating planning and in particular, restricting local authorities' right to control design quality. Aimed at encouraging private house building with no restrictions, this led to some dismal developments in places such as London Docklands.

As town planners were seen as social engineers dealing mostly with land uses, and architects as limiting their interventions to within the client's property, a better blending of the two professions was needed to deal with the public realm and the space between buildings. The creation of the Urban Design Group was part of this evolution. Its founders, mostly architect-planners, were keen to create a professional *rapprochement*. To overturn the decline of cities, they had to be designed as well as planned in three dimensions, and individual buildings had to contribute to the urban scene. This meant a return to urban composition based on the street and the public realm, framed by buildings, and not dominated by the car. A scan through early issues of *Urban Design Quarterly* reveals how the group discussed these concerns.

The view from the pedestrian and the perception of scale from the human point of view became part of the new agenda. Large redevelopment needed to be replaced by smaller interventions and mixed uses replace zoning by use. Quality of life had to be the purpose of development, not just the quantity of development.

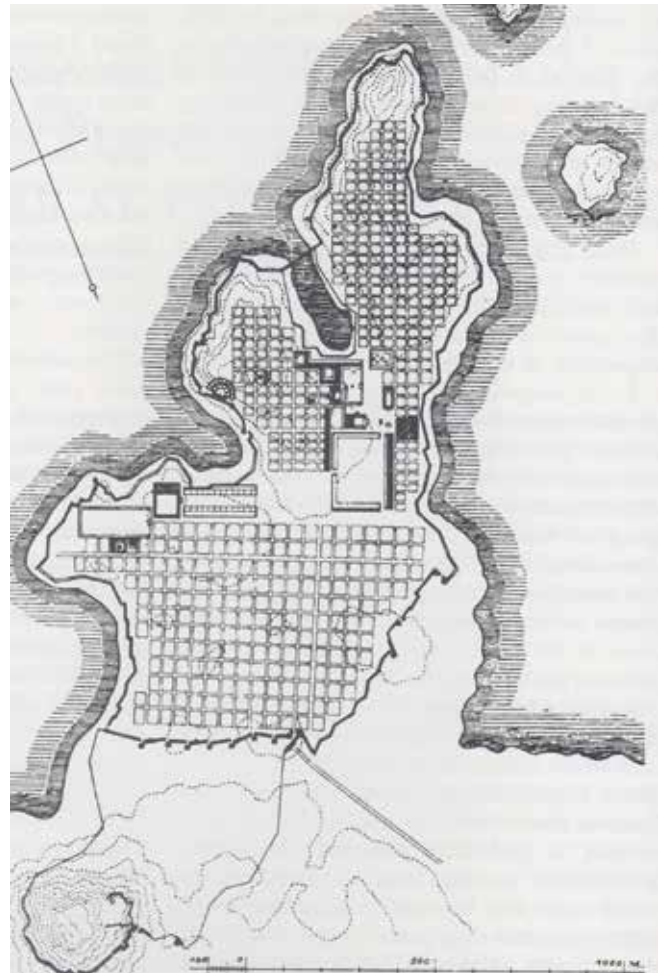
The decline of manufacturing offered opportunities for greening the city, a theme developed in UDQ 24 (Autumn 1984). The characteristics of a 'good city' were summarised by UDG Trustee Arnold Linden in an article published in *The Planner* in March 1988 saying that it should offer all of its inhabitants 'a variety of activities and experiences,... protection and security, together with shelter and comfort,... the opportunity for people to personalise their own surroundings,... clarity of perception and stimulation'.

## THE ESTABLISHMENT OF URBAN DESIGN

The next few years saw a struggle for the acceptance of urban design by the government and the political establishment. Contributing to it was the 1983 UDG Conference, *Mending the City*, a title that summarised the concerns of the time: diversity, adaptability, flexibility, quality. This period also saw an increasing wish by communities to be involved in the planning and design of their neighbourhoods and as a response, a number of experiments in public participation. But in spite of pressure from professional groups, including the UDG, progress was slow. UDQ 35 (June 1990) quoted a Transport Minister still thinking that the solution to traffic problems was to build more roads; many local authorities and consultants thought the same.

At last in 1994, the Department of the Environment published *Quality in Town and Country* which recognised the importance of urban design, and launched a campaign to promote it. 'Thriving towns and cities are vital to a nation's health, and sense of well being' wrote John Gummer, Secretary of State for the Environment in its preface. Soon after the term urban design appeared for the first time in a government circular.

The next 15 years saw a marked improvement in the fortunes of the profession, symbolised by Richard (now Lord) Rogers' research and publication of *Towards an Urban Renaissance* (see p. 6), and the subsequent establishment of the Commission of Architecture and the Built Environment (CABE). The title of that publication is significant as the country's population was growing, but because of urban areas' poor environment and living conditions, people were shunning them. Cities were declining and the countryside was being eroded by sprawl. New policies were needed to attract people back to cities by making them attractive once again.



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'Achieving an urban renaissance is not only about number and percentages. It is about creating the quality of life and vitality that makes urban living desirable' (Rogers, 1994). The effects of this new approach can be seen in:

- increasing urban housing densities
- attempts to reduce traffic dominance and the creation of pedestrian areas, with Birmingham one of the main examples
- the regeneration of numerous urban centres and industrial areas
- the promotion of mixed uses, and
- overall a greater attention paid to the quality of urban areas.

With the stewardship of CABE, supported by numerous publications and events, and under a more sympathetic government, a serious debate about design quality could take place. At the same time new issues entered the agenda.

## CLIMATE CHANGE AND INFORMATION TECHNOLOGY

In his introduction to the report, Lord Rogers referred to 'the technical revolution', 'the ecological threat' and 'the social transformation' as these were now entering the public's mind. Previously, and even in the title of the report, the word environment meant the physical surroundings. Sustainability had just entered the general vocabulary; in UDQ 54 (April 1995), David Lock alerted us to

2 Miletus, Greek settlement in Anatolia had a designed layout by the 5th century BC

the fact that we now had to deal with issues of water, energy, air quality, noise, etc.

Compare the curriculum of an urban design course today to one of only 30 years ago: sustainability will be mentioned everywhere but it wouldn't have made an appearance then. Equally, new technologies influence the information available to professionals, the way that people use the city and the solutions to existing problems. Multiculturalism, globalisation and demographic changes are also part of the issues that today's urban designer needs to deal with. As part of the climate change debate, new concepts such as the circular economy enter the urban design vocabulary, even before they are widely understood.

Good urban design today means avoiding the urban heat island effect, ensuring biodiversity, reducing pollution and flooding, protecting the countryside from being concreted over, making public spaces accessible to all, etc. Debate on these topics results in a new paradigm shift in which well-being, climate change, diversity and inclusiveness are buzzwords, and pedestrianisation, densification, greening and recycling, are some of the solutions available.

Beauty, virtually banned from urban design and planning vocabularies for many years, has re-emerged as an acknowledgement of the fact that what a place looks and feels like is important. Geoff Noble deals with the *Building Better, Building Beautiful* report on p. 16. Similarly the government's *National Design Guide* refers to places rather than buildings, and advocates a comprehensive approach to their design in a similar way that CABE's *By Design* had done some twenty years earlier but with climate change as a new overarching element.

Other concerns that have been around for a long time, have not been resolved; as Matthew Carmona discusses in his article (p. 21), most housing design has not improved. Worse still is the fact that we produce far fewer dwellings than are needed. The way that land is allocated for new housing development has been a scandal for many years, as has been the whole economy of housing production.

## CONCLUSION

Looking back on nearly a century of urban design, it is possible to see how some issues have evolved and taken greater priority, others have withdrawn into the background and new concerns have emerged. We didn't know what sustainability meant in the 1950s and today we don't advocate monumental set pieces or comprehensive redevelopment schemes.

We have never resolved issues surrounding the procurement and financing of development. The Betterment Levy introduced after WW2 was an attempt to recover for the community the value added by public decisions or investments. It failed and no government has ever been able to replace it successfully. Meanwhile in other European countries, the public sector buys the land it wants developed, invests in the necessary infrastructure and recoups the money by selling parcels to developers, subject to a masterplan. Here, these objectives have not been reached because however reasonable and commendable they are, the public sector cannot implement them: it has to wait for developers to be willing to do so and negotiate with them, watering down the objectives in the process.

But behind the changes in vocabulary and priorities, the basic principles of urban design have remained broadly the same. Health has been a priority in planning since its inception even though the threats to health and the remedies have changed over time; they will no doubt change again following the current pandemic. Similarly well-being, quality of life, and access to resources and services have always been part of the goals of urban design although the meaning of these terms have changed. This will continue to be so but maybe because society is constantly changing, these goals can never be achieved.

In UDQ 22 (June 1986), we find a government spokesman saying 'Whatever the changes, you will always be designing,



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**Good urban design today means avoiding the urban heat island effect, ensuring biodiversity, reducing pollution and flooding, protecting the countryside from being concreted over, making public spaces accessible to all, etc**



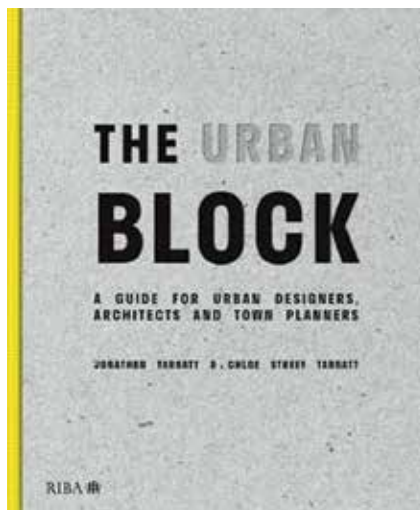
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3 Paris: a green wall as a contribution to climate change moderation  
4 Letchworth: Garden Cities were a reaction to unhealthy crowded cities

planning, financing for people. They must be the prime consideration...' This was 35 years ago!

People's needs and desires change but the principles are the same. We can still apply Vitruvius' triad but instead of durability, commodity and beauty, we have: sustainability, well-being and attractiveness. *Plus ça change...* ●

Sebastian Loew



## The Urban Block, A Guide for Urban Designers, Architects and Town Planners

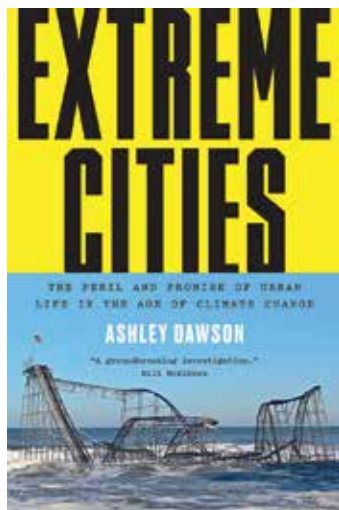
Jonathan Tarbatt and Chloe Street Tarbatt, 2020, RIBA, £40.00, ISBN 978 1859468764

This book analyses and celebrates the urban block, using case studies to explain and illustrate this essential component of urban design. The authors see that generally there is very little consideration of what goes into block design and layout, and yet urban designers are busy 'making new houses, neighbourhoods and new local centres' in vast numbers, so the block needs to be a critical part of their design processes.

The book is divided into four chapters, and the first, Understanding the Block, looks at both theory and practice. It includes historical examples such as The Buttermarket in Canterbury, classics such as Haussman's Paris and more. It ranges from colonial uses of the gridiron block, the Modernist design of Park Hill in Sheffield, the Post-Modern IBA housing schemes in Berlin, and New Urbanism, through to the publication of the *Urban Design Compendium*, therefore covering the rise, fall and rediscovery of the urban block as a key tool in urban design thinking.

The second chapter, Defining the Block, provides a taxonomy of urban forms to give basic block types and their implications for urban life. It begins with the perimeter block with its simple public-private space relationship, and breaks it down into its courtyard and 'nested' derivatives, including for each of them a useful summary of the key features and design challenges. It then looks at point blocks, ribbon blocks, courts, closes and cul-de-sacs.

Designing the Block, the third chapter, deals with the key design issues and variations, what the block needs to accommodate (permeability, density, mixed uses) and adapt to (access and parking) based on Western concepts of the block. The fourth



chapter, Illustrating the Block, uses case studies drawn from a range of densities and contexts, to show their various strengths and weaknesses. The examples from the Netherlands (8 House and Steigeriland), Norway (Barcode), and France (Neptune Logements) are particularly interesting, alongside English ones presented in the same format. The block diagrams are drawn at the same scale throughout the book, each with scale bars and oriented the same way, which is a great help for comparisons. The only unsatisfying part of this publication is its cover, which feels slightly unfinished and not robust enough to withstand the amount of use that this valuable book will undoubtedly have. ●

Louise Thomas

## Extreme Cities, The peril and promise of urban life in the age of climate change

Ashley Dawson, 2019, Verso, £12.00, ISBN 978 1784780395

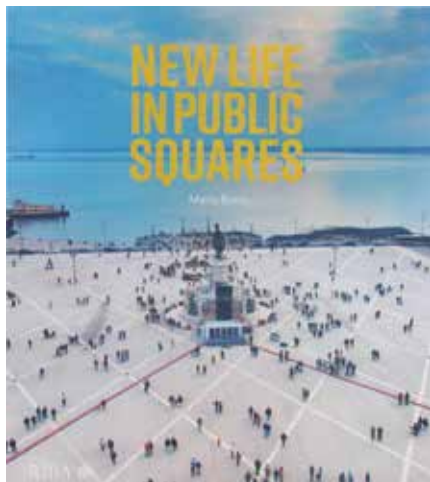
*Extreme Cities* could easily have been a gloom and doom vision of our planet's extinction. Instead, it expresses a passionate belief that what Ashley Dawson terms climate chaos, is intimately linked to socio-spatial inequalities and would require community action to redress environmental injustices and save cities from ecological devastation. He develops his view that cities are a major contributor to global warming due to their intrinsic link to unfettered growth, the lifeblood of what he calls 'catastrophe capitalism', over six emotively titled chapters: Capital sinks, Environmental blowback, Sea change, The jargon of resilience, Climate apartheid, and Disaster communism.

Challenging humans' exploitation of nature is not new; environmentalists like Herbert Girardet denounced the unsustainable ecological footprints of cities, while scientists the world over have modelled

what they identified as the tipping points of anthropogenic greenhouse gas emissions. However, climate change doubters have contested these positions with equal fervour, and Dawson believes that they helped the establishment to undermine remedial interventions after extreme weather incidents, thereby returning cities to an undesirable 'business as usual' state.

Due to their unprecedented concentration of inadequate infrastructure, massive economic resources and human populations, Dawson considers coastal megacities and cities along flooding rivers not just contributors but also the principal victims of climate chaos. Discussing briefly how rising sea levels and intense storms are threatening cities in the Global South, he drills into case studies in the North (New Orleans, Miami, Rotterdam and New York) and how they go about preserving their imperilled economic assets. He criticises their post-disaster top-down interventions, such as New York's 'rebuild by design' initiative, for aggravating their long-term climate vulnerability. Alongside this, he evokes examples of community-led disaster relief and how denizens were prevented from undertaking their own climate-friendly reconstruction. While he recognises the role of government and the private sector in dealing with the process, he deplores the ephemeral nature of community initiatives which he attributes to their unfair share of resources.

Inspired by scholarly urban thinkers and in close contact with the actors involved in his case studies, Dawson brings together well-documented empirical experiences, scientific knowledge and conceptual deliberations of interest to urban designers. His aim is to convert extreme cities into ecocities, but his solutions to create environmental justice – a prerequisite for him to combat climate chaos – tend to be utopian with little chance of realisation. Nevertheless, his deliberations open up a clear opportunity for urban designers (who are otherwise rather absent in Dawson's scenarios to deal with extreme weather calamities) to reflect on their role of inherent and even constitutive actors of mainstream urban development



processes, and to offer their contribution toward reconstructing more sustainable cities. ●

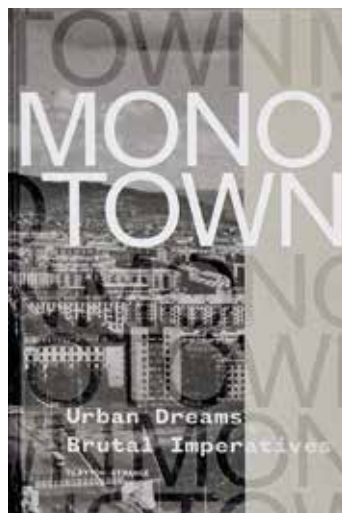
Judith Ryser

## New Life in Public Squares

Marie Burns, 2020, RIBA Publishing, £35.00, ISBN 978 1859468920

A book describing and analysing new or redesigned public squares should be welcomed. This book starts well: the first chapter briefly outlines the historic development of squares and the second is a kind of literature review of the past 50 years summarising the issues that have arisen in the recent past that have required and led to a new approach to public squares. The material will not be new for urban designers, but these chapters are a good summary.

There follows 16 case studies, all but one in Europe and in five categories: Redesign of historic squares, New squares within an existing urban fabric, Squares within new city quarters, New squares that extend the city experience, and Squares that reconfigure a city's structure. But the groupings and categories are not always clear, for instance Place de la République in Paris is not a new square as suggested here. This however is a minor issue. The fundamental problem of this section, which aims to describe how the squares have been created or transformed, is the lack of plans. Apart from a tiny location map (with no scale bar), the text mentioning streets, buildings, monuments and rivers is not accompanied by any plan making it incomprehensible and useless. The photographs are no substitute, particularly as they don't always show what they are meant to. This reflects another problem which is its poor editing. There are not just typos but misspelled or wrong place names, missing words, inconsistent dates, and more. In both the introductory and concluding chapters, captions for the photographs don't even indicate the city in which they are located.



Each case study ends with a Lessons Learnt box, something to be welcomed. Again these are a disappointment as in most cases, these are just a repetition of what has been said before, either in the aims of the project or its description. The final chapter, entitled What we have learnt, does include some useful lessons but these are not cross-referenced to the case studies and they don't read as if they were drawn from them. One element in particular seems missing: although the importance of consistent budgeting and good management is repeatedly mentioned, there is no explanation of procurement or how budgets were spent in the various examples, only the total budget (sometimes in pounds and sometimes in other currencies) and the client body are mentioned.

Even though the examples might be interesting, this book covers the subject in a very disappointing manner, which leaves the reader more confused than informed. A pity. ●

Sebastian Loew

## Monotown: Urban Dreams Brutal Imperatives

Clayton Strange, 2019, Oro Editions, £23.99, ISBN 978 1939621573

*Monotown* provides a comprehensive overview of the history of monotowns in Russia and the challenges that they face from their geographic, socio-political and economic contexts. In short, a monotown is a planned town dominated by a single industry. This simplistic definition does not offer much meaning to the complexities associated with these planned developments. The first section of the book addresses this and explores the definitions, origins and characteristics of monotowns. It follows a chronological account from the late 16th century, highlighting key political, economic and ideological developments leading to the spatial plans for

these utopian industrial towns in the 1920s and 1930s, that were to be built in remote locations across the Siberian hinterland.

The subsequent two sections of the book follow a similar structure and can be read as case studies into specific monotowns. The following monotowns across the then USSR are investigated: Novotroitsk, Yurga, Mezhdurechensk and Krasnokamensk. Each case study provides insights into the standardised approach, yet as a result of their context, each town has its own characteristics. The four case studies seamlessly transition into the third section of the book. Here, we are offered an insight into how the monotown has been translated as a model of urbanisation into remote areas of China and India.

This is an interesting book, clearly written and informative. What brings it to life is the vast amount of visual content that supports the studies. Each chapter is filled with a range of visual material across all scales of the masterplans, from historical maps, aerial photographs, schematic plans, to housing layouts and building plans. Supplementing this, the author also includes numerous drawings and photographs of his own. The drawings tie together a visual consistency through the case studies, although some of the information can get lost within each of the diagrams. Further to this, the grids of photographs taken by the author could have been enlarged to a similar size as the historical images. This would have improved legibility, especially as the images are rich in details of both built form and public space, and how it is being used in the present day.

This book is a valuable resource for any urbanist interested in learning more about monotowns in Russia, China and India, especially with regards to the triangulation between authority, ideology and urban form. In addition, it opens up a dialogue about the reinvention of post-industrial towns and, despite differing contexts from the UK, some lessons and insights can be taken from each of the case studies. ●

Amanda Gregor, Associate, Public Practice working at Sevenoaks District Council

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The following universities offer courses in Urban Design. Please see the UDG's website [www.udg.org.uk](http://www.udg.org.uk) for more details.

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### School of Geography and Planning and Welsh School of Architecture, Glamorgan Building, King Edward VII Avenue

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W [www.cardiff.ac.uk/architecture/courses/postgraduate-taught/ma-urban-design](http://www.cardiff.ac.uk/architecture/courses/postgraduate-taught/ma-urban-design)

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E [ouduku@ed.ac.uk](mailto:ouduku@ed.ac.uk)  
W [www.ed.ac.uk/studying/postgraduate/degrees](http://www.ed.ac.uk/studying/postgraduate/degrees)  
Jointly run with Heriot Watt University, this M.Sc in Urban Strategies and Design focuses on urban design practice and theory from a cultural, and socio-economic, case-study perspective. Engaging students in 'live' urban projects, as part of the programme's 'action research' pedagogy, it also offers research expertise in African and Latin American urban design and planning processes.

## LONDON SOUTH BANK UNIVERSITY

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T 0207 815 5877  
C Manuela Madeddu  
E [madeddum@lsbu.ac.uk](mailto:madeddum@lsbu.ac.uk)  
W [www.lsbu.ac.uk/courses/course-finder/urban-design-planning-ma](http://www.lsbu.ac.uk/courses/course-finder/urban-design-planning-ma)  
The MA Urban Design and Planning (FT or PT) provides an inter-disciplinary approach to urban design and equips students with a comprehensive understanding of urban design, planning and development issues. Through working at different scales of the city and engaging with theoretical debates, students will learn to think about the characteristics of good places and will be equipped to make a critical contribution to shaping those places in the decades ahead. The programme is fully accredited by the RTPI and includes a field trip to a European country.

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T 0191 222 6006  
C Georgia Giannopoulou  
E [georgia.giannopoulou@ncl.ac.uk](mailto:georgia.giannopoulou@ncl.ac.uk)  
W [www.ncl.ac.uk/apl/study/postgraduate/taught/urban-design/index.htm](http://www.ncl.ac.uk/apl/study/postgraduate/taught/urban-design/index.htm)  
The MA in Urban Design brings together cross-disciplinary expertise striking a balance between methods and approaches in environmental design and the social sciences in the creation of the built environment. To view the course blog: [www.nclurban-design.org](http://www.nclurban-design.org)

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T 01865 483 438  
C Georgia Butina-Watson  
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W [www.brookes.ac.uk](http://www.brookes.ac.uk)  
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W <https://www.ucl.ac.uk/bartlett/development/programmes/postgraduate/msc-building-urban-design-development>  
The DPU programme has a unique focus on Urban Design as a transdisciplinary and critical practice. Students are encouraged to rethink the role of urban design through processes of collective and radical endeavours to design and build resilient strategic responses to conflicting urban agendas, emphasising outcomes of environmental and social-spatial justice.

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W [www.bartlett.ucl.ac.uk/planning/programmes](http://www.bartlett.ucl.ac.uk/planning/programmes)  
The MSc/Dipl Urban Design & City Planning has a unique focus on the interface between urban design & city planning. Students learn to think in critical, creative and analytical ways across the different scales of the city – from strategic to local – and across urban design, planning, real estate and sustainability.

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E [m.carmona@ucl.ac.uk](mailto:m.carmona@ucl.ac.uk)  
W [www.bartlett.ucl.ac.uk/planning/programmes/postgraduate/mresinter-disciplinary-urban-design](http://www.bartlett.ucl.ac.uk/planning/programmes/postgraduate/mresinter-disciplinary-urban-design)  
The MRes Inter-disciplinary Urban Design cuts across urban design programmes at The Bartlett, allowing students to construct their study in a flexible manner and explore urban design as a critical arena for advanced research and practice. The course operates as a stand-alone high level masters or as preparation for a PhD.

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E [m.radfar@dundee.ac.uk](mailto:m.radfar@dundee.ac.uk)  
[D.Gopinath@dundee.ac.uk](mailto:D.Gopinath@dundee.ac.uk)  
W [www.dundee.ac.uk/postgraduate/courses/advanced\\_sustainable\\_urban\\_design\\_msc.htm](http://www.dundee.ac.uk/postgraduate/courses/advanced_sustainable_urban_design_msc.htm)  
The MSc Advanced Sustainable Urban Design (RTPI accredited) is a unique multidisciplinary practice-led programme set in an international context (EU study visit) and engaging with such themes as landscape urbanism, placemaking across cultures and sustainability evaluation as integrated knowledge spheres in the creation of sustainable places.

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C Dr Ioanni Delsante  
E [i.delsante@hud.ac.uk](mailto:i.delsante@hud.ac.uk)  
W [www.hud.ac.uk/courses/full-time/postgraduate/urban-design-ma/MA;PgDip;PgCertinUrbanDesign\(FullTimeorPartTime\)](http://www.hud.ac.uk/courses/full-time/postgraduate/urban-design-ma/MA;PgDip;PgCertinUrbanDesign(FullTimeorPartTime))  
The MA in Urban Design aims to provide students with the essential knowledge and skills required to effectively intervene in the urban design process; develop academic research skills, including critical problem-solving and reflective practice; facilitate design responses to the range of cultural, political, socio-economic, historical, environmental and spatial factors. It also aims to promote responsibility within urban design to consider the wider impact of urban development and regeneration.

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C Dr. Philip Black  
E [philip.black@manchester.ac.uk](mailto:philip.black@manchester.ac.uk)  
W [www.seed.manchester.ac.uk/study/taught-masters/courses/list/urban-design-and-international-planning-msc/](http://www.seed.manchester.ac.uk/study/taught-masters/courses/list/urban-design-and-international-planning-msc/)  
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C Dr Amy Tang  
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W [www.nottingham.ac.uk/pgstudy/courses/architecture-and-built-environment/sustainable-urban-design-march.aspx](http://www.nottingham.ac.uk/pgstudy/courses/architecture-and-built-environment/sustainable-urban-design-march.aspx)  
Master of Architecture (MArch) in Sustainable Urban Design is a research and project-based programme which aims to assist the enhancement of the quality of our cities by bringing innovative design with research in sustainability.

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W [www.shef.ac.uk/architecture/study/pgschool/taught\\_masters/maud](http://www.shef.ac.uk/architecture/study/pgschool/taught_masters/maud)  
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W [www.westminster.ac.uk/architecture-and-interiors-planning-housing-and-urban-design-courses/2019-20/september/full-time/urban-design-ma-or-ending-in/urban-design-postgraduate-diploma](http://www.westminster.ac.uk/architecture-and-interiors-planning-housing-and-urban-design-courses/2019-20/september/full-time/urban-design-ma-or-ending-in/urban-design-postgraduate-diploma)  
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## Great Street Expectations

At last year's UDG annual conference I ran a quiz on Great Streets, asking participants to identify pictures of European streets in Allan Jacobs' book of the same name. I did consider putting in a rogue picture in order to confuse. The one I had in mind was High Street Deritend in Birmingham, which I rate as the most unpleasant street in the city centre. It is a mediaeval street, which originally connected the small town of Birmingham around the marketplace of the Bull Ring to the village of Deritend, on the other side of the river Rea. (See *My Favourite Plan* in UD150). Its winding mediaeval footprint has persisted through centuries of change. Some fine buildings survive on its northern side, including the city's oldest building, the late 15th century Crown pub. But the street was widened on its southern side in the early 20th century, destroying everything there, with later redevelopment of poor quality. Much of this is now proposed in turn to be replaced by new residential developments. These include the Stone Yard development which I wrote about in the previous Endpiece.

High Street today is an aggressive six-lane dual carriageway, dominated by vehicles, difficult to cross on foot, and presenting an unattractive ten minutes' walk from the Bull Ring over the river to the Custard Factory in Deritend. It is a travesty of an historic street. But a saviour is at hand. Or rather two, a combination of a new tram route promoted by the arrival of HS2, and the proposed new city centre Clean Air Zone. Birmingham, the original car-mad city of the 1960s, is finally doing a three-point turn, discouraging and restricting the use of the private car, and investing in public transport. A coalition of the City Council, the Combined Authority's Transport for West Midlands (TfWM), and Midland Metro has proposed a total transformation of High Street, catalysed by the introduction of the new tram route.

Some years ago, I observed that the widened High Street had the same dimension between buildings on opposite sides, about 33 metres, as one of Jacobs' Great Streets, the celebrated Las Ramblas in Barcelona. I suggested that it would be possible, given the political will, to transform High Street into another similarly great street. My son James drew a perspective drawing to show how it could look. Now it could be happening. Six lanes of traffic will be reduced to two, and in fact it will no longer be possible to drive from one end of High Street to the other. Many people wedded to their cars are going to be very upset by this. The road space removed will be replaced by a wide pedestrian promenade.



This will not be in the centre, as in Las Ramblas. I proposed it should be on the northern side, where it will be sunniest, and this is being done. The road and bus lane will be next to it, with the tram tracks on the southern side. It is critical that a lot of money be spent on tree planting, to make a real boulevard. I would love to see big plane trees there, throwing their shade over the promenade as in Las Ramblas.

I am writing this shortly after submitting my response to the public consultation on the scheme at the Custard Factory. But I also have just given a talk about another road scheme catalysed by public transport changes, also currently proposed by the City Council and TfWM, for Moseley Road in Balsall Heath. Here it is road widening that is proposed, to accommodate an additional bus lane, not road narrowing; so a reduction in pavement width, not an increase, and the consequent felling of existing mature street trees, not the planting of new ones. Here also the Clean Air Zone is invoked as a justification, and the improvement of public transport. But in this case the net impact

on the environmental quality of the street is negative, as opposed to the positive transformation that is proposed for High Street Deritend. It is striking how the same progressive motivations can produce diametrically contrasting results. ●

Joe Holyoak, architect and urban designer

1-2 High Street and its proposed transformation

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