

Incentives and other measures

Few suggestions were made to the research team but analysis of the case studies highlights some pointers. Decisions affecting the quality of urban design are made initially by commercial and residential developers in the early stages of a scheme. In making these decisions, developers understandably are strongly influenced by what they perceive to be the aspirations of the occupiers and investors.

The three case studies which performed best against the checklist of criteria were the schemes which had several characteristics in common: local authority ambition and action to secure a quality of development that reflected a breadth of urban design considerations; single ownership or control of the site making early masterplanning possible; public/private partnership creating greater planning certainty—Brindleyplace and Ealing; if not partnership, then a strong public/private sector collaboration through the planning process—Great Notley; and public participation, reducing the risks of delays and the increased costs which might result from public confrontation. The two case studies which performed least well against the criteria of urban design quality avoided public/private partnership, collaboration or participation and, in the case of Fair Ridge, incurred considerable costs as a result of a confrontational planning approach.

Some developers, especially housebuilders, who build down to a 'good enough' standard do not allow adequate design time in the early stages of a scheme. If they are also operating in a confrontational environment and/or are developing against market trends, as was the case at Fair Ridge, it is easy to see how scarce resources are siphoned off, possibly to fight planning appeals, leaving little room for imaginative detailed design thereafter.

Incentives to encourage developers and other property decision makers to pay more attention to the quality of urban design could therefore start by seeking to provide greater certainty within the planning process through collaboration. Increased certainty reduces development and investment risk; less risk means a lower return on capital becomes acceptable which, in turn, can release more finance and other resources which can be devoted to design quality.

Nevertheless, there are no quick fixes for achieving quality of urban design. Some of the experience with specifically design-related incentives highlights the limitations of such approaches and the difficulties of isolating the qualities to be promoted.

A more widespread understanding of the nature of the development process and of the challenges, difficulties and risks involved, allied with a more collaborative approach to planning, may well be more successful.

Conclusion

General conclusions

The purpose of the research was to study the involvement of private-property decision makers in urban design. The project was the first in the UK to seek the views of those who directly pay for the majority of the built environment. This is largely unexplored territory and it transcends several established academic and professional disciplines. At the end of the study, it was obvious to the research team that they had only seen the tip of the iceberg and the exercise was best seen as a reconnaissance study. Some organizations and individuals showed a reluctance to become involved in the research but many responded positively and the topic aroused their interest.

Urban design, like most aspects of public policy, is a 'wicked problem' (Rittel & Webber, 1974). We long for a clear definition of what it is and for a simple recipe for achieving good design but this is impossible. Quality cannot be easily measured. The public realm fulfils a variety of requirements and we do not all have the same needs of the same places.

The checklist of design considerations was a research device to define the scope and concerns of urban design. The considerations provide a surrogate measure of quality. Developers, investors and occupiers need to be encouraged to give these considerations a higher priority in their decision making; equally, they need to demand environments which reflect the breadth of urban design concerns and not simply a selection which only satisfies the short-term interests of the immediate client. This will require better urban design; not necessarily more costly design but certainly different design. Adequate time must be allowed for this within the development process.

All design involves making choices and striking compromises between the design characteristics of a product; urban design is no exception. The qualities of an environment are the product of the circumstances, values and times in which it was produced. In some respects, the design of the Ealing Broadway Centre now seems out-dated; in contrast, Brindleyplace clearly reflects contemporary thinking and