Editorial

The search for character and identity in the city can be seen against two strands of twentieth century urban development; first, the unravelling of the impacts of modernist intervention in the city, and second, the more fundamental international structural change in investment patterns in cities. The pragmatic results of these two closely related processes have been, in the popular imagination and experience, a disenchantment with the products of modernism and, in the professional and political imagination, a recognition of the need to 'commodify' the city by selling and promoting its image in a competitive market for investment.

The second half of the twentieth century in particular has seen a major international structural change in investment patterns in cities. Increasingly, investment has been diverted to edge-of-town and out-of-town locations: the first wave being residential investment, the second commercial and employment, and the third wave being retail and leisure. Although there are indications of a reversal of this trend in residential development, there is widespread concern about the continuing fragmentation in the economic base of many city centres. In the UK the revised *Planning Policy Guidance Note 6* (1993), the House of Commons Environment Committee's report *Shopping Centres and their Future* (1994), the DoE/URBED report *Vital and Viable Town Centres: Meeting the Challenge* (1994), and the Government's initiative *Quality in Town and Country* (1994) are just a few of the indications of widespread concern on this issue. In attempting to halt and reverse the decline of city centres, most local authorities in the UK have had to rely primarily on the operation of the land use planning system to regulate the release of land, the amount and type of development, and to stabilise changes in land use. However, the land use planning system alone is too crude and unwieldy an instrument to implement the significant shifts in economic

and social policy necessary to stimulate city centre reinvestment and regeneration. Without many of the fiscal and legislative tools at the disposal of city authorities in the USA and in Europe, local authorities in this country have had to look to improved urban management and governance to effect these changes. The rapid development of the Town Centre Management movement over the past decade is the clearest indication of the determination to forge new partnerships and working practices in achieving city-centre revitalisation.

It has been argued that new decentralised urban forms mean that the city centre is no longer the hub of a city's economic and social life and that multi-nucleated cities and city regions will gradually replace the old role of the centre. However, there seem to be powerful and compelling arguments for taking rapid and positive action to maintain and regenerate the viability of city centres as they are essentially more sustainable and democratic in terms of access and synergetic support for complementary retail, leisure, cultural and other infrastructure such as public offices, health care, education and transport.

Apart from the sustainability and resource efficiency arguments, there is a further reason for revitalising the role of city centres in a climate of global competition for investment. There is considerable evidence to show that a key factor in attracting or discouraging investment is city image. The image of a city is essentially derived from its centre; the culture, heritage, townscape and landscape of the historic city core, and that these combine as key image-forming elements, whether positively or negatively perceived.

Most would agree that the image of many cities benefit from historic associations, and high architectural and environmental quality. How-

ever, the majority of cities in any country may not enjoy such obvious advantages, but will nevertheless have assets that form part of the image and way in which they are perceived. There is a complex interaction between the notions many people may have about a city and the reality of its centre as a milieu for business activity and as providing access to a 'clear disposition' of developable land. Historic centres, for example, may be overcrowded, with traffic problems, constrained by their historic legacy and lacking in facilities. Alternatively, peripheral development may result from the attraction of the 'address' and yet diminish the vitality of the city itself. Competitiveness may well be affected by the way that cities, and particularly their centres are managed, and this in turn may affect their image and the way that they are perceived by users and investors.

The articles in this issue reflect these themes; from the 'measurable' elements of character and identity formation to the perceived image of place by users. In most cases the authors go on to develop strategies for promoting and controlling place and image through policies and guidance. The issue starts with the second part of a major review of English design policies by John Punter and Matthew Carmona. The first part, in issue two, set out a framework for the development of design policies. The second paper goes on to make a detailed analysis of the content and form of design policies in a representative sample of plans. The authors conclude that there is a surprising lack of coverage in many urban design policies of key topics which most urban designers would consider to be central to design control. The concentration on visual aspects of design and the omission of aspects relating to social usage and activity was found to be a feature of many policies and Punter and Carmona conclude their article with clear recommendations on approaches and key areas for future policy development.

Graham Steventon raises doubts about the validity of using notions of defensible space as a crime prevention strategy within residential areas. The notion of defensible space permeates writing on this subject and has been unquestioningly adopted in much of the official and police guidance on housing layout and design. Steventon highlights the dangers of relying on design

alone to initiate and sustain the collective behaviour and in particular questions the pressure on housing developers to create enclave housing to the exclusion of the crime preventative potential of alternative layouts.

In his paper, Karl Kropf argues for a more rigorous and systematic method for evaluating character and identity. He is concerned with the relationship between the physical characteristics of urban form and their relationships with the perceptions of the general and historical character of place. His paper demonstrates how such studies may be used in character assessment and conservation area definition whilst underlining the need to consider form in the context of the activities and intentions of users.

The final two papers are concerned with different periods of urban restructuring since the second World War. In his paper based on the city of Newcastle upon Tyne, Giddings takes as his theme the consideration of the physical framework of the city as four elements; square, street, focal building and background building. He links the importance of these physical elements to a review of the theories and concepts of nineteenth and twentieth century pioneers and proposes that such principles and typologies might be reintroduced as a flexible and positive frame of reference for the urban restoration of the city.

In revisiting Thamesmead, Robbins also asks questions about the relevance of spatial form to good urban design. He suggests that neither modernists nor post-modernists can claim a monopoly on understanding the significance of form, but that by examining form we can expose attitudes that may otherwise remain hidden.

As always we would welcome comment and debate on any of the papers presented in this and previous issues as well as feedback on the journal as a whole. We would also like to set up an international database of people willing to act as referees for papers, or reviewers for books and conferences. As we widen our network of urban designers in practice and education we can ensure that we canvas the widest range of expertise and opinion. Please send details – a brief CV outlining current position, relevant experience and main interests – by post, fax or e-mail.

References

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