Urban Design,

How important is it for cities?

This paper has been written by the EUKN on behalf of the Danish Presidency of the Council of the European Union (The Ministry of Housing, Urban and Rural Affairs). It has been produced with regard to the meeting of Directors General responsible for urban development to be held on 13th and 14th of March in Copenhagen. On this occasion the paper will serve as inspiration and a point of departure for a roundtable discussions and a related on-site visit in the city of Copenhagen.

Discussion points

- How is urban design promoted in the national policies of European countries?
- Are urban issues recognised, considered and integrated by central government agencies in their decision-making?
- Are national policies on urban design sufficient to promote the quality urban design of cities?
- Are national administrations recognised as positively participating in, and supporting, major urban design projects?
Introduction

Urban design is the art of creating and shaping cities and towns. It involves the arrangement and design of buildings, public spaces, transport systems, services, and amenities. It is the process of giving form, shape, and character to groups of buildings, to whole neighbourhoods, and the city. It is a framework that orders the elements into a network of streets, squares, and blocks. Urban design blends architecture, landscape architecture, and city planning together to make urban areas functional and attractive.

While the two fields are closely related, 'urban design' differs from 'urban planning' in its focus on the physical improvement of the public environment, whereas the latter tends, in practice, to focus on the management of private development through established planning methods and programmes, and other statutory development controls.

Recent years have seen a development in the use of design, as well as in design philosophy and design research. Design has come to mean more than shaping and aesthetics; it has increasingly become a strategic element in business innovation processes as well as in a number of societal development processes. A designer’s ability to combine, for instance, designing with user understanding and overall solutions is increasingly becoming a competitive parameter when companies develop new products and services.

An increasing number of countries have invested in design to promote their image internationally, to raise awareness among local consumers of the value of design and product quality, and to increase interest from local industry in the benefits of design for business performance. Furthermore, many of these countries have also invested in developing their design educational systems and their capabilities within the area of design research.

How the city has changed

‘Seen in a long-term historical perspective, city space has always served three vital functions – meeting place, marketplace and connection place. As a meeting place, the city provided opportunities for social exchange of information of all kinds. As a marketplace, the city facilitated commercial exchange of goods and services. And finally, public spaces enabled access to and connections between all the functions of the city...Within a span of only a few decades, a city devoted primarily to working city and basic necessities has been transformed into a city of leisure and enjoyment.’ (Gehl et. al., 2006)

In New City Life by famous Danish architect Jan Gehl et. al. (2006) the story is told about a survey among people in Copenhagen’s city centre. The main question was, “What is the primary reason for your being in Copenhagen’s city centre?” The response was measured at two moments in time. The first was in the 1970s when the answer was “shopping”. Later in 2005 the response was often “being in the city”. Therefore the conclusion was that city space is a goal in itself, a worthwhile asset in its own right. According to Gehl et. al. (2006) more people use the central city and have spent more
time there over the past 40 years, including evenings and weekends when the shops are often closed. ‘All in all, this is a dramatic and remarkable development that offers lessons for other cities that want to improve their public spaces as a way to enliven and enrich the experience of urban life.’

**What kind of policy is in play in European cities when it comes to urban design? And do these policies work?**

While being interviewed by EUKN, Matthew Carmona, Lead Expert of URBACT’s HOPUS project, said that “a good urban design process is about achieving places that are better than it would otherwise be possible to achieve if you let the market have a free rein. Good urban design helps to establish the correct framework within which better investment can occur, within which better social outcomes result and in which better environmental results can be achieved.”

A city is a living expression of its people, their culture and an integral part of their identity as well as being a response to the need for shelter. Societies are defined and recognized by the things they make and the things they do. Most enduringly, they make the buildings and places that accommodate the public and private lives of their citizens. Beyond the practical needs for shelter, the accommodation of functional requirements and the achievement of comfort, people of all societies have demonstrated that their buildings express the highest beliefs and aspirations of their culture - an expression of the human spirit. Insofar as they succeed, their buildings become a form of public art.

Urban design and architecture were mentioned in the Lisbon Strategy, also known as the Lisbon Agenda or Lisbon Process. This was an action and development plan devised in 2000 for the economy of the European Union between 2000 and 2010. Its aim was to make the EU "the most competitive and dynamic knowledge-based economy in the world capable of sustainable economic growth with more and better jobs and greater social cohesion". Urban design and architecture in the Lisbon Strategy point to cultural activities and the creative industries. Therefore they play a critical role in boosting innovation and technology and are key engines of sustainable growth in the future.

The aim of the Lisbon Treaty was not met, but the German EU Presidency of 2007 decided to make urban design and architecture more pragmatic. Several researchers were commissioned to produce background studies in order to prepare the Leipzig Charter for Sustainable European Cities. One of the reports was on good urban design and was produced by Gehl Architects. In this report the term "Baukultur" was first introduced. The German word *Baukultur* unites the multifaceted qualities of planning and building in a single term. It describes how the built environment is created and how society deals with it. It has to be seen as a quality requirement that not only relates to buildings per se, but also covers the way in which we deal with users and stakeholders, with planning processes, with the surrounding countryside or urban areas and the infrastructure. Social aspects play a role in the notion of *Baukultur*. The extent to which building and public spaces meet people’s needs (comfort, healthy environment, stimulating social interaction etc.) is a determining factor for the long lasting urban viability of buildings and will enhance the quality of life.
But what has been done with Baukultur since the Germany Presidency? In the “Baukultur” as an impulse for growth – Good examples for European Cities’ by Gehl Architects - several case studies are shown where intervention was needed. All examples reinforce the notion that Baukultur is today a relevant factor of European structural and location policy and that it needs to be strengthened. One of the cases, namely that of Central Berlin (Germany), describes the successful rebuilding of the city centre which is in a large part attributable to the consistency and confidence with which simple but effective planning controls have been applied. Urban (re-)design in this case saw to it that:

- 70,000 visitors come to Potsdamer Platz every day, of whom 40% are tourists;
- The Central area is Berlin’s centre for film with 40 screens in 3 cinemas, a Film Academy, Imax, and Film Museum and is regarded as a must see by visitors;
- Potsdamer Platz is considered one of Berlin’s top shopping areas;
- The streets have become popular outdoor eating places, where the number of café chairs is equal to those in some of the most popular eating street in Europe.

The new development of the Central Berlin area is successful in illustrating how large scale redevelopment of a central city site can be achieved by close co-ordination of all players in a city’s Baukultur. On a critical note the report mentions that “[a]t a time where many cities are seeing high rise development as a solution to modern development, Potsdamer Platz is a sobering example of how the consistency of the public realms is of greater importance than individual architectural statements.”

A look at two case studies: Holmbladsgade, Copenhagen (Denmark) and the Singing Tower and Culture campus, Utrecht (the Netherlands)

In the Gehl report each case study was assessed along a series of quality criteria, namely: local character, connectivity, density, mixed use, adaptability, high quality public realm, integrated decision-making, user participation. In the paper ‘Towards an Urban Design Manifesto’, Jacobs and Appleyard (1987) suggested seven goals that were ‘essential for the future of a good urban design’:

1. Liveability: A city should be a place where everyone can live in relative comfort.
2. Identity and control: People should feel that some part of the environment ‘belongs’ to them, individually and collectively, whether they own it or not.
3. Access to opportunities, imagination and joy: People should find the city a place where they can break from traditional moulds, extend their experience, and have fun.
4. Authenticity and meaning: People should be able to understand their (others’) city, its basic layout, public functions and institutions, and the opportunities it offers.
5. Community and public life: Cities should encourage the participation of their citizens in community and public life.
6. Urban self-reliance: Increasingly cities will have to become more self-sustaining in their uses of energy and other scarce resources.
7. An environment for all: Good environments should be accessible to all. Every citizen is entitled to a minimal level of environmental liveability.
In the following section we will look at two case studies and assess them according to the above mentioned essentials.

**Holmbladsgade at a glance:**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Urban neighbourhood that has undergone a thorough neighbourhood make-over, with the restoration of buildings, streets and squares. In addition, new sporting and cultural institutions have been built.</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Client</td>
<td>City of Copenhagen, Urban Committee of the Danish Government and Holmbladsgade Facelift Project.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Timeframe</td>
<td>Neighbourhood facelift: 1997-2003</td>
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</tbody>
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| Budget                    | 178 million for housing and open space improvements  
45 million for holistic projects  
15 million for the involvement of residents, information and secretariat  
105 million for a Culture and Sports Plan  
**Total 343 million Euros** |

On 9 July 2009, the neighbourhood of Holmbladsgade (Denmark) was awarded the prestigious Bilfinger Berger Award. According to those involved, one of the reasons this project was so successful was the collaboration with residents and other local forces. Twelve per cent of local residents had participated actively in the neighbourhood regeneration process through meetings or working groups. Even more had participated in events hosted by the design team.

A sports and culture centre was built, where the most pronounced feature is a large translucent membrane that stretches between the sports and culture centre arena, and the four characteristic end walls of the neighbouring public housing scheme. Citizens can get together here which promotes social encounters as well as leisure activities. The main goal for the project was to stop the negative economic and social development of this worn-down old industrial neighbourhood and kick-start a new and positive development.

The result of the regeneration of Holmbladsgade was that outdoor events such as neighbourhood festivities have fostered a local identity and a sense of community, and the work done on new squares and precincts promotes the use of public urban spaces in an entirely new way. It can be said that the urban design plans for Holmbladsgade have had a positive effect. If we look at the seven criteria set out by Jacobs and Appleyard (1987) we could say that the neighbourhood has regained its identity and control. Through new infrastructural changes Holmbladsgade is better positioned within Copenhagen, allowing the citizens of that neighbourhood to move around better and therefore to be more self-reliant and sustainable, and the sports and culture centre has created a stronger and safer community and public life.
The Singing Tower and Culture campus at a glance:

| Description | With the construction of the Singing Tower a new ‘landmark’ will be added to the new Culture campus of the centre area of Vleuterweide which is in the Leidsche Rijn neighbourhood in Utrecht. By means of the Singing Tower the atmosphere of the new town of Vleuterweide is being improved as well as the activities within the surrounding neighbourhoods and shopping area. |
| Client | The City of Utrecht |
| Timeframe | 1 January 2007 – 1 January 2010 |
| Budget | € 250.000 from ERDF, € 175.000 private investment and € 819.632 from public money |

The Singing Tower is located in the Centre of the Culture campus of Vleuterweide, and has many diverse functions. Culture, however, is the connecting link. Surrounding the Singing Tower are the Amadeus Lyceum culture school, the Utrecht Centre for the Arts, Zuwe Welfare (a welfare institution), and the Vleuterweide library. In addition, there is room for a church centre, a sports hall, a theatre hall and the centrally located information square. There is a day care centre for the developmentally disabled and there are approximately sixty rental houses included in the complex. At the heart of the Culture campus stands the 30 metre high artwork which was commissioned by several partners seeking to create a ‘landmark’ within the new town of Vleuterweide, an example of urban design where art and architecture were used to promote awareness of the area. As a result the city of Utrecht hopes to attract entrepreneurs to the Vleuterweide neighbourhood. It is thought that an attractive neighbourhood will see more visitors, so that the experimental character of the Singing Tower will play a bigger role. The campus as a whole is designed so that functions can be combined.

It can be said that not only the design of the Singing Tower but also the development of the Culture campus have had an impact on the Vleuterweide neighbourhood because the Amadeus Lyceum culture school and the Utrecht Centre for the Arts have attracted younger visitors to the neighbourhood. The day care centre for the disabled has created a new identity for the neighbourhood, one where everyone is accepted. On that line it can be said that the Singing Tower and the Culture campus have given an artistic character to the neighbourhood, which has attracted entrepreneurs in the neighbouring shopping centre, making the area more self-reliant. Access to and from Vleuterweide has also been improved through infrastructural change.
How are architectural policies important for the development and implementation of the European Union’s aims set out in the EU 2020 strategy?

During the Urban Intergroup’s European Forum for Architectural Policies (EFAP) conference the President of the Intergroup, Jan Olbrycht, underlined that indeed the issue is not “if” but “how” architectural policies are very important for the development and implementation of the European Union’s aims set out in the EU 2020 strategy. He said that architects should anticipate the future needs of society rather than respond to present needs. They play a crucial role in the impact of regulations and policies and the way they can be adapted. They must design a vision on the future and inspire the public and decision makers.

In a changing world, the EU2020 goals are focused on a smart, sustainable and inclusive economy. These three mutually reinforcing priorities should help the EU and the Member States deliver high levels of employment, productivity and social cohesion. In line with these goals the Royal Institute of British Architects (RIBA) produced a policy paper entitled ‘Better homes and neighbourhoods’. In this paper it is said that high quality design adds value to homes and their surroundings. It can achieve higher values for development sites, provides greater occupier satisfaction, an improved public realm and prestige for owners. Well-designed, sustainable housing will last longer, be more flexible in use, cost less to heat, light and maintain, increase safety and security, and grow old gracefully. Good design contributes to a sense of wellbeing – statistics have shown that over £2 billion per year is spent treating illness arising from poor housing stock – more than is spent by local authorities on the building stock itself.

Three policy examples

1. The United Kingdom’s Government’s Planning Policy Statement 3 (PPS3) on housing encourages local planning authorities to demand high standards of design for new homes and includes the CABE Building for Life criteria, which are an important benchmark for well-designed housing and neighbourhoods. CABE is the UK’s Design Council, which supports local communities to help them deliver and shape places and spaces that meet citizens’ needs. RIBA wants to demolish the myth that design is only subjective. The Building for Life Criteria, for example, provide an objective means of judging the design quality of homes and neighbourhoods and should be more widely used. More should also be done to encourage the provision of high quality public areas and vibrant, well-designed streetscapes.

The UK’s Government goes a step further with its policy planning statements and also considers how houses and the public realm can be built more sustainably and more greenly as domestic energy use is a major contributor to CO₂ emissions. Planning and urban design are not only as important as the design of homes in achieving carbon reduction but also have a major role to play in adaptation to climate change. Therefore the PPS1 is put in play. This consultation seeks views on the proposal to combine and update existing planning policy on climate change and renewable energy from two documents into one. Building from current
approaches, the new policy reflects the latest legislative and policy context. The Planning Policy Statement (PPS) will be a supplement to Planning Policy Statement 1: Delivering Sustainable Development (PPS1). Apart from PPS1 on sustainable development there is also PPS25 which can contribute to a greener Europe. Planning Policy Statement 25 (PPS25) sets out the Government’s spatial planning policy on development and flood risk. In the latest edition the definition of functional floodplain is clarified, and it changes how the policy is applied to essential infrastructure, including water treatment works, emergency services facilities, installations requiring hazardous substances consent and wind turbines in flood risk areas.

2. In 2007, the Irish Minister for the Environment, Heritage and Local Government initiated a process designed to review the effect of policy actions on architecture and to establish a renewed programme of action that would take into account the changed circumstances of the time. The Minister established a Steering Committee to prepare recommendations on policy actions, and three Focus Groups to brief the Steering Committee. The Focus Groups concentrated on three general themes: Quality in the Built Environment; Sustainability; and Awareness, Education and Research. Membership of the Steering Committee and the Focus Groups was drawn from across the professions, public service, statutory bodies, non-governmental organisations, specialist organisations and academia as well as the specialist media. Following the reports of the Focus Groups, the Steering Committee also engaged in public consultation, holding a series of public meetings in seven locations throughout the country. The consultation process was called Conversations about Architecture and the Built Environment and it identified a series of consistent views expressed by participants across the various venues. The facilitators summarised the key issues and made a number of recommendations in a report presented to the Steering Committee.

Among a number of recurring themes, the three most commonly expressed views related to issues around planning and the built environment, education and awareness, and a desire for strong leadership from Government in promoting a high quality, sustainable environment. A significant number of participants commented on their experience when interacting with the planning system and expressed the desire that design quality should be given greater weight in the planning process. It was apparent during the Conversations that many feel disempowered in their ability to impact on the built environment. Those who participated warmly welcomed the Conversations about Architecture and the Built Environment. It was suggested that existing agencies need to be further resourced to design and deliver a range of conversational and educational processes as part of an on-going process of public discussion about architecture and our shared environment.

The Irish Government therefore created Government Policy on Architecture 2009 – 2015, Towards a Sustainable Future: Delivering Quality within the Built Environment. The Key Statements in this policy are:
• In order to strengthen the evidence base for architecture and built environment policy, the Government will actively promote research into the designed environment and will seek to optimise the alignment of existing research funding sources with the need to develop capacities and to deliver reliable information on factors that impinge on strategic decisions;

• Environmental imperatives which extend to every aspect of design and architectural quality are also measured by building performance over time. The Government will play a key role in setting standards and in ensuring that best practice is followed in the delivery of the designed built environment;

• The Government recognises the importance of fostering architectural creativity and innovation and recognises the key role in certain circumstances of architectural design competitions in delivering architectural quality and value for money in the built environment;

• The production and management of a sustainable high quality built environment will be advanced by integrating architectural design and planning frameworks.

3. Where and how people live is one of the primary elements of social sustainability. In the development of the *United Nations Principles for Older Persons (resolution 46/91)*, the UN General Assembly recognised the importance of living conditions and housing for the elderly, and infused it throughout all five categories relating to the status of older people: independence, participation, care, self-fulfilment and dignity. Key principles relating to housing for the ageing population include:

• Access to adequate food, water, shelter, clothing and health care through the provision of income, family and community support and self-help;

• Ability to live in environments that are safe and adaptable to personal preferences and changing capacities;

• Ability to live at home for as long as possible;

• Ability to utilise appropriate levels of institutional care providing protection, rehabilitation and social and mental stimulation in a humane and secure environment;

• Ability to enjoy human rights and fundamental freedoms when residing in any shelter, care or treatment facility, including full respect for their dignity, beliefs, needs and privacy and for the right to make decisions about their health care and quality of their lives.

In worldwide statistics for 2007 published by the Population Division in the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Germany, closely followed by Sweden, Greece and Austria, is among those countries with a high proportion of old people. Only Italy and Japan have a higher proportion of over 60-year-olds. Japan is a special case as the highly-developed industrial nation with the highest level of population ageing and sharply rising life expectancy – over 23,000 Japanese are over 100 years old – and has been tackling the challenges of population ageing through social insurance system reforms for nearly 35 years.
As a consequence of the country’s continuing economic growth, professional life has slowly but steadily become ever more demanding, so that fewer people are able to care for their parents. The traditional image of Japan, in which the elderly are looked after in the family, usually by the eldest child, is beginning to fade away. Very often there is little alternative to an old people’s home, but this is still generally frowned upon in society. The result is an irreversible decline in communal living in large family structures, which in turn leads to the increasing isolation of many old people.

How does Japan deal with this situation? The government responded by encouraging the building of nursing homes, day-care centres and the development of care at home programmes. According to the Japanese Ministry for Health, Employment and Social Affairs, in the year 2000, 349 private homes for the elderly catered for around 26,000 senior citizens. By July 2004, over 52,000 residents lived in 990 assisted residential schemes for the elderly, a tendency that continues to rise. A large number of hotel-like facilities of luxury character have since been built. In recent years, however, more barrier-free residential complexes have been built.

In the introduction it was stated that urban design is the art of creating and shaping cities and towns. Urban design involves the arrangement and design of buildings, public spaces, transport systems, services, and amenities. It is the process of giving form, shape, and character to groups of buildings, to whole neighbourhoods, and the city. It is a framework that orders the elements into a network of streets, squares, and blocks. Urban design blends architecture, landscape architecture, and city planning together to make urban areas functional and attractive.

The above mentioned policies touch on housing, sustainable development, spatial planning, architecture and how to make sure that proper homes are built for older people. The core, however, is that within urban design there is a need for flexible and sustainable plans. As architect Antonio Borghi puts it, “Urban design and housing issues are strongly affected by demographic and migration trends. Ageing population and ethnic minorities have become a major issue in most European countries. Europeans are becoming older so urban design and housing projects should bear in mind specific needs, services and facilities for elderly. This does not mean that we have to build homes specifically and only for the elderly but when building, bearing in mind the elderly, children and disabled people. People love what they own or what is theirs [their house, their city] and growing old does not mean that they stop loving these things. You have the right to stay in your house which is possible by creating houses which can be easily adaptable to your specific needs. Moreover people are going to live longer and play a very important role in society, supplying a lot of services that the welfare cannot afford anymore. Cities and buildings have to evolve accordingly.”
Interesting further reading

- Urban Design for an Urban Century: Placemaking for People - Lance Jay Brown, David Dixon, Oliver Gillham
- Planning the Good Community: New Urbanism in Theory and Practice - Jill Grant
- “Baukultur” as an impulse for growth, Good examples for European Cities – Federal Ministry of Transport, Building and Urban Affairs (publisher), Gehl Architects (consultant)