

approaches. The character, performance and our experience of places change through time. This fact is rarely taken into account when schemes are being proposed; when investors (or owner-occupiers usually in the case of housing in Britain) decide to buy a development; or when the first occupier decides to take a lease on a property.

We might like to imagine that places will age gracefully. Few do and in reality all require constant maintenance and they tend to become obsolete. Developers, investors and occupiers increasingly consider the life-cycle costs of buildings. We need to show a similar level of awareness and adopt appropriate responses to the care of the public realm. The essential structure of the public realm should last for decades. Too often in urban design short-term considerations and features become confused with the long-term ones. Yet once a development is completed, its essential features cannot be changed without considerable expense.

Achieving a sustainable quality of urban design demands such insights and understanding. However, the need to adopt a longer term view of quality is counter to one significant trend as the horizons of commercial, financial and political decision makers are getting ever shorter (Gibson *et al.*, 1996). Quality of urban design depends on a horizon longer than most participants hold at present, and a sense of pride of ownership and the principle of stewardship of the public realm need to be reinforced or reintroduced.

The processes that create urban environments are complex and the search for quality of urban design seems to run in a circle. Society seeks improved quality; the developer aspires to meet the customers' needs as does the investor; but the requirements and aspirations of most customers are usually too self-centred to meet society's wishes. The challenge is to find ways of breaking the cycle. Planning policy is important but it is only one piece of the jigsaw. The development process is subject to powerful external influences including the ideas and values people hold about the kind of environments they want to occupy, own and use. Education and debate are two of the keys to changing people's expectations and ways of working. To be effective, education must be underpinned by informed inquiry and research; and it must be supported by example and leadership.

Achievements, trends and outlook

The standards of urban design in Britain appear to be improving, albeit gradually, and there are a number

of schemes which demonstrate a real concern for the quality of the public realm. Some of these developments had their roots prior to the recession, but others are apparently responses to the switch to an occupier's or buyer's market and to increased competition generally.

There is a growing awareness of the importance of investing in quality, sometimes for long-term commercial reasons, but also because failure to take a long-term view often results in society as a whole paying, possibly dearly, later on. From a narrow perspective, organizations increasingly recognize the importance people, their knowledge and skills play in ensuring the success of business; and the influential role of brand image and the contribution that quality of environment may play in this. These are important trends and ones which could drive enterprises to look ahead and demand better quality of urban design. Whether they lead to development in more or less urban locations is uncertain: this will be the product of a number of influences, including planning and transport policies and public fiscal policy. These changes and trends should help raise standards of urban design. However, ultimately there has to be a demand for, and a willingness to invest in, quality. With urban design, the sum of the standards people individually set and accept is the standard we collectively enjoy.

One overriding lesson from the research for professional and academic urban designers alike is well summarized by Jonathan Barnett's comment, written over 20 years ago:

To produce significant results . . . urban designers must rid themselves of the notion that their work will be contaminated by an understanding of . . . real estate decisions. It is not always necessary to approve; it is essential to understand. (Barnett, 1974, p. 12)

The interrelationship between urban design and the planning process is well established and comprehended even if, for some people, it is an area of continuing debate and controversy. By comparison, the interrelationships between urban design, the development process and the property industry are poorly understood, underresearched and rarely written about. Until this situation is remedied, urban designers are likely to remain at the whim of the development community; similarly most private-property decision makers will still fail to appreciate the extent to which they can profit from investing in quality of urban design.