Living Places

An Urban Stewardship and Design Guide for Northern Ireland (Draft)



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Draft: August 2013



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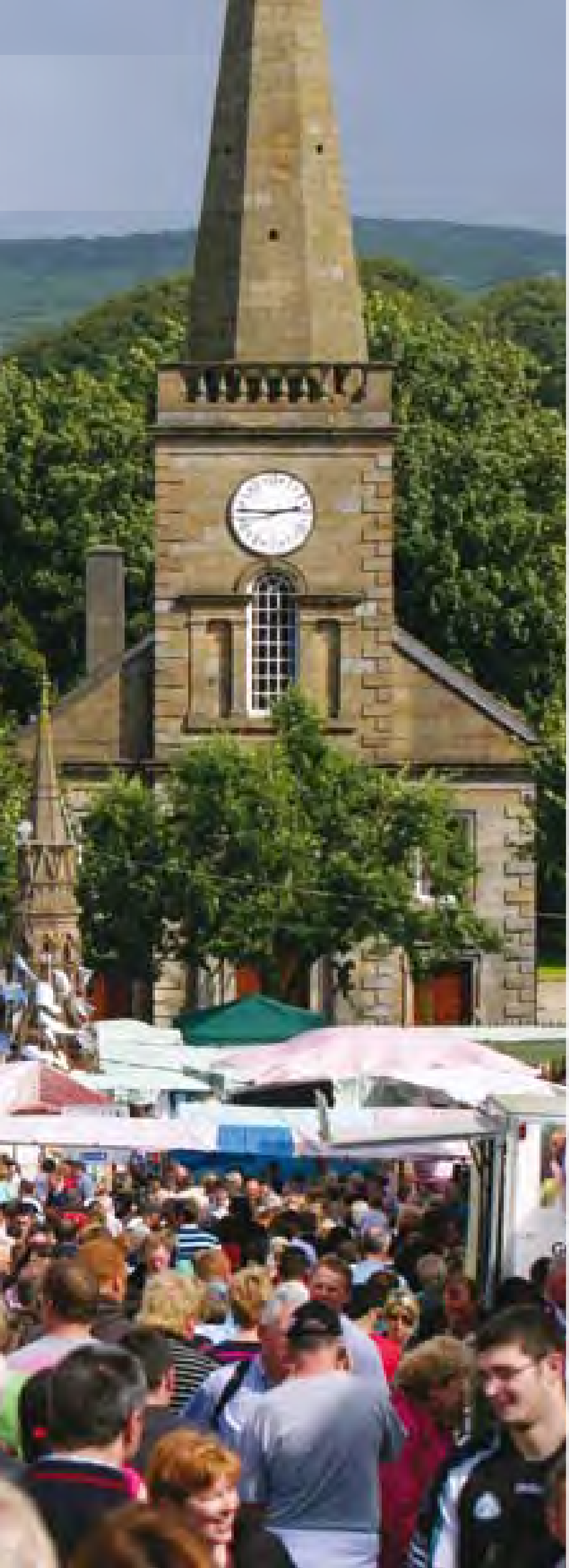

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Foreword





This document is about good urban places. We can all think of one. Perhaps it is the city, town, village or street in which you live. Perhaps it is where you visit, where you play, where you work, shop, or go to school. It may be somewhere that has now changed or long since gone, or even somewhere that you have never been.

Good places are important to all of us. As individuals, we are drawn to them and their ability to provide for our needs, to make us feel safe and even happy. As a society, good places are a focal point of social and economic activity, and help to define our collective sense of identity.

You would think therefore, that given the immense value of good places, we would be good at making and maintaining them. Unfortunately this is not always the case. Looking around us we can still find urban places that are unattractive, unsafe and unloved. Some may have become that way over the years, whilst others may have been built that way from the outset.

For Northern Ireland to continue on its path to a brighter, more prosperous future for all, it is vital that we work together to find ways to improve the planning, design and management of our urban places. Stronger cities, towns, villages and neighbourhoods will be central to the fulfilment of this overall objective.

Good places are not a luxury, they are a necessity.

Introduction

This Urban Stewardship and Design Guide aims to clearly establish the key principles behind good place making. It seeks to inform and inspire all those involved in the process of managing (stewardship) and making (design) urban places, with a view to raising standards across Northern Ireland.

The focus of the guide is urban areas, by which is meant all of our cities, towns, villages and neighbourhoods. It recognises the wider economic, cultural and community benefits of achieving excellence in the stewardship and design of these important places, be they existing or newly proposed.

Traditionally stewardship, the way in which our urban places are managed and maintained, has been considered separately from the processes of planning and design. However, in a departure from such tradition, urban stewardship and design are treated in equal measure in this guide, owing to the contribution they both make to the quality of the urban environment and the role that we all as individuals have to play.

This document provides strategic guidance and should be read alongside other policies and guides, including the DCAL Architecture and Built Environment Policy. Its content will be a Material Consideration in the determination of planning applications and planning appeals for development affecting all urban places. In submitting a planning application for a masterplan in an urban area, applicants will be required to demonstrate how the identified 'qualities' set out by this document have informed their proposals.

The Urban Stewardship and Design Guide has been produced by the Department of the Environment (DoE) who at the time of writing, are responsible for planning in Northern Ireland. Change is on the horizon, however, and it is anticipated that many responsibilities relevant to place making including local planning, will be transferred to newly organised local councils. This guide has therefore been written to be of relevance throughout this period of transition and after.





Who should read this document?

Making places involves many more people than just architects and planners. A whole host of individuals and organisations contribute to the way in which our urban places look and function.

Developers construct new urban places where people must live and work. Engineers design large swathes of urban space and manage its operation. Residents care for their properties and gardens. Refuse collectors keep our streets clean and clear. Landscape Architects create outdoor spaces. Shopkeepers seek to innovate and attract new people. Traffic wardens keep circulation systems fluid. Politicians pass laws that underpin urban functions. Buskers fill our streets with music. Councillors will make critical planning decisions that shape our places.

And these are only to name a few. Good places are the result of collective endeavour.

So who should read this document? In this context, all of us. We invite everyone to read this guide and to consider how they can contribute to making our urban places better for all.

Key definitions for the purposes of this document (full glossary provided in Appendix A)

Urbanism: *1) The study of process of change in towns and cities 2) The process and product of becoming urban*

Urban Design: *The collaborative and multi-disciplinary process of shaping the physical setting for life in cities, towns and villages*

Urban Stewardship: *The careful management of the urban environment*

Place Making: *Creating somewhere with a distinct identity; urban design*

Source: The Dictionary of Urbanism (Cowan, 2005)

The Urban North

An important first step in understanding urban places is to gain an appreciation of their history. Our cities, towns and villages have been shaped by numerous influences, including the natural landscape and the shifting sands of their cultural, political and economic context.

Human settlement on the island of Ireland is believed to have commenced around 8000 BC. Yet other than small monastic communities in places such as Armagh, Omagh and Bangor, it was the arrival of Anglo Normans in 1177 AD to which the modest beginning of Ulster's urbanisation can be attributed. The legacy of this era is the fortifications and narrow streets found in medieval towns such as Carrickfergus, although in many other places, like Newry and Belfast, little such evidence remains.

The turn of the 17th Century saw the Plantation of Ulster and the most ambitious program of town building to have taken place here. The landowners newly arrived from Britain brought with them aspirations of fine urban places, based on the market towns of their native land. Many of Northern Ireland's modern day urban centres date from this period, where the underlying structure of plantation era urbanism remains clearly evident. Gracious market places such as Lurgan, Dungannon and Newtownards, wide central streets such as Cookstown or Aughancloy and grid iron street patterns like Derry / Londonderry and Coleraine owe their existence to this period.



Plantation era plan of Bellaghy, County Londonderry.

In the 19th Century it was industrialisation that provided a major stimulus for urbanisation. In some rural areas, this resulted in attractive planned settlements such as Sion Mills or Edenderry. Yet it was urban areas like Portadown, Lisburn and most notably Belfast, where rapid growth occurred on an unprecedented scale. Through the course of the century Belfast, for example, grew from a population of 22,000 to 340,000, seeing a major influx of new residents from rural areas arriving to find employment in the city's shipyards and linen mills. Rows of densely packed terraces are perhaps the most well known remnant of this era.

Yet arguably it was the 20th Century that had the most impact on the urban north. A series of factors combined to comprehensively shape our contemporary environment. This included depopulation of traditional urban centres due to the decline of heavy industries, a new Modernist approach to planning and the complex impacts of the Troubles, leaving behind a legacy of deprivation in many inner urban areas. Conversely, urban growth appeared in other locations like Newtownabbey, Antrim and the new town of Craigavon, spurred on by the rise of the motor car and associated road building. By the late 20th Century, urban growth had accelerated, driven on by the advent of peace and a decade of sustained economic growth.

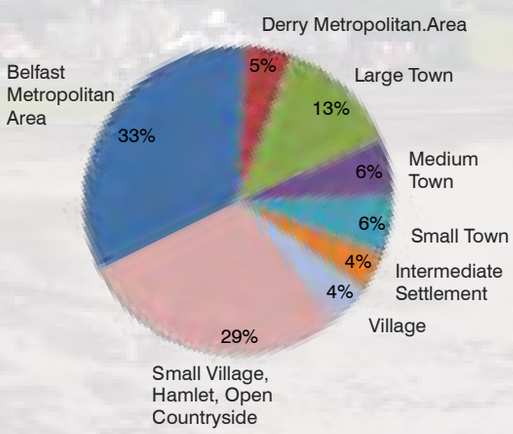


Fig. 1: Population Breakdown by Settlement Type (2011)

Today at the beginning of the 21st Century, Northern Ireland has a population of 1.8 million. Over two thirds of us live in urban areas, be it in and around our major cities or in small towns and villages. With many more of us frequenting urban areas to shop, work, or go to school, it is clear that the quality of such places impacts upon us all.

Good Places

In studying good places, a temptation can exist to immediately look abroad and indeed, much can be learned from Mediterranean or Scandinavion towns, for example. Yet a frequently overlooked fact is that Northern Ireland has many good urban places of its own.

Throughout this document good examples of local places will be highlighted and precedents from further afield will be drawn upon where relevant. It is vital that we identify the attributes that make our places successful so that we can protect them for future generations, and learn from them for potential application elsewhere. Many of our greatest urban places have been afforded a degree of protection through their designation as Conservation Areas or Areas of Townscape Character. Yet, there is no reason why we should not aspire for all our urban places to be of good quality design, leaving a legacy for future generations.

South Belfast, for example, is a large urban area that in spite of relative adversity, has managed to thrive over the years. Much can be attributed to its underlying Victorian and Edwardian urban design, where elegant tree lined avenues and terraced urban blocks have proved resilient to the change taking place around them. Much of South Belfast has also escaped the impacts of heavy handed planning and infrastructure of the 1960s and 70s, meaning that unlike other parts of the city, it remains seamlessly connected into the city centre and thereby conducive to both walking and cycling.

A key ingredient of most successful urban places is good streets. Quite different from ‘roads’, ‘streets’ not only act as important movement routes for traffic and people, they also serve as vital public spaces used by us all. Street design is therefore a vital skill of urban stewardship and design.



Fig. 2: Eglantine Avenue is a classic example of a fine South Belfast street, comprised of medium density buildings, good architecture and mature trees.







Situated beneath the Mourne Mountains, Castlewellan in County Down is a fine example of a successful village. Unusually it was designed by a French architect in the 18th century and the quality of its original layout remains in clear evidence today. Amidst its twin squares and avenues of mature trees lives a thriving community with a strong local retail offer and social life.

Broughshane in County Antrim is a village whose name has become synonymous with success, having won the Royal Horticultural Society's 'Britain in Bloom' award 10 times in the past 25 years. Whilst the underlying structure and architecture of the village is of merit, it is the endeavours of its community that have put Broughshane firmly on the map. Immaculate public spaces and flamboyant floral displays are the physical manifestations of a cohesive community with real pride in their town.

Challenges

Like all countries, Northern Ireland faces challenges that stand in the way of successful place making. Whilst our ability to directly influence such factors can vary, it is essential that we seek to fully understand and act upon them by every means possible.

A global challenge affecting all is climate change, which necessitates a major change in development practice, as well as urban lifestyles. For example, rising sea levels around Northern Ireland will make some coastlines and floodplains uninhabitable and require major adaptation in others. Furthermore, increased energy efficiency must also go hand in hand with a reduced dependency on carbon emitting sources of energy and transport.

Our towns and cities have always been shaped by their economic context. Yet, acute deprivation remains a persistent problem for many living in urban Northern Ireland. Overcoming the physical, social and economic barriers of inequality must be an objective of all place making and regeneration initiatives. Furthermore, the beginnings of the 21st century have been characterised by a global recession that has reconfigured Northern Ireland's economic landscape. One of the most visible effects has been the impact on retail, which, combined with increased online shopping, requires action to safeguard the economic sustainability of our town and city centres.

Northern Ireland has a unique set of socio-political circumstances, tragically defined by the Troubles conflict of the late 20th Century. Whilst much progress has been made since the 1998 Good Friday Agreement, a legacy of division remains, materialising in many of our urban centres and inner city neighbourhoods. As long as tension and mistrust exist between those of different religious and political backgrounds, the existence of physical barriers (or Peacewalls), of invisible territorial barriers and of spatial demarcation through murals and flags will continue to greatly impede the ability of our urban areas and their people to prosper. In the context of continued efforts to jointly resolve such complex issues, the provision of 'neutral' urban space, not only for commerce and leisure, but also as places to live, will remain especially important.



The loss of high street retailers and prevalence of vacant units presents a clear challenge to the future of our town and city centres.

During troubled times in Northern Ireland, both economic and political, attracting investment and development was particularly difficult. As a result, a culture of welcoming 'any' development opportunity with minimal constraints grew in certain quarters. Fortunately today times are much improved. However, a hangover from this era is development that remains of low design quality, that functions poorly and is unsympathetic to its surroundings.

Another challenge facing urban places is the impact of the car oriented development. Car ownership in Northern Ireland is one of the highest per capita of the UK population. The impacts of this are widespread and have several direct relationships with the quality of our urban environments. The first is environmental, which in addition to global implications, results in localised health risks associated with air pollution at congested locations. The second impact is spatial, where our urban roads and car parks become choked with congestion. Furthermore the necessary infrastructure to accommodate such traffic can dominate its surroundings and impact physically upon adjacent communities by creating barriers. And the third impact of a car oriented development is social, with new 'exurban' areas built to a very low density, thereby reducing their ability to support shops, public transport and other community services. Such development goes hand in hand with the continued depopulation of traditional town and city centres. The diagram overleaf illustrates how these issues of car dominance sit within a self-perpetuating cycle of factors.

Finally, division of another sort presents a significant barrier to good place making. Central and local government in Northern Ireland is rigidly structured by subject area (see diagram), as are many professional disciplines associated with the built environment. Consequently the collective endeavour of making and caring for successful places becomes greatly interrupted by 'silo' structures. Two common results are the advancement of different plans for the same location with little or no coordination with one another (e.g. a road scheme and a regeneration initiative), and inaction due to a lack of coordination and alignment (e.g. undelivered masterplans or unused events spaces).

As this section highlights, some considerable challenges face those involved in planning, designing and managing urban areas. Yet in jointly tackling such problems, significant opportunities can also be realised to improve our urban places and the quality of life of those who live there.



Bad Places

Bad places affect us all. Whilst genuine ‘no-go’ areas have become a rarity, urban places that are unattractive, unsafe or uncared for remain all too common.

The impacts of such places are widespread, affecting much more than simply their visual appearance. They hamper economic performance of the wider area by suppressing land values and deterring investment, as well as potential customers and visitors. They detrimentally affect local communities through their susceptibility to antisocial behavior and damage to external perceptions. They cost managing authorities and landowners alike through additional resources required to maintain them and keep them safe. And more broadly, they can negatively affect how we relate to and feel about the urban places we call home.

Within this context, tackling bad places and raising our standards of place making must not be regarded as the interest of a specialist few. It affects us all.



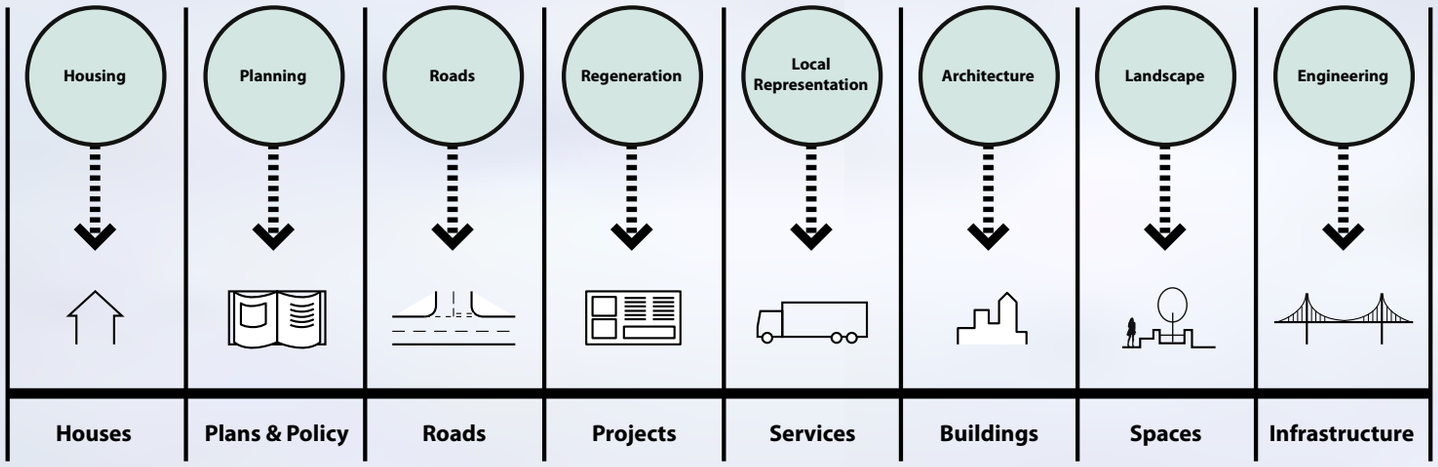


Fig. 3: Silo structures and professional boundaries that affect the quality of urban places through fragmentation

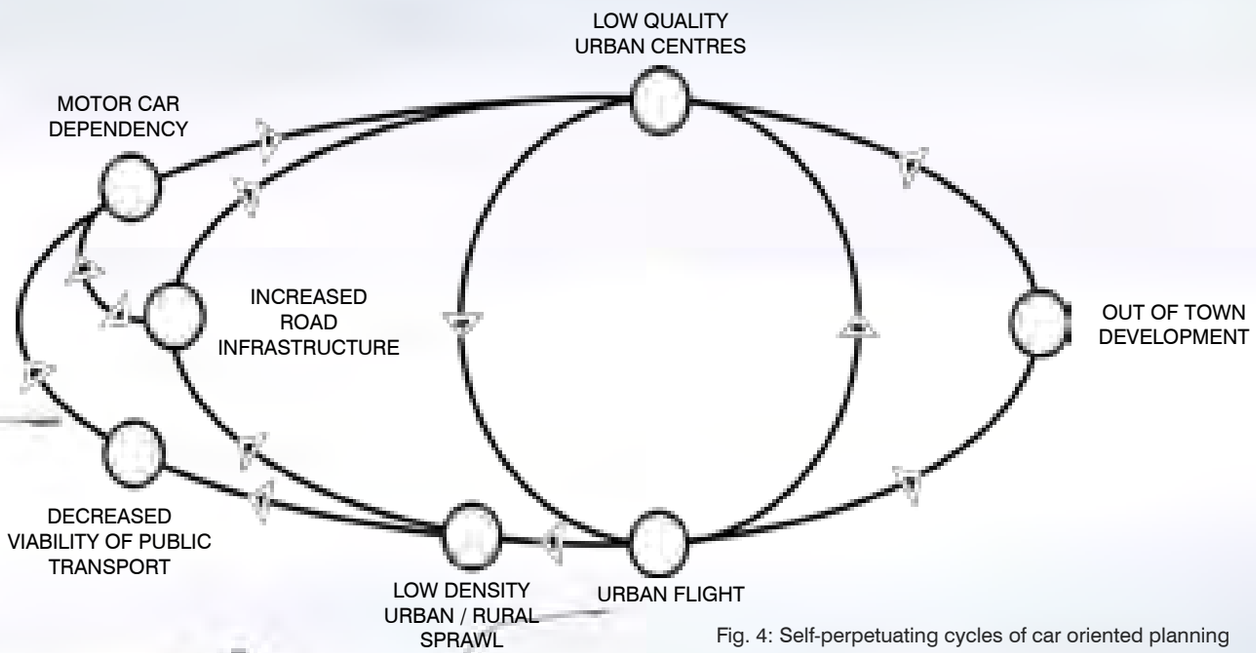


Fig. 4: Self-perpetuating cycles of car oriented planning



Ten Qualities

Whilst we all know good places, defining what makes them successful is a complex matter. There is of course, no such thing as the perfect place. The central measure of success adopted by this guide is how sustainable a place is.

Physical, social and economic sustainability are key indicators of how well a place functions. Good places thrive, being able to sustain the way they function for many years and indeed, generations. Amongst the many attributes that help to make places sustainable over the long term is an ability to adapt to inevitable changes that take place around them.

Another key ingredient of good places, and a theme of this guide, is that of quality. Good places are designed, built and managed with an attention to quality at the heart of the process. Quality does not, however, equate to higher costs.

Through the course of this document we have explored examples of good, successful places. We have also reviewed some of the challenges faced locally and considered what our aspirations may be for places here in Northern Ireland. It is now necessary to consider how we can home in on the key principles of good place making to assist the many decision makers involved in the stewardship and design of our urban places.

It is advocated that Ten Qualities of Urban Stewardship and Design are pursued by all those involved in shaping our urban environment in Northern Ireland. These qualities, which represent the critical ingredients of successful places, are explained in detail in the following sections.

Each quality is illustrated with the use of case studies drawn from across Northern Ireland. Their inclusion in this section is not to suggest that each represents a faultless example of placemaking. Rather they demonstrate how each specific quality has been successfully delivered in the local context.

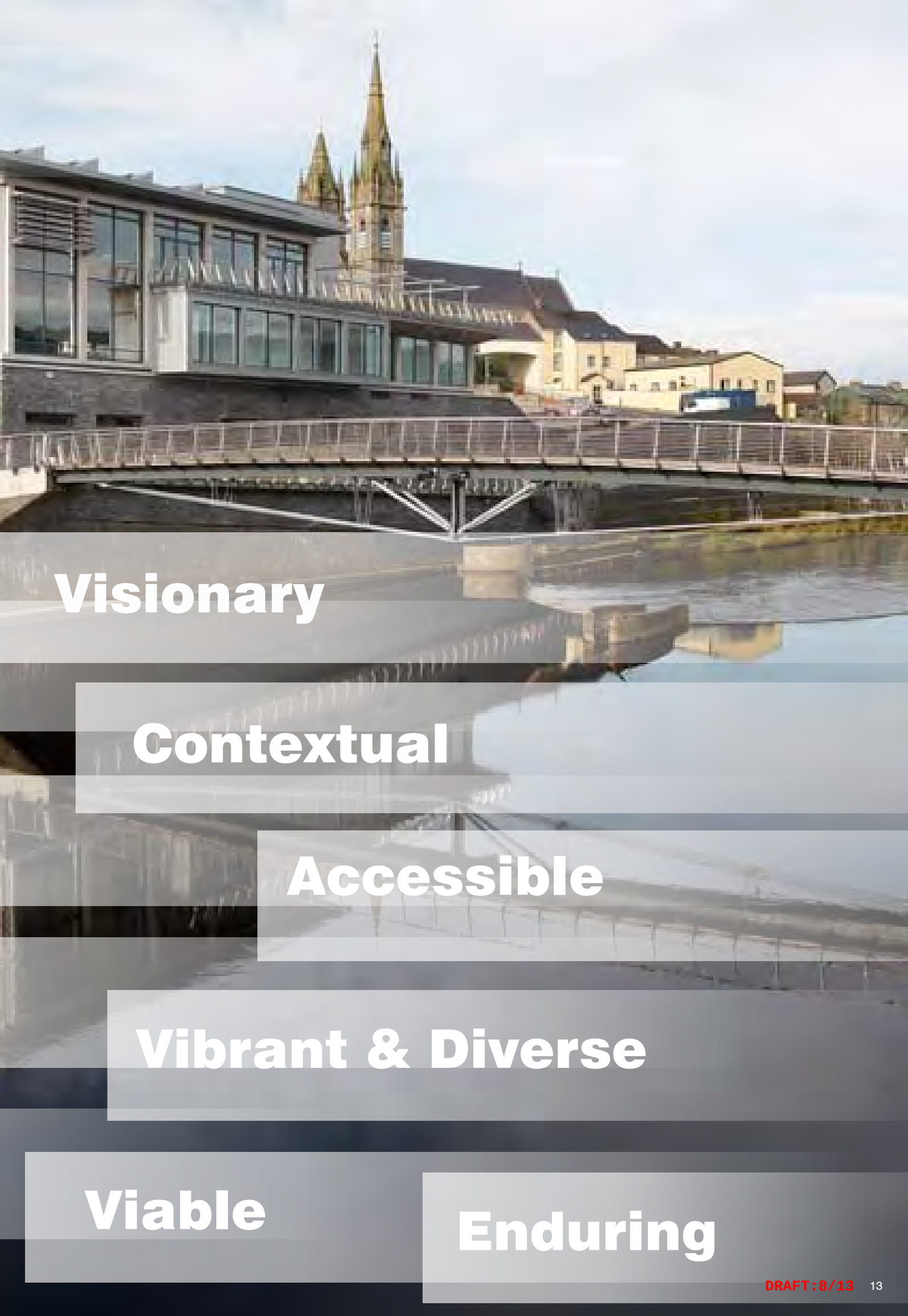


Collaborative

Responsible

Hospitable

Crafted


Visionary
Contextual
Accessible
Vibrant & Diverse
Viable
Enduring

Visionary

With clarity of purpose and direction

A primary ingredient of good place-making is vision. Few successful urban places come about by accident and even fewer remain so without concerted intervention. Such places need a clear vision at their heart to ensure that existing qualities are protected and future potential is realised. Many of our greatest cities, towns and spaces have derived from a bold vision which was subsequently delivered and upheld. Today this process requires a common understanding between all those involved in shaping a specific place, so that their actions over time contribute positively to its success. Without such a shared vision, the fate of an urban place is left to chance.

Case Study: Gracehill

Northern Ireland's first Conservation Area and one of our most cherished urban places, Gracehill near Ballymena is testimony to a strong vision, upheld through its quality of design, delivery and aftercare. Its Moravian founders planned a self sustaining community, to which the contributions of its residents through trades and crafts, were returned with a quality home in which to live. Today, whilst no longer convened on religious grounds, Gracehill's residents enjoy an urban place of exceptional quality.



Fig. 5: A simple, well proportioned street layout, centred around a green open space, provides the basis for Gracehill's quality of place.



Recognising Potential

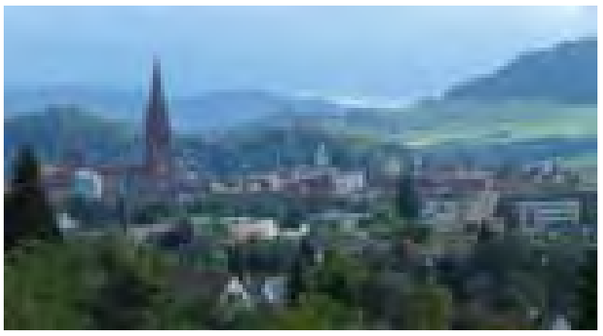
The first step in shaping an urban place, be it existing or newly proposed, is to recognise its potential. The impetus for development may come from a variety of sources, be it in response to a commercial opportunity, local need or resolving a particular problem. Yet alongside such objectives, early consideration must also be given to the kind of place that is to be created. What will it look like? How will it feel? How will it relate to its surroundings?

Answering these questions will involve a process that draws on inspiration, perhaps from experience of other places that share similar characteristics. It will also involve analysis of the site, testing its capacity and it will lead to the development and refinement of a strategic vision that emerges through consultation with others. Critically, all proposals for urban places must be founded on a sound evidence base. Such a rationale must be communicated to others, be it through a strategic framework, masterplan document and increasingly, a Design and Access Statement, which explains the design principles and concepts adopted by a proposal.

Leadership

Because creating urban places involves so many different people and organisations, strong leadership is required to ensure that the chosen vision for that place comes to fruition. As outlined earlier, this process is hampered in Northern Ireland and elsewhere, by existing 'silo' structures within the public and private sectors, as well as the administrative boundaries they work to. Leadership is therefore required to overcome such barriers and to facilitate the interdisciplinary and interdepartmental process of creating successful places. Furthermore, those responsible for decision making must be clearly identified and be given the remit to do so.

Strong leadership is often associated with individuals and indeed, they are important people whose talents must be nurtured. As Northern Ireland embarks upon the repatriation of certain planning powers from central to local government, much of the civic leadership required to create and maintain successful urban places will fall to councillors and their senior officials. Yet importantly, organisations from the public, private and community sectors must become adept at fulfilling such leadership roles to positively shape our urban environments. Working together in a collegiate environment, such organisations must be able to jointly identify and agree upon the most appropriate leader for specific tasks.



The German city of Freiburg has a well established reputation as one of Europe's most sustainable cities. Its success can be traced to the early adoption of an ambitous vision for a greener city and consistent leadership that has overseen its delivery and development.

Skills

The development and realisation of a vision requires a range of place making skills. Northern Ireland has a many talented individuals and effective educational programmes, yet a significant proportion of the necessary skills remain absent or in the wrong locations. Addressing this problem will require a comprehensive programme of upskilling. Firstly, a more widespread awareness of urbanism and the components of successful places is needed. This goal, which is addressed in part by this publication, must tap into the latent expertise that we all posses through experience of our own cities, towns, villages and neighbourhoods. Secondly, an ability to plan, design and deliver good quality places and to skilfully manage those processes is key. Currently many placemaking skills, most notably design, lie exclusively in the private sector, compromising the ability of the public sector to manage such processes.

Finally and arguably of greatest importance, a richer range of skills is needed to ensure that our urban centres are well looked after and remain active, safe and attractive. At present, most of these roles are reactive in nature, involved with enforcement, policing, cleaning and repair. Yet as outlined through this document, the potential of proactive stewardship is significant, calling upon the skills of events organisers, animators, artists and new roles yet to be defined.

With all such skills, these should be introduced at the earliest possible stages of training and further educational programmes.

BOROUGH SURVEYOR
CITY ARCHITECT
MUNICIPAL
ENGINEER
PARK WARDEN

A number of place specific job titles have disappeared from modern day Northern Ireland. The Borough Surveyor, Municipal Engineer, City Architect and Park Warden were all charged with responsibility for the quality of a specific place.





Case Study: Armagh City Centre

The City of Armagh owes much of its attractive urban layout and architecture to a bold vision put in place 250 years ago. Archbishop Richard Robinson arrived in Armagh in 1764 and soon set about its transformation from a humble Ulster settlement to an elegant city of stone buildings and tree lined spaces. His vision was ambitious, including a stately palace, fine townhouses and many public buildings, including an infirmary, observatory, library and gaol. Robinson's city was set around an expansive mall, inspired by the greens of his native England.

Whilst Bishop Robinson's ultimate vision of a university town remains unfulfilled, his legacy is being continued by Armagh City and District Council and DSD through masterplanning, public realm works and development projects.

Collaborative

Shared in use, management and planning

Only by working together can we create successful urban places. Unlike a work of art produced by a solitary artist, an urban place is the product of collective endeavour. The shared use, extent and impact of urban places on us all is such that no single person or organisation is capable of mastering such complexity or shouldering such responsibility. Furthermore, the involvement in this process of those for whom the place is intended is not only an enriching experience, but also critical to its eventual success.

Case Study: Glenariff and Waterfoot

Nestled in the Glens of Antrim, the coastal village of Waterfoot and surrounding settlement of Glenariff have become an unlikely venue for an innovative process of collaborative action. A village plan commissioned by Moyle District Council provided a focal point around which local residents could collaborate with local authorities to bring about improvements to their village. Since its production, the plan has stimulated numerous projects of great value to local people, including the creation of new seating areas, beach gateways and a community garden. Whilst modest in nature, these achievements demonstrate the transformative potential of effective collaboration between local people, local authorities and the private sector. They also show how through good stewardship, local communities can drive positive change in their local area.







Cooperation and Coordination

"Joined up thinking" is a commonly heard term, but one that is often lacking in practice. This is especially true of urban stewardship and design, where the input of many individuals and organisations is a necessity for the creation of successful urban places.

Through the planning system an obligation exists for applicants to consult on their proposals with the owners and tenants of neighbouring properties. Yet this is often too late for meaningful collaboration. It is therefore necessary at the earliest opportunity to identify all those who have a potential role to play in shaping a particular place. Once such a forum has been established, a shared vision for that place can be jointly developed and agreed upon, leading to a strategic approach to its implementation. If individuals are unable to convene such forums, public authorities should be in a position to assist and if necessary, require them to take place.

The Value of Working Together

To realise the full physical, social and economic potential of an urban place, it is often necessary to transcend existing administrative and ownership boundaries. Doing so requires collaboration between different parties, a number of whom may not share the same priorities or objectives. Yet the long term benefits of such collaborative working often far outweigh the short term inconveniences of such relationships.

Strategic masterplans and the collaborative process of developing them can provide an excellent focus around which different landowners and stakeholders can work together to realise the full potential of an area.

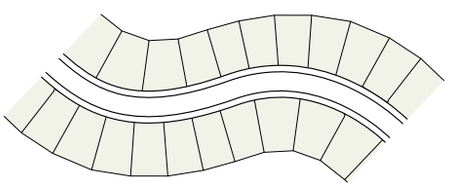


Fig. 6: Traditional plot layout to either side of a street.

Working together is also a vital component of creating successful streets. To achieve the necessary continuity of building frontage on either side of a street, land ownership must be configured to facilitate such a development pattern. Many of our greatest streets involved a design of plots in the first instance, which were then sold to individual developers under condition of observing certain design rules. Such practice, like the creation of successful new streets, is now rare in Northern Ireland.



To ensure that different departments and officers had a mutual understanding around issues of place and design quality, North East Derbyshire District Council formed their own Urban Design Academy. The group meets regularly to attend masterclasses, visit successful places and review major development schemes.

Active Participation

Shaping places *with* rather than *for* those who will use it has many advantages. Firstly it provides a focus around which relationships necessary for success are formed. Secondly it capitalises on the collective expertise and understanding of the place in question, thereby reducing the risk of failure. And thirdly, it gives everyone a greater ownership and pride in the outcome, which will greatly aid its ongoing success. This must go beyond minimal processes of 'consultation' to meaningful approaches to 'participation'.

Methods of participative planning, design and stewardship are extensive and diverse. These must be tailored to suit the objectives of the specific session and the people with whom it is taking place. With the involvement of a competent facilitator, focussed and productive workshops should also be creative and enjoyable.

Communication

"The single biggest problem in communication is the illusion that it has taken place". (George Bernard Shaw). Finding and maintaining effective means of communication is absolutely central to the collaborative process of place making. Care must be taken, therefore, to employ language that is understood by all and that resists complicated terminology or jargon. Another greatly undervalued skill in participative planning is listening. Accurately hearing and understanding the needs and opinions of others is the cornerstone to developing a responsive outcome. Finally good communication creates trust between parties. Transparency should be a constant feature of any process to jointly shape urban places.









Case Study: Connswater Community Greenway, Belfast

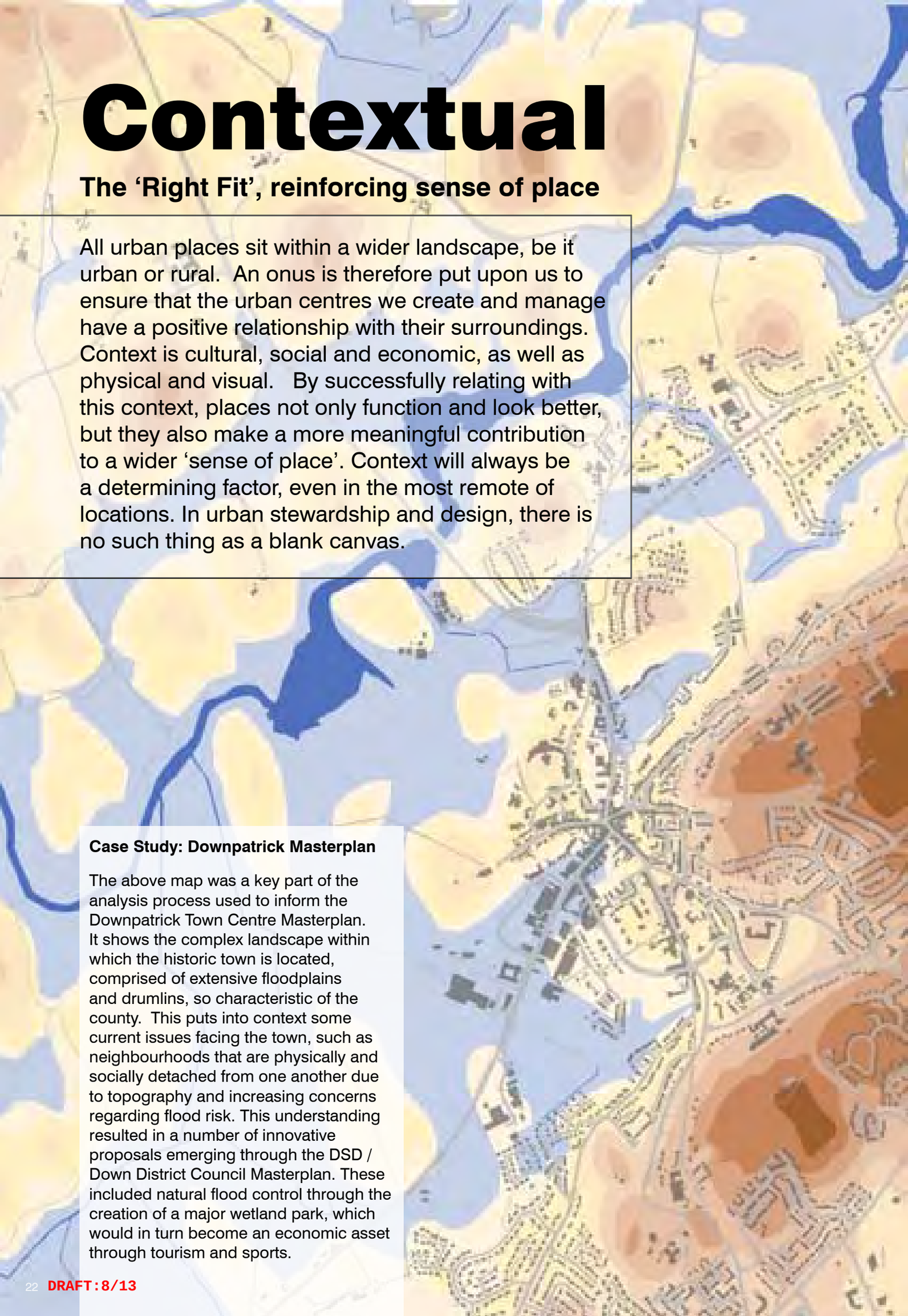
Collaboration is central to one of Northern Ireland's largest regeneration projects, the Connswater Community Greenway. The grand vision involves establishing 9km of continuous foot and cycle path and connecting existing open spaces along the routes of 3 inner city rivers. The result will be an invaluable piece of 'green infrastructure' for Belfast, of benefit to thousands of residents who live along its intended path.

The geographic scale of the project, spanning many different communities, land holdings and administrative boundaries, necessitated East Belfast Partnership to coordinate an extensive process of collaboration from the outset. Achieving full planning consent, successfully competing for a major lottery grant, through to agreeing detailed plans and construction programmes have all been made possible by a commitment to ongoing collaboration between the public, private and community sectors.

Contextual

The ‘Right Fit’, reinforcing sense of place

All urban places sit within a wider landscape, be it urban or rural. An onus is therefore put upon us to ensure that the urban centres we create and manage have a positive relationship with their surroundings. Context is cultural, social and economic, as well as physical and visual. By successfully relating with this context, places not only function and look better, but they also make a more meaningful contribution to a wider ‘sense of place’. Context will always be a determining factor, even in the most remote of locations. In urban stewardship and design, there is no such thing as a blank canvas.



Case Study: Downpatrick Masterplan

The above map was a key part of the analysis process used to inform the Downpatrick Town Centre Masterplan. It shows the complex landscape within which the historic town is located, comprised of extensive floodplains and drumlins, so characteristic of the county. This puts into context some current issues facing the town, such as neighbourhoods that are physically and socially detached from one another due to topography and increasing concerns regarding flood risk. This understanding resulted in a number of innovative proposals emerging through the DSD / Down District Council Masterplan. These included natural flood control through the creation of a major wetland park, which would in turn become an economic asset through tourism and sports.

Understanding Place

Before making any proposal for an urban area, it is essential to understand the site in question and its context. Doing so involves two distinct yet commonly confused activities. The first is surveying the site and its vicinity. This involves an objective process of data collection, which may be visual, topographic, movement patterns or socio-economic data. The second is the analysis of that information, so that conclusions can be drawn and then used to shape future proposals. A particularly important task is to identify the positive attributes unique to that place, so that these can be protected and enhanced where possible. Robust analysis conclusions provide the vital evidence base required to develop proposals.

Why does the area look the way it does? What are the most pressing social issues? What is the commercial mix of the area?



Dublin City Council's Liberties Area Plan is an excellent example of contextual urban planning founded on a strong evidence base. Tasked with shaping new development in a rapidly changing urban context, the document places great emphasis on understanding the unique social, economic and physical qualities of the study area.

Natural Systems

No matter how urban or rural, all places have underlying natural systems that need to be understood and integrated where feasible. This should be seen as a positive opportunity to enrich a place, rather than a constraint to be overcome. What is the hydrology of the site and is it prone to flooding or difficult to drain? What are the ground conditions and how will these affect the chosen type of construction?

Furthermore, an evaluation of an area's flora and fauna is important, so that existing natural processes are understood and can be protected. For example, an area of established native planting is likely to sustain an ecosystem of insects, birds and mammals. Preserving and enhancing such wildlife habitat is a core action in maintaining biodiversity, whilst also adding to the richness and interest of our urban places.

Harnessing Heritage

The built heritage of our places is a precious asset to be understood and integrated where possible. Buildings, structures or landscapes of cultural or architectural importance may be afforded official protection through the listing process. However, others may not have such protection but still be of immense value to the underlying character and culture of a place. Harnessing such assets can contribute greatly to the unique identity and character of a particular place.

Contextual Design

Good places respond to their context. This will manifest in different ways, depending on the nature of the site and its surroundings. Contextual design may be visual, making the most of good views and landmarks beyond the site. It will be through movement, making sure that pedestrian, cycle and vehicular connections are made with the surrounding network of streets and paths. It may also relate to the architectural style of buildings, their materials and massing, if they are deemed through analysis, to contribute positively to the quality of the broader environment.

Appropriate Scale

An influential component of an urban area's character is the scale of its buildings, spaces and movement routes. It is often a degree of consistency in their massing, especially along streets and around civic spaces, that gives an area a sense of visual coherence. New urban development should therefore respond to the scale of surrounding areas, again where analysis shows it to be a component of its positive identity. This may include, for example, the maintenance or reinstatement of a building line or a street width ratio.

Edges, Boundaries and Transitions

Often it is the transition point from one character area to another that leads to places of poor environmental quality. These 'in-between spaces' occur where contextual design has been lacking. A common example of this is where large infrastructure projects are advanced with little or no consideration of how they relate to surrounding urban areas. All projects, no matter how large or small, must work to add positively to the quality of adjacent urban areas.



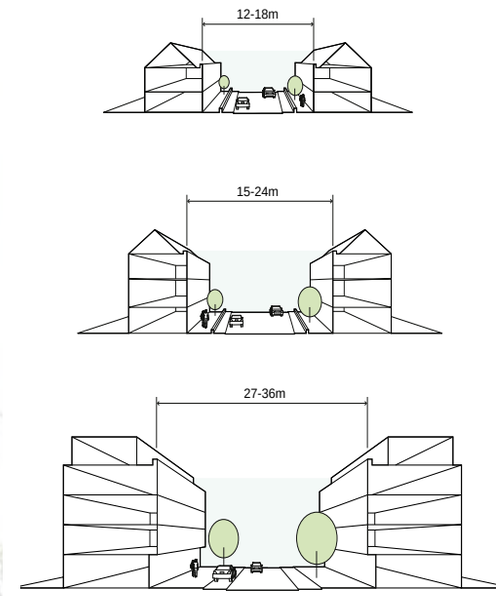


Fig. 7: It is essential that urban road space is designed as an integral part of its surrounding environment, thereby forming a street. As shown above, a balanced street width ratio is key to ensuring a proportion and a sense of enclosure.



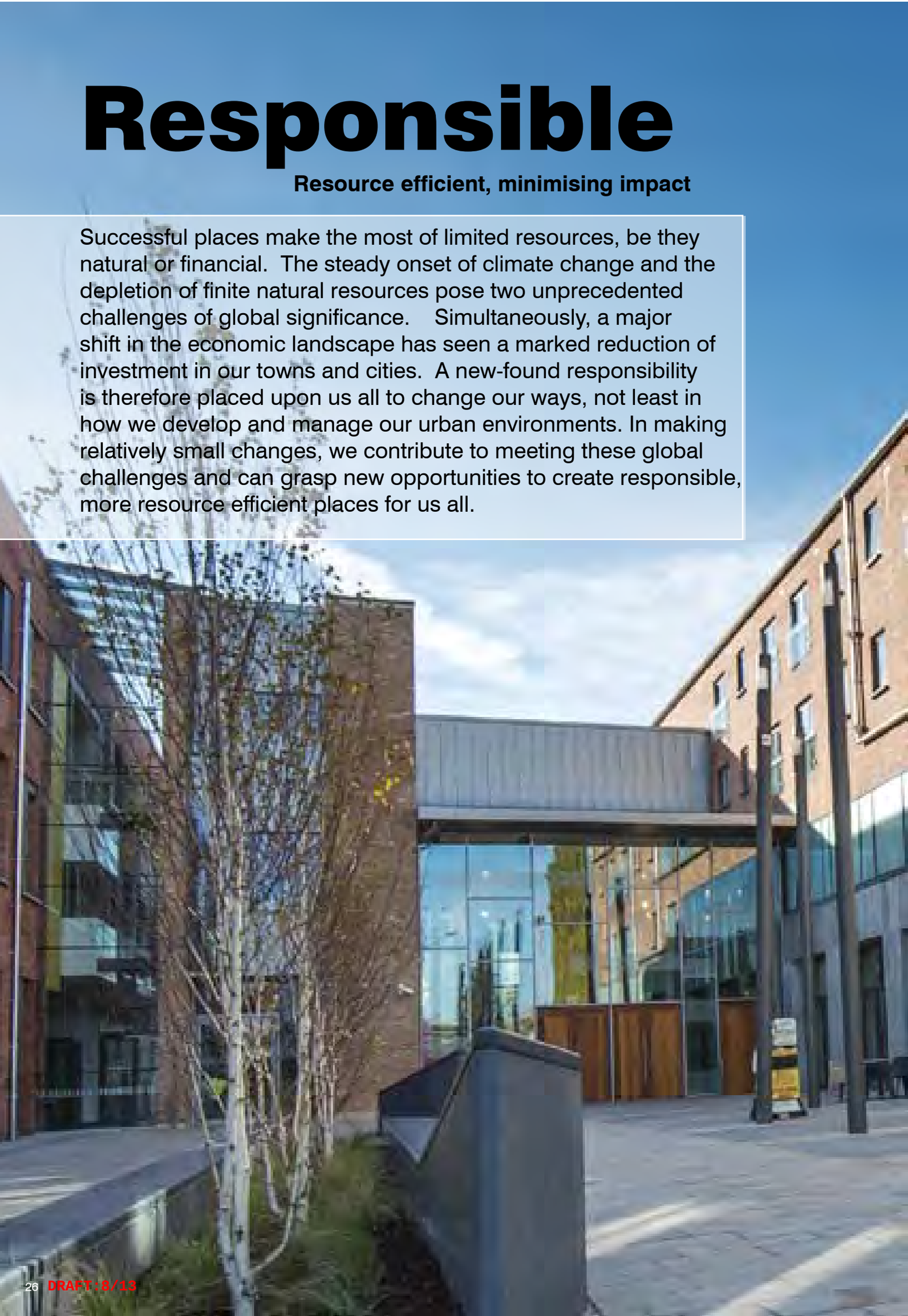
Case Study: Cultúrlann McAdam Ó Fiaich, Belfast

Contextual design must not only relate to its physical surroundings, but also to that of its social and cultural context. In West Belfast, the Cultúrlann has become a beacon of local identity and a focal point of the wider Gaeltacht Quarter. Housed in a former church, the centre is a lively hub for the arts, music and language. Its 2012 extension, designed in consultation with NIEA, introduced a contemporary expression to the historic building, making a statement whilst respecting its built heritage and that of its surroundings.

Responsible

Resource efficient, minimising impact

Successful places make the most of limited resources, be they natural or financial. The steady onset of climate change and the depletion of finite natural resources pose two unprecedented challenges of global significance. Simultaneously, a major shift in the economic landscape has seen a marked reduction of investment in our towns and cities. A new-found responsibility is therefore placed upon us all to change our ways, not least in how we develop and manage our urban environments. In making relatively small changes, we contribute to meeting these global challenges and can grasp new opportunities to create responsible, more resource efficient places for us all.



Case Study: Skainos, Belfast

It is fitting that one of the most responsible new developments in Northern Ireland should be located in the heart of one of its most deprived and divided neighbourhoods. The purpose of the Skainos is to provide 'shared space for community transformation and renewal' and those behind its creation use the metaphor of a tent, into which all are invited. The centre, home of the East Belfast Mission, houses homelessness services, employability and social economy projects, youth and family work, community development and peace building initiatives, as well as a vibrant worshipping community and social housing. Its social responsibility is matched by its commitment to the environment, with natural ventilation, biomass heating and the island's first ever vertical garden.



Conserving Limited Resources

Urban places and their constituent buildings and spaces can do much to reduce their use of limited resources, bringing environmental and economic benefits to owners and users alike. In many instances this involves the use of new technologies, which through encouragement and requirement must continue to become the norm in mainstream development practice. For example, rainwater harvesting and sustainable urban drainage systems can save greatly on water infrastructure costs, whilst solar panels and ground heat pumps where feasible, are innovative ways in which to supplement traditional energy sources. Furthermore, improved building insulation is an especially important and often low cost measure by which the energy consumption of our urban areas can be curtailed.

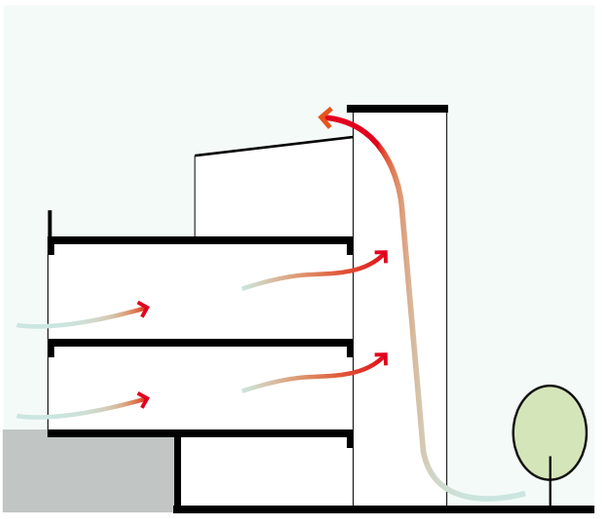


Fig. 8: Passive ventilation, where buildings are designed to facilitate the natural passage of air, is another effective means by which urban areas can reduce their impact on resources.

Maximising the Impact of Limited Resources

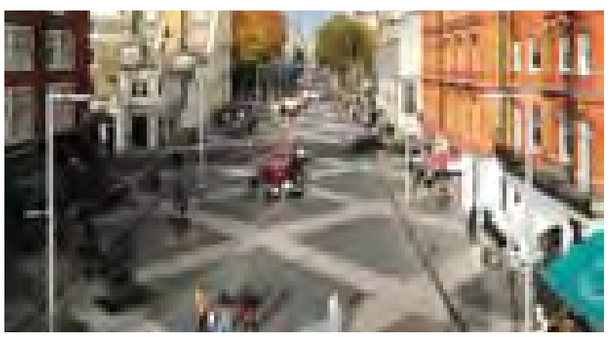
In addition to conservation, it is also imperative that we strive to make the most of those limited resources we have. This is often more difficult to achieve on an individual site-by-site basis and to have a more significant impact, requires the joined-up thinking referred to in the previous section. Capital expenditure by the public sector is one such area where many unrealised opportunities exist for councils, departments and agencies to join forces in a specific location. For example, if a major roads project is advanced in an urban area, it should be done in tandem with fulfilling the area's wider regeneration objectives. Similarly, a renewal of the public realm of a street should be coordinated with upgrading of its underground utilities, thereby resulting in a single construction period without the need for multiple revisits.

Going Local

A major contributor to climate change and resource depletion is the use of fossil fuels in transportation. Technological advances in vehicle design must go hand in hand with more sustainable planning practices, thereby reducing the need for long vehicular journeys both during and after construction. Sourcing building materials from the local area where possible and providing local facilities within walking distance of residential and business communities, all lessen the impact of vehicular travel.

Shared Space

Another often overlooked and finite resource in our urban centres is space. The rise of car use in particular has led to town and city centres being dominated by cars, resulting in an imbalance between the needs of vehicles and pedestrians. In busy central areas, the introduction of shared space may be an appropriate response. This involves the creation of streets and spaces within which people have priority over cars. Distinctly different to pedestrianisation, such spaces are surprisingly safe, as drivers are required to proceed with great care due to the high number of people walking there.



Shared space projects, like that recently installed along Exhibition Road in central London, comprehensively rebalance the relationship between people and cars. Furthermore, the absence of road markings and highway signage helps to 'declutter' the street, removing obstacles to pedestrians and helping to the make the space more visually appealing.



Case Study: Magheramorne

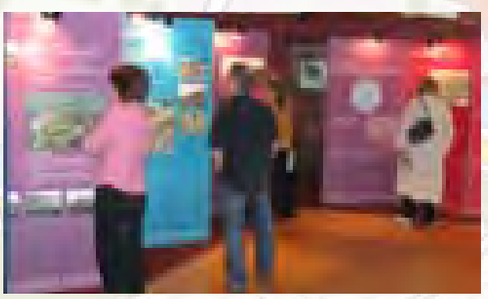
The proposed transformation of a disused quarry and workings on the shores of Larne Lough has Responsibility at its heart. As they plan their exit from the site, its owners wish to leave a positive local legacy that serves as a fitting culmination to over 300 years of quarrying limestone in that location. Consequently, Lafarge and their design team have worked closely with local people to develop plans for an adventure sports hub and new waterfront village.

By integrating a host of sustainable design features, the quarry company have partnered with the WWF to help Magheramorne eventually become a One Planet Living Community. The proposed settlement also adopts a tight, human scaled urban layout familiar in harbour villages, with narrow shared surface streets and community uses located along its continuous seaward frontage.

This ambitious proposal demonstrates the role that private firms, working with the local community, can play in the pursuit of Responsible design.



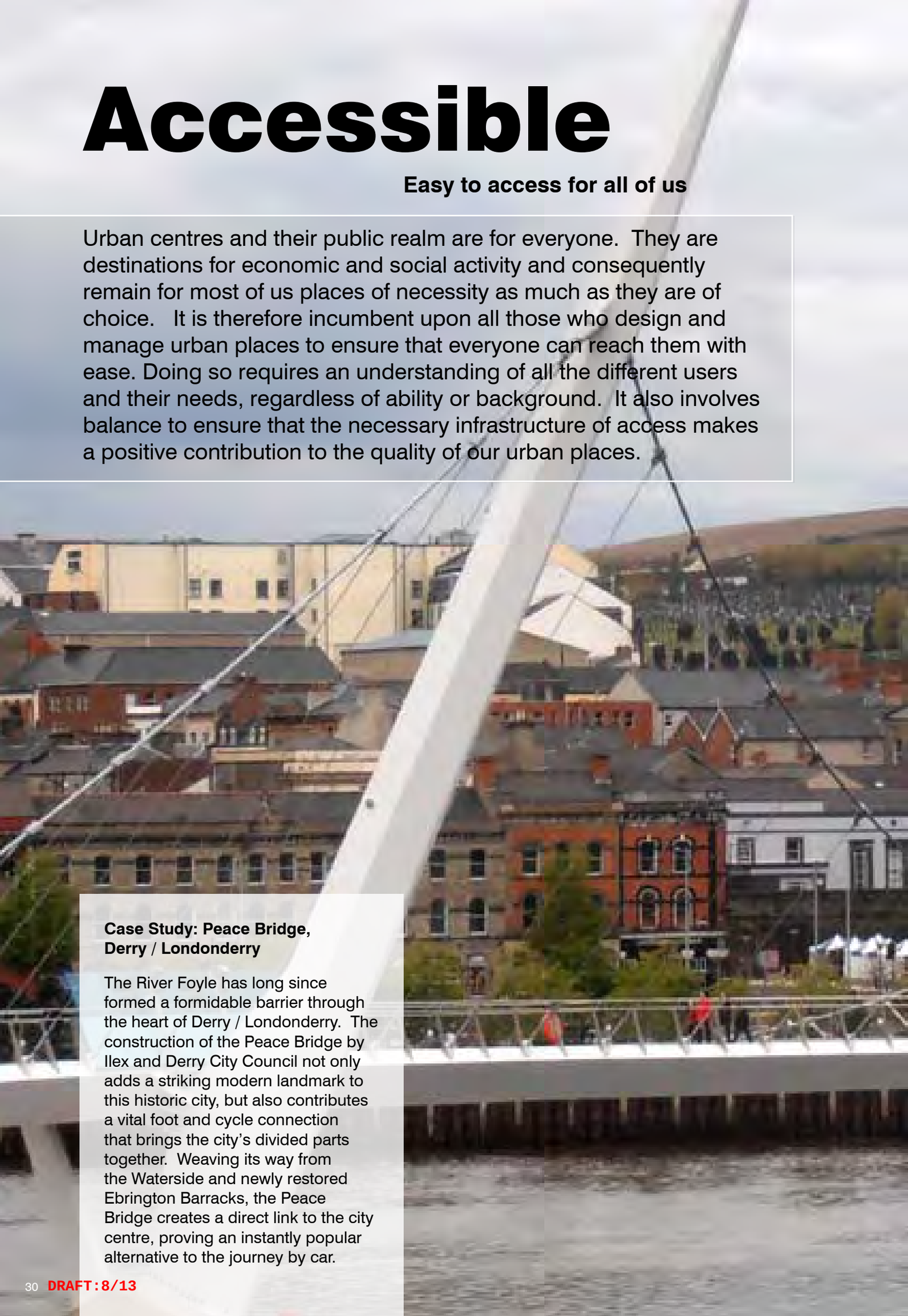




Accessible

Easy to access for all of us

Urban centres and their public realm are for everyone. They are destinations for economic and social activity and consequently remain for most of us places of necessity as much as they are of choice. It is therefore incumbent upon all those who design and manage urban places to ensure that everyone can reach them with ease. Doing so requires an understanding of all the different users and their needs, regardless of ability or background. It also involves balance to ensure that the necessary infrastructure of access makes a positive contribution to the quality of our urban places.



Case Study: Peace Bridge, Derry / Londonderry

The River Foyle has long since formed a formidable barrier through the heart of Derry / Londonderry. The construction of the Peace Bridge by Ilex and Derry City Council not only adds a striking modern landmark to this historic city, but also contributes a vital foot and cycle connection that brings the city's divided parts together. Weaving its way from the Waterside and newly restored Ebrington Barracks, the Peace Bridge creates a direct link to the city centre, proving an instantly popular alternative to the journey by car.

Inclusivity

Whilst providing access for all users is a legal obligation, it should not be considered in isolation from the many other design aspects of a building or space. Successful buildings and spaces manage to integrate requirements such as ramps and rails within the overall design approach, as opposed to being shoe-horned in as an afterthought.

Stewardship and design in a Northern Ireland context must also give careful attention to access requirements of people with different religious and political backgrounds. This especially important need is central to the long term objective of a shared future and will avoid the creation of near permanent barriers, be they physical or perceived, set within the structure of our urban areas.



Peacelines are temporary interventions, until such time as divided communities on either side feel safe enough for them to be removed. But if blocked streets and paths are built across, barriers to movement can become permanent, remaining long after the fences have been removed.

Sustainable Transport Hierarchy

Dominance of the motorcar has become a defining feature of many urban places, rarely contributing positively to their overall quality. The high number of vehicles on our roads has a negative environmental impact through emissions and economic impact through congestion. Whilst private car access remains important, it should sit within a hierarchy of sustainable transportation. This helps keep our urban centres dominated by people instead of cars, maintaining access and reducing negative impacts.

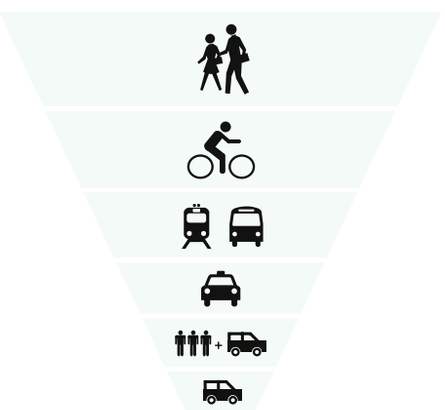


Fig. 9: Sustainable Transport Hierarchy

Connectivity

Good urban places require a network of permeable routes that pass through them, thereby giving choice to users, limiting walking distances and maintaining a flow of movement that helps to keep places active and safe. This is best achieved through an urban structure of interconnected streets, many examples of which have long stood the test of time. Whilst cul-de-sacs create localised areas of low traffic they, along with single access car parks, become disjointed from their surrounding context. As a result, unless interconnected with footpaths, they impose long journeys on people needing to travel short distances, leading to increased usage of the car.

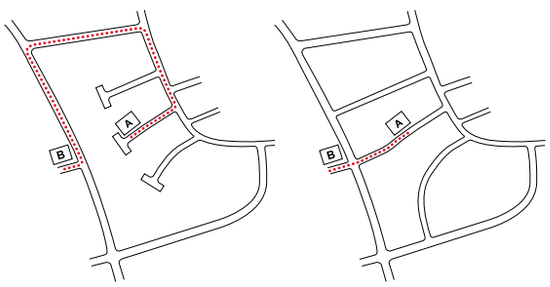


Fig. 10: Trip generation (between A - B) caused by a cul-de-sac layout.

Legibility

An interesting feature of many successful urban areas is that those finding their way around rarely require the use of a map. The reason is that good places have an inbuilt navigation system that makes them easy to read. Such 'legibility' involves the use of visual cues in the form of landmark buildings and structures in key locations, like corners and junctions, a hierarchy of streets and spaces that increase with scale as they become more important and strong visual connections between key destinations. Importantly such 'cues' must be of a suitable scale proportionate to their context.

Car Parking

Providing convenient and safe car parking is an important component of access for our urban centres. However, accommodating such space-hungry facilities without compromising urban quality can be a challenge. The provision and management of car parking requires a strategic approach so that appropriate space is provided in the right locations. On-street parking can contribute positively to an urban area, as long as it does not dominate. Furthermore, opportunities for underground and appropriately designed multi-storey car parking must also be pursued in central urban areas.



Case Study: Cecilia's Walk, Derry / Londonderry

It is vital that developments in existing urban areas ensure good linkage and accessibility with their surroundings. Too often schemes are designed in isolation missing such opportunities.

Cecilia's Walk in Derry / Londonderry is a good example of how this can be achieved. Working closely with the planning authority, Apex Housing and their design team developed a site layout of permeable streets and spaces. Where possible, links were made with surrounding areas, such as the adjacent park. Where links were not possible in the short term, provision was made for future street and path connections to adjacent sites.

Furthermore, a close working relationship with local communities helped to ensure that such routes made a positive contribution to the area, leading in this case, to the development being named by pupils of the local school.

Fig. 11: Despite its steeply sloping site, the layout places great emphasis on through routes, be they existing (east / west) or potential for the future (north)

Hospitable

Welcoming, safe and healthy

Successful places make us feel good. Human beings require to feel safe and comfortable in their surrounding environments. Our first impressions and the way in which we feel about a place will inform the decisions we make. How long will I stay, will I come back and what will I say to others about this place? The answers to such questions have profound implications for the sustained social and economic success of our urban places.



Case Study: Newcastle

Traditional seaside towns suffered from the growth of air travel and affordable holidays abroad. Yet towns like Newcastle, County Down have responded by reinventing themselves and investing in the quality of place. Set against the magnificent backdrop of the Mourne Mountains, Newcastle has embarked upon transformation of urban quality, with a new contemporary promenade, a comprehensive shop front improvement scheme and the introduction of high quality public realm.



Climatic Considerations

The weather and microclimate of our urban streets and spaces has a direct bearing on how they are used. The comfort of their users at different times of the day and year is therefore an important consideration. Partially covered streets and shop awnings can be an appropriate response to the inescapable issue of rainfall. New urban developments must be orientated carefully, to avoid tall buildings and wide streets becoming wind tunnels. In existing areas, modest wind shelters can help make a place more hospitable. Also, the impact of sunlight is often an overlooked feature and popularity of outdoor seating areas and events spaces, for example, is strongly linked to their 'solar aspect' even in the winter months. Awareness of aspect also avoids the creation of dark spaces overly reliant on artificial lighting.

Healthy

The layout and design of our urban centres can influence the health of their users. Cleaner industries and stricter controls have greatly improved air quality. However, traffic congestion remains a source of air and noise pollution in numerous central locations, necessitating a move to reduce volumes via alternative modes of transport. Urban layouts, the quality of their design and the provision of green open spaces are also influential factors in the decision of people to walk or cycle, leading to increased exercise and reduced car use.

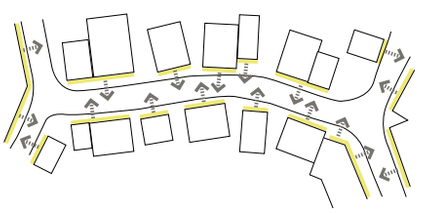


Fig. 12: Buildings must front onto streets and public spaces

Safety through Urban Design

The design and layout of an urban area also contributes to how safe it is and feels. A clear delineation should exist between public and private space, so as to avoid uncertainty of use by people. Public spaces including streets, should be overlooked as much as possible by the windows of adjacent buildings. Mixed use development helps to maintain activity levels through the day and evening, whilst also bestowing a sense of ownership which deters vandalism and other antisocial behaviours. Lighting must also be well provided for in publicly accessible urban areas, encouraging positive activity during the hours of darkness.

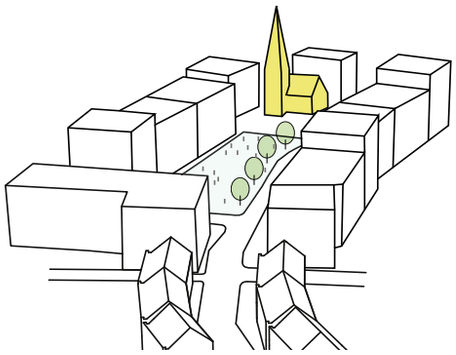


Fig. 13: Landmark buildings can be key to announcing arrival

Sense of Arrival

Urban centres should give everyone a positive welcome and sense of arrival. This must go beyond welcome signage and literature to become engrained within the structure of our urban environments. For example, the entrance to key spaces should be adequately proportioned and detailed to be open and inviting. Principal streets and spaces should be celebrated with suitably scaled landmark buildings and where appropriate, a 'crescendo' of urban scale. Critically, derelict buildings and spaces in prominent locations must be tackled with urgency, so to eliminate the negative messages they inherently portray.

Animation

People make places safe. A common misconception is that the safety of a public place relies on reactive measures such as policing, CCTV and security barriers. However, many of our safest urban centres are those with high levels of pedestrian activity, where the presence of many people deters criminal and antisocial behaviour. Conversely we all know how unsafe a very quiet or 'dead' urban space can feel. Maximising levels of positive activity is therefore an important goal for those shaping our urban places. Such animation can be achieved through the distribution of building uses, the coordination of opening times and regular events. Furthermore, repopulating our urban centres, including reoccupying the upper storeys of buildings, (e.g. Living Over the Shops), is an important long term objective.

Partnerships

Invariably all urban centres require some level of policing to maintain law and order. Areas with the most effective policing are those where the police work in partnership with the local residents and businesses. Regular communication between such parties, often facilitated through semi-formal relationships and groupings, can make an invaluable contribution to the safety of an urban centre.



Case Study: Belcoo

The County Fermanagh village of Belcoo is in many ways typical of Northern Ireland's small rural villages. Whilst its culture, economy and identity will always be strongly tied to the rural context, much of the village itself has an attractive urbanity that must be understood, protected and enhanced.

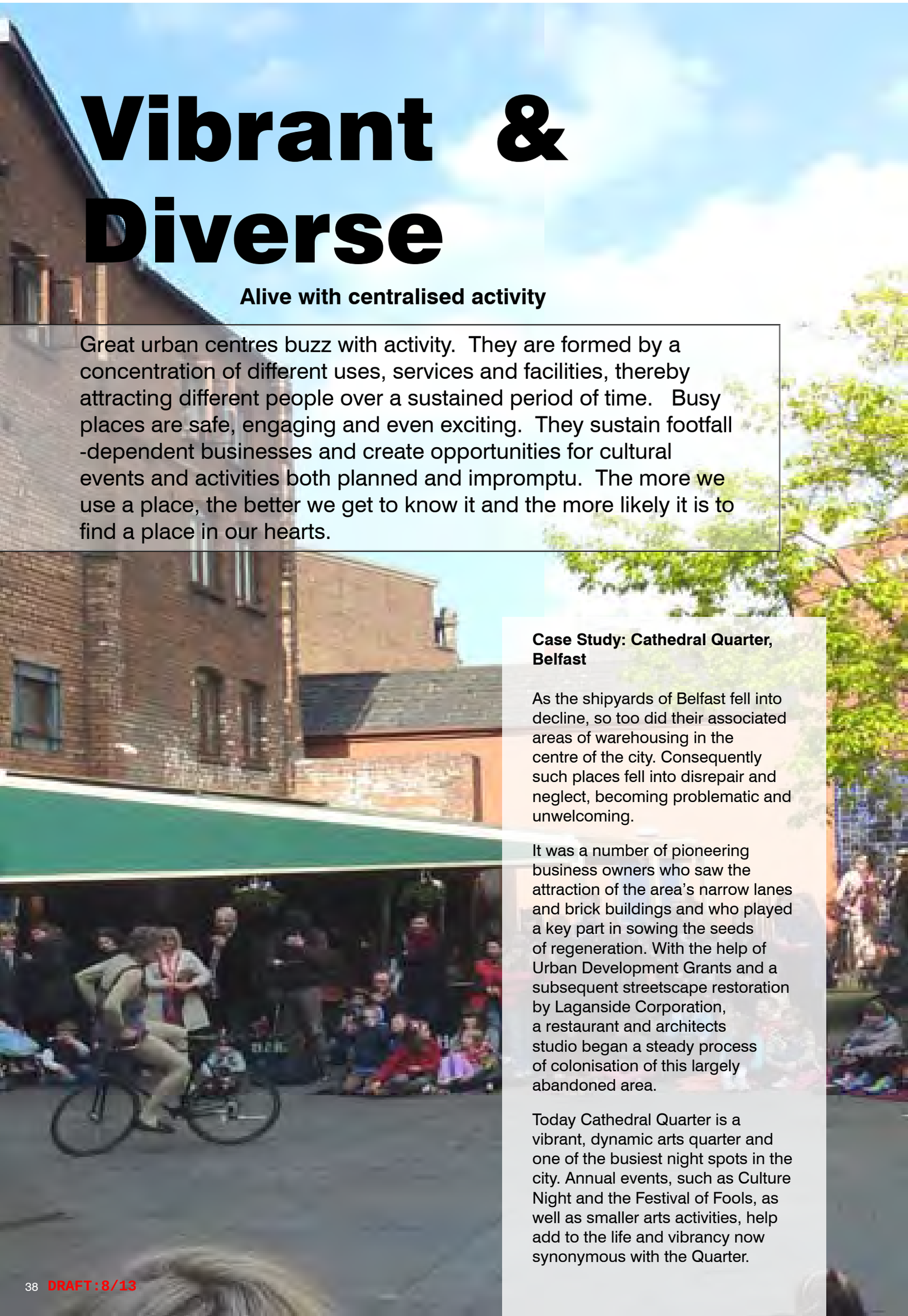
Traditional two and three storey buildings create well defined and active streets, whilst dramatic views and generous open spaces bring the countryside into the town.

Like many village communities, the people of Belcoo have worked together with their local council to produce integrated village plans, sponsored by DARD and the EU. These identify a series of measures, such as building restorations, footpath trails and welcome signage, that contribute to the local economy and help to ensure that the hospitality afforded by such communities is reflected in the villages in which they reside.

Vibrant & Diverse

Alive with centralised activity

Great urban centres buzz with activity. They are formed by a concentration of different uses, services and facilities, thereby attracting different people over a sustained period of time. Busy places are safe, engaging and even exciting. They sustain footfall -dependent businesses and create opportunities for cultural events and activities both planned and impromptu. The more we use a place, the better we get to know it and the more likely it is to find a place in our hearts.



Case Study: Cathedral Quarter, Belfast

As the shipyards of Belfast fell into decline, so too did their associated areas of warehousing in the centre of the city. Consequently such places fell into disrepair and neglect, becoming problematic and unwelcoming.

It was a number of pioneering business owners who saw the attraction of the area's narrow lanes and brick buildings and who played a key part in sowing the seeds of regeneration. With the help of Urban Development Grants and a subsequent streetscape restoration by Laganside Corporation, a restaurant and architects studio began a steady process of colonisation of this largely abandoned area.

Today Cathedral Quarter is a vibrant, dynamic arts quarter and one of the busiest night spots in the city. Annual events, such as Culture Night and the Festival of Fools, as well as smaller arts activities, help add to the life and vibrancy now synonymous with the Quarter.



Centralised Services and Facilities

It is vitally important that services and facilities, are located at the centre of our villages, towns and cities. This establishes a critical mass of activity which sustains their economic, social and environmental viability, whilst keeping our urban centres safe and engaging places to visit. If such functions are dispersed across a settlement or worse, located beyond its urban limits, town centres risk falling into steady decline characterised by quiet streets and vacant sites. Furthermore, the dispersal of traditional services results in higher car usage, as pedestrian, cycle and public transport connections become unviable.

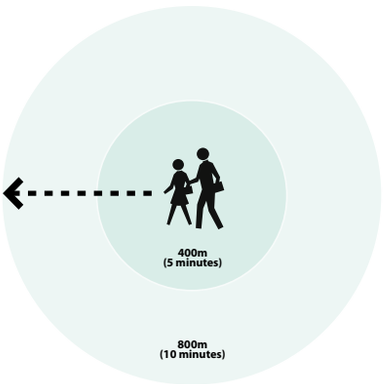


Fig. 14: Facilities located in urban centres should always be located within easy walking distance of one another

Sustainable Urban Densities

Activity levels in urban areas are directly linked to their density of development. Measured by the number of residential dwellings per hectare (Dph), traditionally medium to high densities have resulted in greater physical, social and economic activity levels, whereas low density development dissipates such activity. Pedestrian activity, or life on our streets, increases in urban areas that can be defined as 'walkable'. In Northern Ireland, we must strive to ensure our urban centres incorporate medium to high densities, whilst maintaining the other qualities necessary to create good urban places.

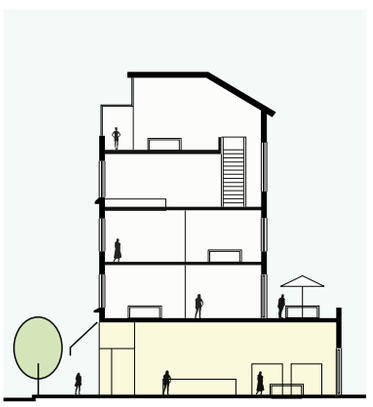


Fig. 15: Medium density, mixed use buildings are a fundamental component of successful urban places.

Mixed Use, Type and Tenure

Active and vibrant urban places and communities need a rich mix of people. A key means by which this diversity can be achieved is through mixed use, type and tenure development. Mixed use involves bringing together different land and building uses in one urban area or building. By juxtaposing shops, offices and apartments, for example, activity levels are sustained at different times of the day, evening and week. Mixed type development involves a mix of dwelling sizes, such as 1 – 2 bed apartments and 3+ bed houses, which are attractive to people of different lifestyles and stages. Mixed tenure development should also comprise a mix of privately owned, privately let, affordable and social accommodation. This helps to avoid the creation or the perception of ghettoes by increasing the diversity of people living in an area.

Active Frontages

Buildings contribute greatly to the levels of activity we see along our streets and spaces. It is important, therefore, that they are planned and designed in manner which maximises the activation of ground floor frontages. This is achieved by locating activity generating uses on the ground floor of buildings, (eg small shops, cafes, bars, community centres) and less activity generating uses on upper floors (eg offices, apartments, large shops, car parks). Narrow building plots result in an increased number of frontages and entrances along the street.

Further ground floor activation can be achieved through the provision of outdoor spill out space for stalls and seating, as well as generously proportioned openings that blur the boundaries between internal and external space. Long ground floor stretches of blank wall, frosted window or car park openings must be avoided so to ensure that our urban centres remain active, safe and attractive.

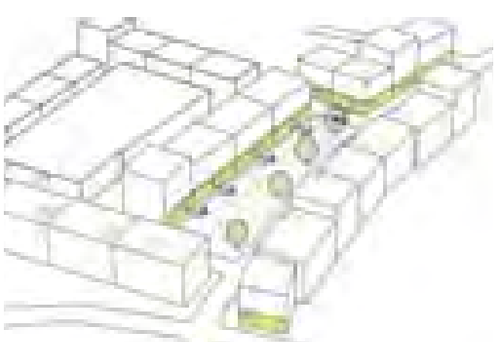


Fig. 16: Successful public spaces rely on activation from adjacent buildings. Rarely can large floor plan units contribute sufficiently and should therefore be 'wrapped' by buildings of a smaller size.

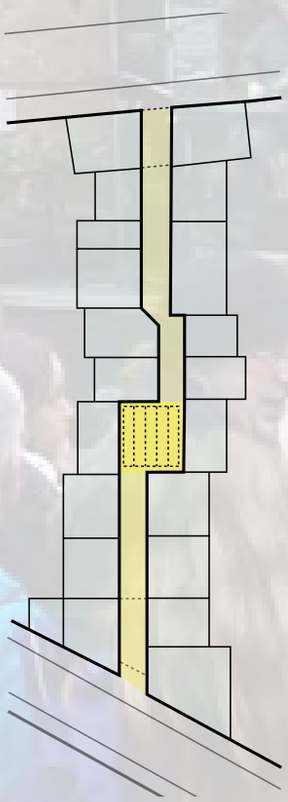


Fig. 17: Main Street comprises of multiple units facing onto a central pedestrian street

Case Study: Main Street, Omagh

Creating successful new streets has unfortunately become a rarity in Northern Ireland. Yet developments such as Main Street in Omagh by Boaz Properties, demonstrate how by following some simple rules, a vibrant and active street can become the focal point of a commercially viable venture.

Main Street links Omagh's High Street to one of the main areas of car parking. It is a narrow pedestrian route, lined on each side with shops, bars and cafes. Activation of the street is achieved by five features. 1) the daily throughput of people 2) frequency of small units opening onto the street, 3) mix of uses open during the day and evening, 4) encouragement of businesses to use space in front of their units, 5) outdoor events in the space.

Crafted

Of excellent design quality and aesthetics

It is no coincidence that many of our successful urban places are also attractive. Design quality impacts significantly on the overall character of a place, as well its ability to function and prosper. Like links of a chain, a poorly designed building or open space can greatly compromise the overall strength of the place it is part of. Many of our most cherished urban places are testimony to the lasting power of good design. There is no reason why all our urban places should not attain such high standards.



Case Study: Lyric Theatre, Belfast

The new Lyric Theatre in South Belfast has been the recipient of many awards for its design. The task for its competition winning architects, O'Donnell + Tuomey, was not without challenge, involving a sloping riverbank site set against the tightly packed rows of a traditional Belfast street. Their elegant response was a building that gently twists within its site, so forming a positive relationship with both the river and the street. Its contemporary design and traditional materials result in a fine piece of landmark architecture that has seemingly grown from its context.



Clarity of Concept

Well designed places require a clear rationale based on evidence, as outlined under the quality of Vision. Similarly, successful buildings and spaces must have a clear concept that underpins the way in which they look and function. If, for example, a particular architectural style has been chosen for a new building, then its execution should be faithful to the underlying principles of that influence, avoiding a mix and match approach to its overall aesthetic. Likewise, if an urban square has been established as a gathering place for people, its management must be aligned to fulfil that underlying concept with events and controls on car parking, for example.

Aesthetic Principles

Attractive buildings and spaces observe a number of aesthetic principles, which in good architecture, often go unnoticed. Proportion, for example, governs the visual relationship of different elements with one another, resulting in a balanced aesthetic that is pleasing to the eye. Rhythm is another feature of successful building facades, where the distribution and spacing of windows, doors and other features forms a discernible rhythm, often tying in with adjacent buildings. The choice and distribution of materials is another important consideration, which should be underpinned by a clear rationale. Materials should have relevance to their location and sit well with one another in colour and texture. An overly extensive 'palette' of materials can create a cluttered or confused eventual look, whereas conversely, a restricted palette, if not considerately applied, can result in austere or lifeless appearance.

Peer Review

Maintaining consistently good design for our urban places requires a process of monitoring and quality control. Such responsibility must lie with a planning authority, within which adequate design skills need to be in existence to make accurate assessments of design quality. However, this process can be usefully augmented by a system of peer review, where designers and other built environment professionals give independent comment and advice on the design quality of development proposals as they emerge. Such involvement early in the process, helps to avoid subjective decision making, to increase design quality and to challenge preconceived ideas that may have become outdated.

Commitment to Quality

Good urban places rely on consistent quality of design, materials, construction and maintenance, as well as the services in which they offer. Quality is often an early objective of a design and development process, but can be lost due to the emergence of other priorities and involvement of people who are insufficiently aware of the overall vision. Quality must not be confused with cost. Buildings and spaces with low budgets must still be designed to a high quality, using appropriate materials and maintained as intended from the outset. If through this process, costs impede the ability to deliver in the original concept, then that concept should be revised, but not its quality. All too often good design is compromised by a reduction in quality mid way though the process of its delivery. This results in a watered down version of the original concept and is ultimately detrimental to the place and people for whom it is intended.

Place Specific Design

Uniqueness is a precious feature of successful urban places, helping to forge their identity and reinforce their 'sense of place'. All places have unique attributes, be they views or natural features, buildings, open spaces, design details or materials. New design must therefore help to positively contribute to such identity through respect of its existing context and the incorporation of place specific features. For example, views across a vacant site to a landmark church spire should be retained and managed to the benefit of its development. Most of our towns and cities have important views that must also be observed, be they to Belfast's hills or Derry's walls. Or a locally prolific material, such as brick for example, could be incorporated in a new design, thereby reinforcing the role it plays in shaping local identity. Place specific design does not however equate to mimicry or pastiche copies of existing places. Cutting edge contemporary design can sit well within an existing urban context if its design is of sufficient quality and it has understood, respected and responded to those unique features of its context.





Case Study: Sion Mills

This small village near Strabane was created to house the workforce of Herdman's Mill, a prominent name in the linen industry of 19th Century Ulster. The quality of urban design and architecture to be found in Sion Mills is unusually high, largely attributed to the vision of the Herdman family and their son-in-law architect, William Unsworth. Finely detailed and crafted public buildings and houses are matched in quality by the industrial architecture of the mills and associated buildings. The ongoing efforts of its building preservation trust and partners will be key to ensuring the future of this urban gem.

Viable

Functional, flexible and lasting

Good places last. The reasons for such survival are complex, as places are inevitably affected by changes that happen around them, be they economic, social or political. Whilst often our ability to control such change is limited, there are responsive measures that can be taken to maintain the viability of urban places and increase their chance of success.



Case Study: St George's Market, Belfast

Flexibility is a key attribute of many urban places that survive for generations. The modern day success story of St George's Market in Belfast, which was saved from imminent demolition in the 1990s, is linked to the building's ability to adapt. St George's attracts locals and visitors alike to its bustling market days, the layout of which can be easily changed to suit the number and type of stall holders. Furthermore, the covered market space, which is managed by Belfast City Council, is also used for cultural and corporate events, bringing additional income that helps its continued operation.



Diversity of Provision

Urban places provide different functions relative to their scale, infrastructure and regional context. It is vital that this role is understood by those shaping a vision and those taking decisions around provision of new facilities, services or commercial ventures in a specific urban area. For example, whilst all towns may wish to have a state of the art leisure facility, this decision must be made in the context of regional provision, population densities, transport infrastructure and the availability of resources. A core skill in successful development, be it private, public or community sector, is identifying viable propositions relative to their context.

Deliverability

It is essential to understand how proposals for an urban area will be delivered, so that potential obstacles to their implementation are identified early. This process will necessitate a range of measures, relative to the extent of factors affecting deliverability. The policy context of a proposal, for example, must be understood through documentary reference and potentially clarified through discussion with the relevant authority. The funding context must be examined early, with project partners secured before advancement of proposals. Adequate skills must be procured to ensure that the necessary quality of design and implementation can be achieved. Proposals must be broadly acceptable to those who will be affected by them as determined through a process of effective dialogue and consultation.

Durability

The selection of building materials and construction techniques is another key task in increasing the viability of a project. Materials must be appropriate to the role they are expected to perform. If such information is unavailable, it must be acquired through professional testing methods. Similarly, there are normally several different methods of constructing a building or space. The benefits and disadvantages of each method must therefore be systematically assessed to inform this decision making process.

Flexibility of Use and Management

The social and economic context of place is in a constant state of flux, often taking unforeseen directions. Consequently, a key quality of good placemaking is flexibility. Buildings and spaces require flexibility built into their structure for changes of use. For example, ground floor units may be designed to accommodate retail or residential usages depending on demand. Management practices must also be structured to allow flexibility, thereby enabling stewardship to be responsive to changing circumstances and new opportunities that arise.

Serviceability

Successful urban places are serviced well, without detracting from the quality experienced by the general public. This requires an early understanding of service requirements for any development and is likely to include power needs, water and electricity supplies, maintenance programmes and viable points for delivery and collection. Early identification of such needs enables them to be integrated with the overall design approach and avoids a late addition that jars with the underlying vision and concept.

Temporary Uses and Interventions

Vacant buildings and spaces that no longer serve their intended purpose can negatively impact upon the quality of our urban places. Efforts are therefore required to identify temporary uses and interventions that help to bring them back into use. 'Meanwhile occupancy' involves the identifying and incentivising of appropriate uses for vacant buildings and spaces. This often takes the form of 'pop up shops', which operate in empty premises for a limited period and for a reduced rate or rent. Similarly, unsightly buildings or spaces that have fallen into disrepair can often be improved at relatively low cost, thereby tackling the blight they have created.

Testing

Determining the viability of a new use, activity or mode of operation beforehand can be very challenging. Provision should therefore be made to test the viability of new ideas, before the change is introduced on a permanent basis. For example, an outdoor market could be established for a trial period or a new road layout tested for a short period. Such piloting reduces the risks of wasted resources.





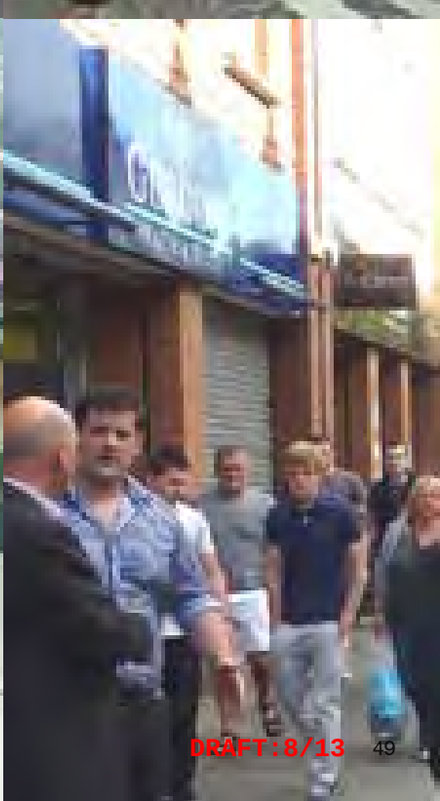












Case Study: Ballymena Town Centre Public Realm Strategy

When government investment through the Borough Council and DSD was earmarked for the public realm of Ballymena, an innovative process of participative consultation was used to develop and test proposals. Six outdoor events were organised providing the context for discussion with the general public about the future of their town centre. The events, as varied as a street Olympics, urban farm and 24 hour street makeover, also demonstrated the potential of Ballymena to accommodate new uses that would complement its established retail base. They also provided a practical opportunity to learn how different spaces should be designed and managed in the future.

Enduring

Imbued with a legacy of continued understanding and interpretation

Places never stand still. As time passes they evolve and adapt, and the people involved with them come and go. We have a responsibility therefore to ensure that all our places remain successful and positive and in doing so, that the lessons we learn about them are passed on to our successors.



Case Study: Portrush

Investment in the quality of its urban heart is helping Portrush to endure as a destination for visitors. Projects in the North Coast town include comprehensive redesign of its promenades and seafront spaces, introducing quality materials which will last far longer than their predecessors. Portrush has also had significant success in delivering short term improvements, seeing the Coleraine Borough Council, DOE and landowners collaborate to tackle blight caused by derelict buildings and spaces.

Self Sustaining

Mixed use places not only help to generate positive activity and safety, they also strengthen the resilience of a place to the impact of external change. Good lasting places normally consist of a variety of different uses, such as residential, employment, retail and leisure. They also often have a mix of private and public sector uses. This means that if problems occur in a particular sector (eg retail), risks are spread and the place is less affected than somewhere dominated by a single use. This is one reason why we must work to ensure that our urban centres, buildings and spaces are designed and managed to accommodate a range of different uses.

Adaptive Reuse

Finding new uses for old buildings is a vitally important exercise that helps to re-energise urban places whilst retaining their unique identity and character. It is often buildings like former churches, banks or public institutions such as libraries where some of our finest architecture can be found. Yet as our society and economies change, so too do our requirements for such uses.

These precious buildings must not be regarded as a costly burden, but as an exciting opportunity for new development. They often prove more adaptable than modern counterparts, whilst also having the ability to attract different funding streams, such as grant aid for listed buildings. Critically, whether such a building is listed or not, its unique features or attributes must be identified early, so that new interventions, potentially contemporary in style, help to accentuate the unique qualities of the building in question.



The success of the Merchant Hotel, converted from a former bank headquarters in Belfast, demonstrates the vital role adaptive reuse plays in maintaining built heritage and the sustained vitality of our urban centres.

Communicating Heritage

If places could talk they would have countless stories to tell. Good interpretation can help to bring the history of a place and its people alive, engaging locals and tourists alike.

To be effective, interpretation must be clear and concise, avoiding a temptation to overload people with information. A simple story, an unusual fact or a description of a personality can be just enough to interest people and ignite their imagination. Creativity is an essential ingredient, with sculpture and performance often good alternatives to the



Alec the Goose, Belfast: Creative ways by which to communicate heritage can successfully engage will all members of the community.

Passage of Skills and Knowledge

Finally, we must all learn from places and ensure that the many lessons learned are passed onto others. Places are fascinating and complex, with no end to what we can learn about them. Furthermore, individuals who are often critical to the success of place making projects inevitably come and go. They may be a civil servant moved from one department or section to another, a consultant whose contract reaches completion, a local politician who misses out on re-election or a community volunteer who relocates to another town.

The knowledge we accumulate about urban places must be recorded and passed on to others, so that such valuable understanding is not lost.

For example, how best can local stakeholders be convened for a workshop? What is the best configuration to accommodate a large event in this particular space? At what time of year do the trees respond best to pruning?

Consideration should be given to mechanisms by which place-specific knowledge can be captured and passed on, enabling our urban



Case Study: Killyleagh

Like many small towns, Killyleagh struggled with the departure of its traditional industries leaving it with dereliction and an air of neglect. Concerned at this decline, a group of local residents formed the Killyleagh Development Association and 20 years on they continue to oversee a rolling, largely self sustaining process of acquiring and redeveloping empty properties. Killyleagh, part of which is a Conservation Area, is now a notably attractive town and with a thriving, mixed community, making it as popular a place to live in as it is to visit. This success can largely be attributed to the hard work of local people and it serves as an inspiration to the many towns faced with similar challenges.

Bringing it Together

Through the course of this guide we have introduced ten qualities of successful urban places. Each one is important, with its own particular benefits, as well as challenges associated with its delivery. However, only when these ten qualities are brought together, can truly great place making begin.

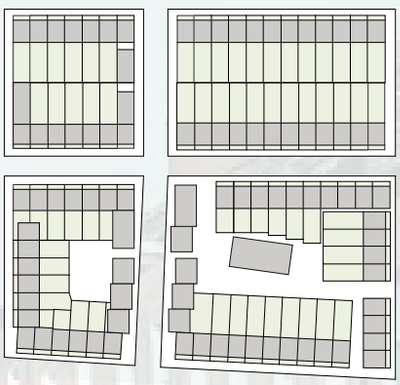


Fig. 18: Clarendon Street's perimeter blocks help to clearly define public and private space.

Case Study: Clarendon Street

The Clarendon Street area of Derry / Londonderry is one of the few districts of Georgian housing that remains in Northern Ireland. Such places, also found in Dublin, Bath or Edinburgh, have proved highly sustainable and popular places in which to locate. In Clarendon, fine town houses and apartments join offices and shops to form an attractive mixed use neighbourhood. A relatively high development density and proximity to the city centre have resulted in an area and a lifestyle less dependent on the car than others.

Whilst afforded Conservation Area status, efforts to protect the fine qualities of this urban place must continue. Yet as successfully demonstrated by the contemporary design of the new Cultúrlann building, this does not equate to turning such places into museum pieces.



Visionary
Recognising Potential, Leadership, Skills

Collaborative
Cooperation & Coordination,
The Value of Working Together,
Active Participation, Communication

Contextual
Understanding Place,
Natural Systems, Harnessing Heritage,
Contextual Design, Appropriate Scale,
Edges, Boundaries & Transitions

Responsible
Conserving Limited Resources,
Maximising the Impact of Limited Resources,
Going Local, Shared Space

Accessible
Inclusivity, Sustainable Transport Hierarchy,
Connectivity, Legibility, Car Parking,

Hospitable
Climatic Considerations, Healthy
Safety through Urban Design,
Sense of Arrival, Animation, Partnerships

Vibrant & Diverse
Centralised Services & Facilities,
Sustainable Urban Densities,
Mixed Use, Type & Tenure, Active Frontages

Crafted
Clarity of Concept, Aesthetic Principles,
Peer Review, Commitment to Quality,
Place Specific Design

Viable
Diversity of Provision, Deliverability, Durability,
Flexibility of Use & Management, Serviceability,
Temporary Uses & Interventions, Testing

Enduring
Self Sustaining, Adaptive Re-use,
Communicating Heritage,
Passage of Skills and Knowledge

Case Study: Woodbrook, Lisburn

Establishing entirely new urban areas brings with it a responsibility that goes well beyond the simple provision of houses, offices or infrastructure. It must be focussed on the creation of successful urban places that provide for the establishment of vibrant, lasting communities.

At Woodbrook, part of the westward expansion of Lisburn, private developers the Carvill Group took this responsibility seriously. From the outset, they held a strong vision of creating a village, and not a housing estate, recognising the commercial value of good placemaking. To fullfil this objective, extensive research was undertaken involving studies of successful local villages and field trips to England and Germany, where the developer and design team invited councillors and officials to join them in considering how lessons could be applied in the local context.

The result is a village in its layout and architecture, that has local resonance, whilst also being contemporary in nature. A familiar language of terraced houses and continuous street frontages, is given an contemporary twist with landmark buildings. The retention of mature existing trees also helps to root Woodbrook into its rural setting. A range of sustainable technologies was also introduced to help sustain the urban settlement and reduce its impact upon the environment.

Like so many developments of its time, progress at Woodbrook was stalled by the collapse of the property market. Yet the project and process behind it is an excellent example of strong collaborative practice, resulting in a new urban place of great quality.

Case Study: Belfast City Centre, Belfast

The centre of Belfast is on a journey. It has left behind an era of shut downs and the notorious ring of steel, to become an increasingly vibrant and cosmopolitan city centre. This ongoing change over a relatively short period of time can be attributed to many factors, not least more peaceful circumstances within which it is now located. Yet a key catalyst to the city centre's rejuvenation has been government investment, including an ongoing project to revitalise its streets and spaces.

The Streets Ahead project emanated from a public realm strategy produced by DSD in 2006, which identified the especially poor condition of the city centre's streets and spaces. As a result, a major programme of improvement has commenced, introducing high quality stone paving, street furniture, lighting and public art throughout the central area.

This work provides the context for greater use of the city centre for leisure based retail, as well as cultural events. The city council and city centre management company have worked with local retailers to extend opening hours and to attract more cultural events into the city.

Like all city centres, Belfast continues to face challenges, including economic conditions and the need for better physical linkage to surrounding communities. Yet, through recognising the importance of good place making, its journey of transformation provides an inspiration to all our urban places in Northern Ireland.



Looking Ahead

Northern Ireland has many wonderful urban places, ranging from large cosmopolitan cities and small rural villages. They all have their own strong identity and character, whilst sharing the fundamental qualities that combine to form great places. We must not, however, take their qualities for granted, nor overlook opportunities for further improvement. Neither must we lose faith in our collective ability to transform the all too many places that remain unsafe, unattractive and unloved.





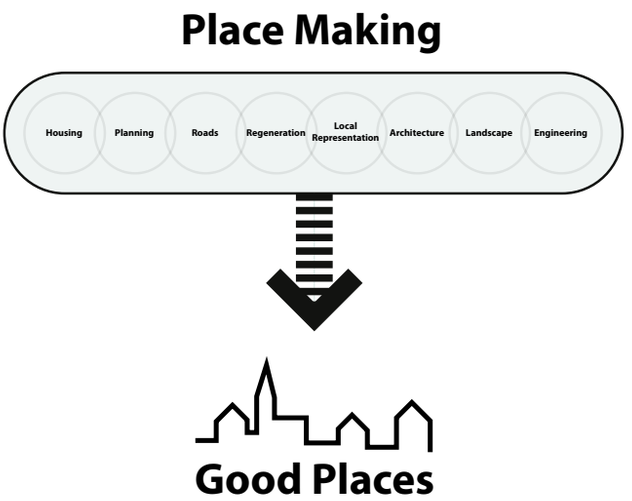


Fig. 18: Overcoming silo structures is vital for good place making

Places are complex and as such, there is no one department or organisation that can comprehensively manage how they are shaped. Furthermore, place making is a collaborative process, involving all those with a stake in the future, be they from the public or private sectors or from the community. It will be essential, therefore, that effective mechanisms are in place to bring about the 'joined up thinking' so vital to creating and keeping our urban places successful.

Change is underway in Northern Ireland and this presents an excellent opportunity for better places. Firstly, the reorganisation of government structures provides the ideal context within which to break down the many administrative barriers that currently exist to collaborative working in the built environment. Secondly, changes in planning policy will move us towards to a more place oriented spatial planning practice, Thirdly, a greater commitment to collaboration and participation will make stronger connections and build trust between the many different people whose input is key to place making. The continuation of such change will be vital for the future.

The quality of our urban environment is of fundamental importance to the future of Northern Ireland. Economically, urban centres must work hard to sustain and improve the context for existing business whilst attracting new investors, employers, employees and visitors. Physically, our urban centres must adapt to become cleaner, more efficient and more attractive for the benefit of us all. And socially, our urban centres will play a pivotal role to improving quality of life, breaking down barriers and helping Northern Ireland to continue its journey of transformation.

Good places are not a luxury,
they are a necessity.

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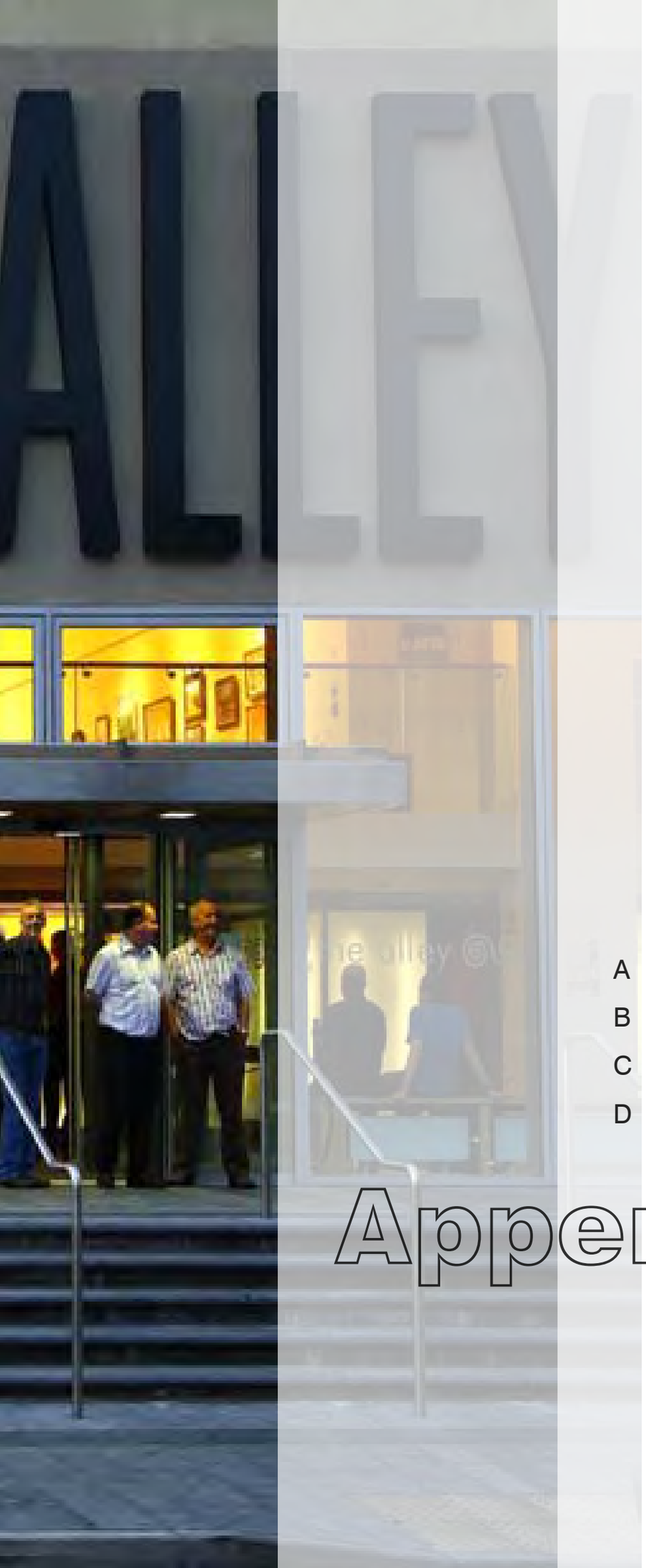

A Glossary of Terms

B Further Information

C Image Credits

D Compiling the Guide

Appendices

A. Glossary of Terms and Abbreviations

Accessibility	the ease with which a building, place or facility can be reached by people and / or goods and services.
Architecture	1. the profession of designing buildings, 2. the style of buildings
Consultation	finding out people's views
DCAL	Department for Culture, Arts and Leisure
DOE	Department of the Environment
DRD	Department of Regional Development
DSD	Department for Social Development
Green Infrastructure	a network of multi-functional green space, urban and rural, which is capable of delivering a wide range of environmental and quality of life benefits for local communities
Landscape Architecture	the art and science of planning and designing external space for human use and enjoyment
Legibility	the quality of a place being welcoming, understood easily by its users, easy for visitors to orient themselves in, and presenting a clear image of the wider world.
NI	Northern Ireland
NIEA	Northern Ireland Environment Agency
Participative Planning	a planning process that actively involves the area's residents and other stakeholders in a significant way
Permeability	the degree to which an area has a choice of routes through it; the condition of being permeable.
Planning	a framework offering a capacity for agreeing visions, analysing problems and opportunities, organising consultation and collaboration, setting policy, guiding design, and implementing action, all within a dedicated legal structure.
Public Realm	the parts of a village, town or city (whether publicly or privately owned) that are available, without charge, for everyone to see, use and enjoy, including streets, squares and parks;
Supplementary Planning Guidance	additional advice provided by the local authority on a particular topic, 'elucidating and exemplifying' policies in a development plan
Sustainable Urban Drainage	physical structures built to receive surface water run-off.
Sustainability	a condition likely to have a positive impact on the social, economic, and environmental conditions of people in the future and/or in other places.
Urban Design	the collaborative and multidisciplinary process of shaping the physical setting for life in cities, towns and villages
Urbanism	1) the study of process of change in towns and cities 2) the process and product of becoming urban
Urban Stewardship	the careful management of the urban environment
Walkability	the ease with which it is possible to walk around an area, from one point to another, or from housing to local facilities

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B. Further Information

continued

3) Featured Case Studies

Gracehill	http://www.gracehillvillage.org
Armagh City	http://www.armagh.gov.uk and http://www.dsdni.gov.uk
Glenarriff / Waterfoot	http://www.moyle-council.org
Connswater Community Greenway, Belfast	http://www.communitygreenway.co.uk
Downpatrick Town Centre Masterplan	http://www.downdc.gov.uk and http://www.dsdni.gov.uk
Cultúrlann McAdam Ó Fiaich, Belfast	http://www.culturlann.ie
Skainos, Belfast	http://www.skainos.org
Magheramorne	http://www.magheramorneworks.co.uk
Peace Bridge, Derry / Londonderry	http://www.ilex-urc.com and http://www.derrycity.gov.uk
Cecelia's Walk, Derry / Londonderry	http://www.northandwest.org
Newcastle	http://www.downdc.gov.uk
Belcoo	http://www.fermanagh.gov.uk
Cathedral Quarter, Belfast	http://www.thecathedralquarter.com
Main Street, Omagh	http://mainstreetomagh.com
Lyric Theatre, Belfast	http://www.lyrictheatre.co.uk
Sion Mills	http://www.sionmills.org
St George's Market, Belfast	http://www.belfastcity.gov.uk
Ballymena Public Realm Strategy	http://www.ballymena.gov.uk
Portrush	http://www.colerainebc.gov.uk
Killyleagh	http://www.downdc.gov.uk
Clarendon Street, Derry / Londonderry	http://www.derrycity.gov.uk
Woodbrook, Lisburn	http://www.lisburncity.gov.uk
Belfast City Centre, Belfast	http://www.belfastcity.gov.uk and http://www.dsdni.gov.uk

4) Other Useful Organisations

Academy of Urbanism	http://www.academyofurbanism.org.uk
Forum for an Alternative Belfast	http://www.forumbelfast.org
Landscape Institute	http://www.landscapeinstitute.org
Ministerial Advisory Group (DCAL)	http://www.dcalni.gov.uk
PLACE	http://www.place.uk.net
Royal Society of Ulster Architects	http://www.rsua.org.uk
Royal Town Planning Institute	http://www.rtpi.org.uk
Ulster Architectural Heritage Society	http://www.uahs.org.uk
Urban Design Group	http://www.udg.org.uk

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7	Broughshane	Ballymena Borough Council
10 - 11	Dunbar Link, Belfast	Mark Hackett
12 - 13	Strule Centre, Omagh	Omagh District Council
14 - 15	Gracehill	Ulster Architectural Heritage Society
16	Frieburg	Benuter; Florian K, Wikimedia Creative Commons
18	Stewardship at Glenarrif	M Cooper / Ministerial Advisory Group
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21	Connswater (All)	East Belfast Partnership
23	Liberties Area Plan	Dublin City Council
24 - 25	Falls Road, Belfast	Belfast Media Group
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30	Peace Bridge, Derry	http://memineandotherbits.wordpress.com
32 - 33	Cecilia's Walk, Derry	RPP Architects
33	Cecilia's Walk, Derry	Apex Housing
34 - 35	Newcastle Promenade	URS Corporation
36 - 37	Belcoo	Alex McClatchey
42 - 43	Lyric Theatre, Belfast	Dennis Gilbert www.dennisgilbert.com
42	Lyric Theatre (Section)	O'Donnell + Tuomey
44 - 45	Sion Mills	Allan Hamilton, Treasure Trails
46 - 47	St George's Market	William Murphy, 'informatique' www.flickr.com
50	Portrush	Coleraine Borough Council
51	Merchant Hotel, Belfast	Merchant Hotel, Belfast
52 - 53	Killyleagh Harbour	'Alister667' www.flickr.com
54 - 55	Clarendon Street, Derry	Frank Harkin
56	Woodbrook, Lisburn	Carvill Developments
57	Belfast City Centre	Department for Social Development
60 - 61	Alley Arts Centre, Strabane	Alan Jones - Alan Jones Architects / Queen's University, Belfast

Compiling the Guide

Living Places was written and produced through a collaborative process that involved many different organisations and individuals.

It was comissioned in 2012 by the Minister for the Environment, Alex Attwood MLA, and its production managed through the Policy Unit of The Department for Environment.

The Department convened a Project Steering Group comprising representatives from a range of organisations involved with urban stewardship and design, drawn from both the public and private sectors. (see adjacent list)

Living Places was researched and written by a consultant team, led by Urban Designers and Landscape Architects, The Paul Hogarth Company, who were supported by Gareth Hoskins Architects, CUi and WYG. They met at regular intervals with the Department and Project Steering Group, facilitating workshops through which the document was developed.

Research also involved participation of the Living Places team at the 2012 PLACE / FAB Winterschool in Belfast and the 2012 Academy of Urbanism Congress in Derry / Londonderry. It also involved site visits and workshops in Belfast, Derrry / Londonderry, Armagh and Killyleagh.

The Department and its team wish to thank all those involved in this particularly collaborative process.

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ULSTER ARCHITECTURAL HERITAGE SOCIETY

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thepaulhogarth company
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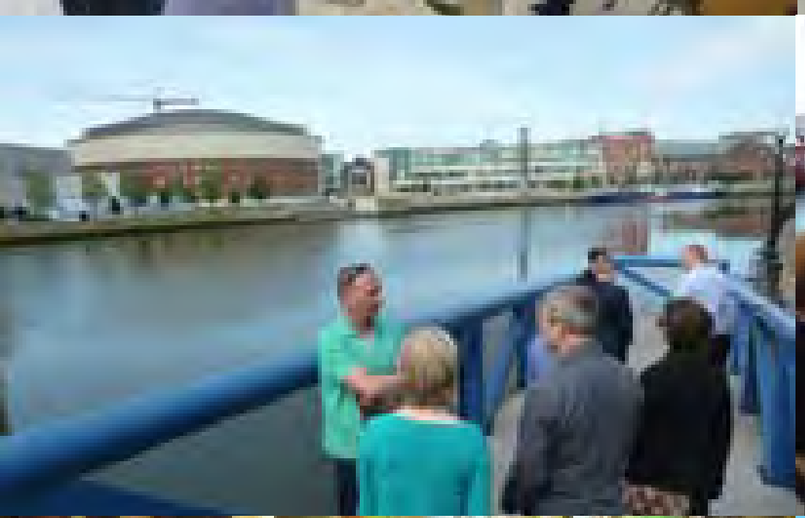




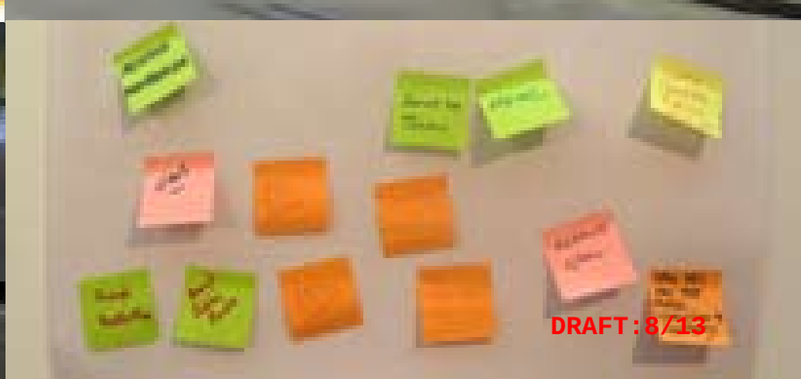
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This Urban Stewardship and Design Guide aims to clearly establish the key principles behind good place making. It seeks to inform and inspire all those involved in the process of managing (stewardship) and making (design) urban places, with a view to raising standards across Northern Ireland.

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