

Creating Better Places...

summary note of *Design Principles Training Event - Inverclyde, Wednesday 12 March 2014*

the event considered how applying design principles can assist projects and strategies to deliver better people outcomes

CREATING PLACES, the policy statement on architecture and place for Scotland, identifies the role of design in making places for people as highlighted in the opening Jan Gehl quote: “*First life, then spaces, then buildings: the other way around never works*”. This theme also underpins the Scottish Government’s policy document on **DESIGNING STREETS** which promotes the design of streets as public spaces.



A learning event with Inverclyde planning authority, in association with Improvement Service, responded to a request for specific training on design principles - Unity & Order, Punctuation, Scale, Proportion, Harmony and Rhythm.

An introductory session looked at how environments are experienced, and noted the importance of user perception. Such experiential qualities are set out in the Scottish Government’s policy **DESIGNING PLACES**, e.g. identity, safe and pleasant, ease of movement, and welcoming.

The importance of environmental experience has been identified by Scotland’s Chief Medical Officer Sir Harry Burns who has [highlighted the need to understand and make sense of the environment](#) along with a need to enable social interaction and community connections.

The facilitated discussions were prompted by reference to several sources including [CABE’s Design Review 2002](#), the Homes and Communities Agency’s [Qualityreviewer](#), and [Moughton’s: Urban Design - Street and Square](#). Reference was also made to [Steve Tiesdell’s](#) lecture presentations.

The workshop considered two and three dimensional aspects of elevations, massing and form, context relationships, and dynamic street scene, and scaled up to consider how design principles impact across wider whole settlement scale.

“Rather than think about buildings in isolation it’s good to understand how we contribute to street scene and the bigger picture” Development Management participant

Key points arising from the discussions included:

Unity & Order: helps us to comprehend and interpret our environment; a proper balance of ‘prominent’ and ‘good ordinary’ buildings are required; a high quality public realm and green infrastructure can assist unity of differing elements

Punctuation: the fundamental unit of design is not the separate building but the whole city; designs can be too ‘noisy’ or too ‘quiet’ relative to context; conformity and contrast should be considered relative to setting; an aim is not necessarily to ‘fit in’ as this might lead to mediocrity

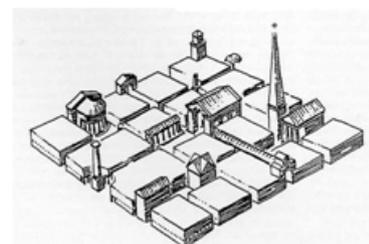
Scale: relation of parts to each other and to the whole; human scale is important; good designs resolve issues across a range of scales - city wide, landmark, neighbourhood, immediate area, user

Proportion: give due weight to elements; focal points dominate; composition of two equal parts to be avoided (unresolved duality); respect vertical / horizontal emphasis; avoid domestic features in larger scale situations

Harmony: good design should have interest and accent, and avoid monotony; work with context

Rhythm: Most buildings form the background fabric of the place; existing rhythms should be recognised; proposals should seem compelling and relate to the project’s setting

A FEW iconic buildings
Special
Objects
Object-buildings (possibly object-facades)
Buildings-in-space



MANY quotidian buildings
Ordinary
Texture
Backcloth buildings; collateral buildings
Buildings-defining-space



The ‘special’ special versus the non-special special

The ‘good ordinary’ versus the poor ordinary



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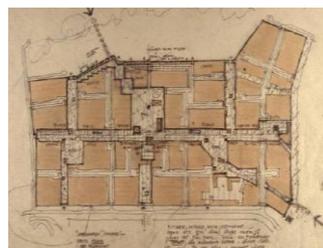


The final part of the workshop scaled up the discussion, which had initially focussed on individual projects, to consider how schemes might consciously assist the implementation of broader strategies that foster liveability and high quality of life across settlements.

A starting point for this discussion was an emphasis by Jan Gehl and others about the need to start with a public space plan to inform the planning process (rather than an approach which considers buildings, then spaces, and puts people last).

Reference was also made to work being carried out by the Copenhagen planning authority to integrate the delivery of projects with the objective of supporting three strategies:

- More urban life: identify where people want to go
- More walking: how people get to where they want
- Encourage people to stay longer in a place



Using simple drawing techniques the participants worked in groups to identify and correlate the interaction of:

- key 'dominant/focal' buildings and their settings
 - 'good' ordinary buildings (mostly frontages)
 - 'poor quality' ordinary backcloth buildings
 - places where people don't want to go
 - where people do want to go
 - how people get there

Key learning points evident from the event were:

- Planning supports the making of places for people, and must consider how people perceive their environments
- Environments need to be understandable and aid people connections – a public space plan is a good starting point
- Design principles are relevant not only for Development Management's assessment of a project, but also for policy planning in terms of making places as a whole
- Projects help to deliver bigger placemaking strategies
- There should be a proper balance between dominant focal points and good quality backdrop buildings
- Places where people want to be should be supported by good quality backdrop buildings, and be easily accessible
- Poor quality backdrop buildings and places (e.g. roads) hinder people enjoyment of their environment
- Creating places for people, and a public space plan, should inform the development of site and place briefs



"Every design wants to make a statement or win an award!"
workshop participant

"Enjoyable, and a helpful reminder we are planning for people" workshop participant