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Urban design draws together the many strands of place-making - environmental responsibility, social equity and economic viability, for example - into the creation of places of beauty and distinct identity. Urban design is derived from but transcends related matters such as planning and transportation policy, architectural design, development economics, landscape and engineering. It draws these and other strands together. In summary, urban design is about creating a vision for an area and then deploying the skills and resources to realise that vision.

Since the Second World War, this country has seen very extensive urban development and renewal. While there are exceptions, a great deal of this development has been third-rate and is lacking in any 'sense of place'. At worst, the results have been downright ugly and unpleasant. Fine urban fabrics have been spoilt through the process of re-development. The remarkable built heritage flowing from the English urban tradition has yielded to banal and monotonous development, humdrum in design and dominated by traffic. We have repeated standard housing types and layouts, retail boxes and road layouts so many times, with little or no regard for local context, until we find that now almost everywhere looks like everywhere else.

Unblocking the blockages

The development process, and the players within that process - central and local government, politicians and professionals, developers, financiers and builders - have become entangled in a system which produces developments, but not places. We hope that this Compendium will fulfil a useful role in redirecting efforts, to create a framework for development as a contributor to the creation of quality places. There is a growing commitment on the part of funding agencies, as well as planning law and guidance, to underpin this effort to ensure that developments will not be considered acceptable unless they address the issue of place and do it well. To make quality places the norm rather than the exception means overcoming a whole series of constraints, including :

- The compartmentalisation of professional disciplines - the traffic engineer, chartered surveyor, architect, landscape architect, planner - rather than adopting a multi-disciplinary approach.
- The lack of recognition of the legitimate role of the public sector to promote high quality design through planning, site assembly, procurement and investment.
- The predominantly conservative, short term and supply-driven characteristics of the development industry - particularly the volume housebuilders, who concentrate on the 'house' product rather than the creation of a 'place', lifestyle or community.
- The property and financial industries' preference for single use schemes and buildings.
- A lack of innovation in development approaches in respect of sustainable development, use of new technology, construction efficiencies, and planning and design appropriate for the 21st century.