Book reviews

Improving Design in the High Street Colin J. Davis, Architectural Press/Royal Fine Art Commission, London, 1997, 81pp, £9.99, ISBN 0 7506 3453 7

This well-illustrated reference book is a useful and practical guide to achieving a range of improvements to the quality of the environment in town centres, a message simply stated on the front cover, where the photograph of a typical cluttered and unkempt high street is balanced by an inset line drawing showing how much better the street appearance could be.

Jointly funded by the Royal Fine Art Commission, Marks and Spencer, Land Securities and the Department of the Environment and aimed at town centre interests, including local authority officers and councillors, designers, the private sector and community groups, it indicates in a clear fashion the key issues to concentrate upon and shows how results have been achieved. It includes a wide collection of examples of implemented projects, ranging from accentuating landmarks to varying activities in urban spaces. It should be standard reading for members of all forums concerned with better management of traditional centres, whatever the size of the town or city, and makes reference to partnership working to agree programmes and secure resources.

The book is clear on the need for a process for improvement, a process described in three sections: analysis, programme and actions. The aim of the process is to improve both the *character* and the *convenience* of a town centre, reinforcing an earlier reference in the book to 'quality' as the underlying advice embodied in the Government's Planning Policy Guidance Note 6, *Town Centres and Retail Development*. Following the analysis, it suggests that a fairly comprehensive list be used to build a local programme of coordinated action.

The two linked checklists aiming at a quality environment are a 'convenience' checklist cover-

ing the welcome, the care of the centre and comfort and safety and a 'character' checklist that concentrates primarily on the urban design issues of urban space, materials, local landmarks, shops and buildings, also including street life and mix – the ways in which spaces could best be used. A total of 25 points are listed, eight on qualities of convenience and 17 on qualities of character, with analyses of three town centres of differing sizes: the small market town of Brighnorth, the urban centre of Brixton and Leicester as an example of a major subregional centre. These three examples, each simply described on two facing pages, summarize the process graphically, providing a good starting point for the analyst and designer.

The 25 case studies in the 'Action' section that follows explain with colour photographs and line drawings each one of the checklist actions. While only a limited amount of detail is provided, and the list itself is not intended to be comprehensive, there is more than enough material here to generate awareness of the improvements that can be made. Readers seeking further information can do so by contacting the individuals referred to in each example. Most examples have sketches showing 'as now' and 'how it could be' scenarios – instant visual evidence of the need for improvements. Many of the sketches have been based on other work by Colin Davis, in his earlier books *Traffic Measures in Historic Towns* and *Traffic in Townscape*, and in his streetscape manuals for Edinburgh and Brixton centres.

This is a useful awareness-raising document, with excellent illustrations and practical ideas to encourage readers to consider and realize their own local town centre improvement strategies.

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