
The Aesthetic Control of Development

Author(s): Kaliopa DIMITROVSKA-ANDREWS

Source: *Urbani Izziv*, april 1992 / April 1992, No. 19, URBANISTIČNO OBLIKOVANJE (april 1992 / April 1992), pp. 32-39

Published by: Urbanistični inštitut Republike Slovenije

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.com/stable/44180150>

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <https://about.jstor.org/terms>



This content is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC BY 4.0). To view a copy of this license, visit <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>.



Urbanistični inštitut Republike Slovenije is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *Urbani Izziv*

JSTOR

Kaliopa DIMITROVSKA-ANDREWS

The Aesthetic Control of Development

Traditionally, design has been judged on the basis of aesthetic quality. More recently, efficiency and economy have been added to aesthetic as meaningful criteria. However, many of non measurable criteria, which have been used in urban design practice include elements of aesthetic.

The term aesthetic derives from the classical Greek noun *aestheticos*, meaning a set of principles of good taste and appreciation of beauty (The Concise Oxford Dictionary, p. 17).

In classical philosophical tradition "aesthetic" has often been assumed to accompany "ethics" as two related basic aspects of "man's relation to reality", aesthetic is concerned with the "beauty", ethics with the "good".

In the planning context the term aesthetic is usually used to refer to the visual design issues of development, because most of the immediate objects of architectural and urban practices are empirical, physical objects, which are primarily visual.

Aesthetic in Urban Design

Aesthetic and design are expressed as a part of the same process, design being the activity of arranging forms and spaces, and aesthetic the visual appreciation of the end product.

Aesthetic perception is a product of a biological system which is identical across the species and is programmed with both constants and variables (Smith, 1981). The constants consist of primitive brain programmes which stretch back to our primordial origins and which have strong emotional overtones. They concern the search for new experience and the constant search for orderliness in the environment. The variables comprise the infinite range of genetic differences and individual

experience, including acculturation. They concern a dialogue between two contrasting systems of information; there is more complex perception routine in which aesthetic value emerges out of tension and contest. In other words, the way the brain operates can be simplified after Youngson (1990, p. 52-54) in two different ways of reacting to the appearance of built environment: sensuous and intellectual.

The first consists of human response to mass and space, to proportions, sequences, shapes, colours, textures and the like. To some extent this is a matter of taste and of what we are used to; but is not merely that. There are colours and surfaces, voids and proportions that naturally please the eye. Thus Greek temples are calm, whereas Baroque facades are restless; Regency terraces are elegant and urbane; the Gothic revival is solemn and serious; and the best twentieth-century buildings are light and full of freedom. Responses such as these are close to the pole of pure sensual experience.

But at the same time these response can be educated. An understanding of the built environment is essential to aesthetic judgment.

Previous knowledge and reflection are essential if we are to judge buildings not from the sensuous but from the intellectual point of view. ... We can sometimes see in buildings references to other buildings, and therefore to other scenes and other societies, if we know enough. ... Looking carefully at buildings and trying to understand what they do and what they say and what problems they solve is thus a precondition of judging them. Thoughtful, well-informed and sympathetic examination may not lead us to like a building; but it should lead us to recognise its quality, including its aesthetic quality, if it has any.

Understanding of the architectural design of the buildings is important, but the aesthetic effect of the buildings "depends more than uniting else on their mass and placing" (Youngson, 1990), their impact in the urban environment as a whole. General outline of a new building should harmonise with its surroundings and has to be sympathetic in the scale, setting, colour and texture. Harmony and decency of the urban environment seems to be one of the rule upon which the built form have to be produced. "A few good buildings will not make a good street or a good town, and that a few bad ones will ruin everything" (Youngson, 1990). London Docklands (Isle of Dogs) can be an example of total urban design failure besides an extremely high architectural value of some of the buildings. Mediocre as architecture, Nash's stuccoed facades and colonnades of Regent Park are still admired as example of one of the best man-made urban scenery.

The other important consideration in the urban scene is the visible evidence of the past.

The retention of old buildings is of the greatest importance to the cultural life of the city; but this retention must be a selective process, depending on the aesthetic quality of the buildings, on their history, and on their capacity for further use. (Youngson, 1990, p. 69)

So far we can conclude that aesthetic in urban design is consisted with external appearance of development and its context; that is: "massing and setting" of buildings, "harmony and decency" of their composition and "visible evidence of the past" in urban scene.

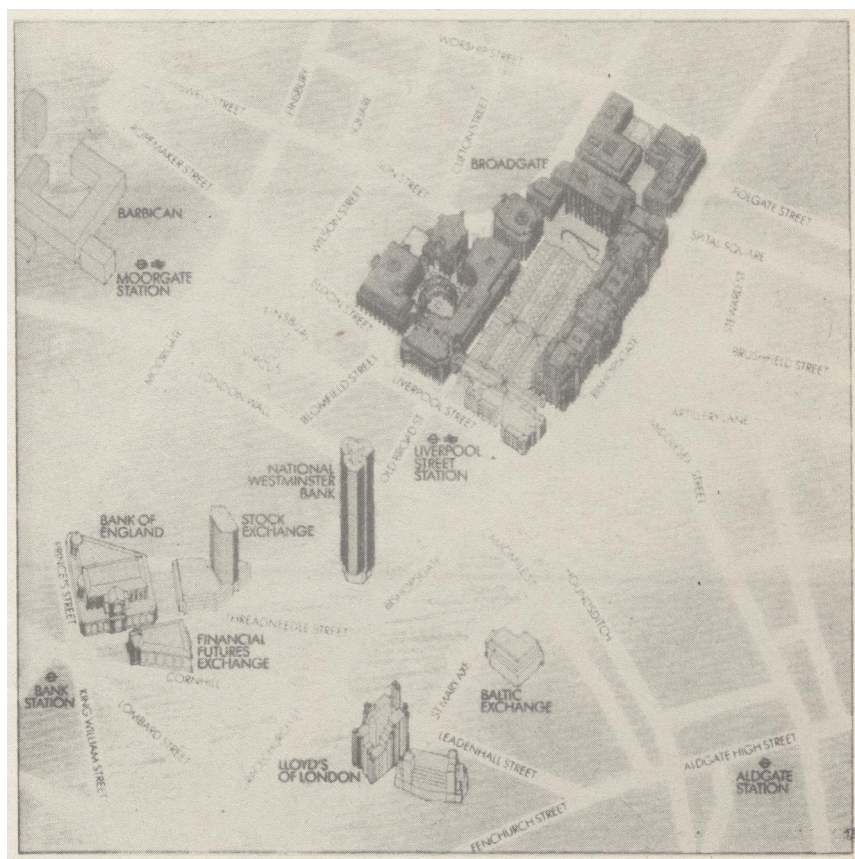
External appearance of the built environment was and remains one of the most important subject in the urban-design research area. This is the main subject in the work of urban perceptualists (Lynch, 1960; Cullen, 1961; Appleyard, 1969) and environmental psychologists (Heath, 1968; Lowenthal and Riel, 1972; Kaplan, 1973), which attempt to understand people's reaction to

the physical appearance of built environment and to determine aesthetic issues for a new development.

Lynch was interested in the way in which cities are seen, and the implications of city images for their design. His work was concerned primarily with "legibility" of the city - "the ease with which its parts can be recognised and organised into a coherent pattern. Legibility depends on perceptual differences among their elements, which can be made either visually, or in terms of activities, or both. The concept of legibility, which has a role in most of urban-design approaches is used to denote places whose layouts can easily be grasped by their user (Bentley and Butina, 1990).

Lynch had subsequently (1981) developed the wider framework of a "normative theory of city form", described through a series of performance dimensions; following, as we can see later, are important for an aesthetic considerations of the development control; access (the ability to reach other activities, resources, ... or places, including quan-

Broadgate. Phases 1-4. London EC1, a rare example of a successful modern urban space combined with a high quality of architectural design and refinement of detail.



tity and diversity of the elements which can be reached), *fit* (the degree to which the form and capacity of spaces, equipment... in a settlement match the pattern and quantity of actions that people customarily engage in), *sense* (the degree to which the settlement can be clearly perceived and mentally differentiated and structures in time and space by its residents and the degree to which that mental structure connects with their values and concepts), *vitality* (the degree to which the form of the settlement supports the vital functions, the biological requirements and capabilities of human beings) and *control* (the degree to which the use and access to spaces and activities, and their creation, repair, modification, and management are controlled by those who use, work, or reside in them).

Broadgate (summer)



Kaplan (1973) has attempted to provide a more integrated framework for

environmental cognition and preferences, but the results of Berlyne's experiments in complexity and novelty are more important from the urban design point of view. He states that diversity, complexity, novelty and ambiguity in a composition are conditions which lead to "arousal" and "attention". Order, organisation, symmetry, and repetition keep arousal within moderate and tolerable bounds. An aesthetic product, after Berlyne, has to accomplish two things: (1) gain (and maintain) the attention of an audience, and (2) keep arousal within limits. However, there is not clearly defined and quantify an aesthetic response and the work of environmental psychologists has not yet approached the stage where it may be applied in the planning process with any degree of confidence.

Cullen's work *Townscape* (1961) and *The Concise Townscape* (1971) based on the visual perception of the built environment become one of the most popular urban-design approaches in England, "something of a textbook for both aesthetic control and civic design" (Williamson, 1990). Cullen emphasises the physical environment as an "art of ensemble", focusing on the individual's visual experiences of the environment and its subsequent application in design, in "creating a place" (Bentley and Butina, 1990). These visual experiences are interpreted through a catalogue of visual concepts described such as "art of ensemble" (the grouping of buildings to picturesque effect), "serial vision" (a series of analytical views), "here and there" (what lies beyond?), "place" (identity), "enclosure" (static space), pedestrian scale. *Townscape's* influence on the practice of town planning, particularly the analyses of the imageability of the urban environment, remains enormously strong, to this day. Much of Cullen's terminology, which is tied to traditional qualities of an urban environment (pedestrian scale, closure, place) is present in the checklists of aesthetic considerations for good urban design. However, *Townscape*, which suggests how to produce new design respecting the existing context, lacks of methodological rigour (discussing physical

form out of its social, political and economic content) has been critical as being "tourist mentality" approach (Punter, 1985).

By outlining the work of some of the more prominent environment psychologists and urban perceptualist, we can conclude that the perception of the built environment involves a degree of aesthetic response, which can be sensuous or intellectual or both. If an understanding of the built environment is essential to aesthetic judgment, than there must be some rules upon which an urban environment should be designed to satisfied aesthetic needs. Different authors have emphasised different elements of the urban appearance as being important for an aesthetic quality, but an aesthetic control of an urban development in its

"wider sense does not begin and end with the control of external appearance of development; it embraces urban design in its widest sense to control the physical attributes and uses of new buildings and the spaces between them, so as to ensure a rewarding sensuous experience for the public who use the environment thus created. So aesthetic control must be as much concerned with the comfort and safety of the passer-by, with the activity, vitality and accessibility of the place under consideration, and with the social as well as the visual pleasure that building and spaces can create". (Punter, 1985, pp. 93)

From this point of view aesthetic control must take a practical considerations of other development control elements such as: suitability of location and land use, quantities and mix of space, activity generation, functional layout and access, site characteristics and context, size, massing and external appearance of development. If aesthetic and design are expressed as a part of the same process; design being the activity of arranging forms and spaces, and aesthetic the visual appreciation of the end product, may we can suggested that the meaning of Aesthetic in Urban Design is not consisted only with external appearance of development and its context, but also

with its using, this being result of the sometime different experience of users and perceivers of buildings and public environments. From this point of view Aesthetic control in Urban Design context has to dial with achievement of good urban design.

Aesthetic issues in contemporary development control practise

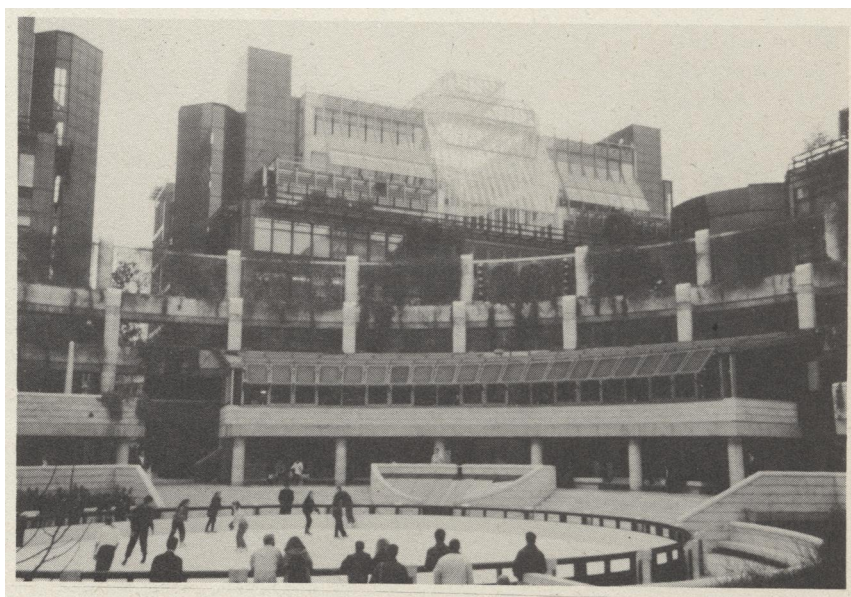
Aesthetic control and the promotion of aesthetic standards and policies by planning authorities has been criticised for being with out clear direction and intention:

There are also several influences combine to diminish aesthetic as a planning consideration, including:

1. The nature of aesthetic considerations which may seem imprecise, variable and emotive;
2. The appeal of other more quantifiable inputs to planning such as economics, geography and sociology (land use, density, access);
3. The divergence between the legal and the aesthetic approaches to planning, the former based on law and precedent, the latter searching for the unique in every situation.

As a result of these factors aesthetic are not generally a proper subject for detailed control, but in practice, there is a tendency to be formulated and applied an increasing number of aesthetic policies.

Broadgate (winter)



Which design elements are significant for ensuring that aesthetic quality in the urban environment being under the control of its development?

There is a wide range of these elements variously classified in the checklists of aesthetic considerations and in the everyday development control practice. The main considerations come from the issues of context, amenity, external effects and arrangement, and architectural design (see tables). Previous research has shown that different authorities interpret aesthetic considerations in a variety of ways and there is no systematic approach in

this area, so even the most important design decisions are made through negotiation within the planning process. This is yet another reason for the revived interest in the need to develop clearer principles of design control which can be more comprehensible to the public, and can be clearly encompassed by prospective developers (e.g. The Prince of Wales, 1989). A number of professionals (e.g. Bentley et al, 1984; Holyoak, 1985; Urban Design Group, 1987; Tibbalds, 1988; Buchanan, 1988) have offered their ideas as to what might constitute fundamental principles for good contemporary architecture and urban design practice.

Broadgate, Liverpool station



Comparison of these different checklists of principles for good urban design shows three basic categories:

1. **Context and the general compatibility of new development**
2. **Arrangement and External Effects**
3. **Architectural issues and Facade/Elevational Design**

In considering Category (1) Context, it can be seen that many written advice policy statements of local authorities deal with these aspects of development. Key phrases used to express a building's relationship to its surroundings, such as prevention of outrages, preserving character, injurious to surroundings (Circular 1305, 1933); preventing alien intrusion, relate building to its context (RFAC, 1990) are present in the vocabulary of planning control. Even the contemporary RIBA debate in aesthetic control concludes that there is a need for better presentation of planning applications to analyse and illustrate the context of the proposed development.

Elements which can thus be taken into consideration in a sense of context are: site characteristics (topography, landscape, townscape and ecological features), land-use characteristics (mixed uses, compatible contents), setting (urban morphology, street line, street back, visibility), scale (height, bulk, massing). It has to be recognised that "a checklist or formula approach to design or

design control, uncritically applied, can stifle creativity and inhibit innovation by overemphasising importance of context, narrowly shared meanings and historical forms" (Punter, 1990). Such an approach, particularly if "developers see slavish adherence to guidance" might develop into plagiarism. Any design principles in use have to be appropriate to a particular development context (different criteria for town centres, suburbia, industrial estates).

The second category, Arrangement and external effects of development relates to the quality of the public realm. Any set of design principles here have to be relevant to user experience and "in this sense issues of access, safety, comfort, convenience are likely to be more important than architectural delight" (Punter, 1990). Elements which can thus be taken into consideration in the sense of the External Effect of development include:

- layout (external space-private and public, access and parking, service),
- physical quality impact (daylight, noise protection, visual privacy, microclimate), landscaping (hard & soft, trees, public and private amenity space, street furniture, paving, signs), scenic amenity (street scene, public space scene).

Category 3) Architectural issues is the most sensitive area of aesthetic control. The Royal Fine Art Commission's report "Planning for Beauty" in commenting on the visual effects of development identifies: aesthetic impacts of solid & void, fenestration, silhouette and shape, vertical or horizontal emphasis, colour and texture, modelling or decoration. Aspects to be considered in the sense of the architectural issues of development might include: style (historical reference, spirit, meaning, symbolism), materials (types, colours, textures, contrast, transparency, weathering), facade/elevation details (solid and void, fenestration, decoration, proportion). However, the preoccupations of British townscape critics and aesthetic controllers with questions of archi-

tectural style has shown this to be a big mistake (Punter, 1985; Larkham, 1988). Neo-classical, neo-Georgian and neo-vernacular, "have each become as omnipresent and bland as the very mediocrity they sought to oppose" (Punter, 1990). Therefore, what might constitute a set of design principles that would help ensure a humane architecture, while leaving the architect free to exercise his full creative powers? Buchanan's principles seem to be the most useful set that might be elaborated in the specific condition of aesthetic control. His prescription for architectural facades (1989) might be encapsulated by the emphasis upon place, richness, and hierarchy as he emphasises the obli-

Birmingham, International Convention Centre, making more of the canals and their edges.



CONTEXT AND GENERAL COMPATIBILITY

commandments/principles	elements/aspects to be considered
fit, vitality (Lynch), appropriate activity (Jacobs), harmony and context, in scale with context (HRH The Prince of Wales); responsive environment, variety, human scale (Bentley et al); uses respect of history, encouragement of mixed use, scale of enclosure (Tibbalds); retention of the best, more than one use (Holyoak); responsive forms, mixed use (UD Group); dialogue with context and history (Buchanan); massing and setting, harmony and decency, visible evidence of the past (Youngson)	site characteristics topography, landscape and townscape, ecological features land use characteristics mixed uses, compatible setting urban morphology, street line, setback scale height, bulk, massing

ARRANGEMENT AND EXTERNAL EFFECTS

commandments/principles	elements/aspects to be considered
sense, access, legibility (Lynch); the street permeability, robust space, activity richness, safety (Jacobs); permeability, legibility, visual appropriateness robustness and adaptability of the public space (Bentley et al); encourage pedestrian permeability, legibility (Tibbalds); hierarchy (HRH The Prince of Wales); visual accessibility reflect uses (Holyoak); public access, security, (UD Group); public space and movement system, place making, public realm outdoor room (Buchanan); art of ensemble, serial vision, here and there, place, enclosure (Cullen).	layout external space - public and private access and parking, service physical quality impact daylight, noise protection, visual privacy, micro climate landscaping hard and soft, trees scenic amenity street scene, public space scene

ARCHITECTURAL ISSUES

commandments/principles	elements/aspects to be considered
robustness/adaptability and flexibility of buildings, visual and symbolic richness (Bentley et al); visual delight (Tibbalds); materials and decoration, signs and light (HRH The Prince of Wales); "visible" construction, integral ornament (Holyoak); stimulating, protection, comfort (UD Group); respect architectural conventions, articulate mean- ings, connect inside and out, natural-rich materials, decoration (Buchanan).	style historic reference, spirit, meaning, symbolism materials types, colours, textures, contrast, transparency, weathering facade/elevation details solid and void, fenestration, decoration, proportion

gation of the facade to respect architectural conventions, to make outdoor rooms, to communicate between inside and out, as well as the need for visual and symbolic richness, the use of natural materials (which weather well) and the importance of decoration (that distracts and delights, intrigues and informs).

Briefly, we can summarise therefore that design elements established as being significant for the control of the aesthetics of development are versed in the basic principles of urban design, and refer to three main categories: context/compatibility, arrangement/external effects and architectural issues/facade-elevation design of development. The table shows the relationship between these recent urban design commandments/principles and the elements of aesthetic control in these three main categories (page 38).

mag. Kaliopa Dimitrovska-Andrews, dipl. inž. arh.

Besedilo je del raziskave opravljene na Joint Centre for Urban Design, Oxford Polytechnic.

References:

- Smiths, P. F.: "A theory of aesthetics", Royal Institute of British Architects, Journal vol. 88, No. 12, 1981.
- Scruton, R.: *The Aesthetics of Architecture*, Methuen & Co. Ltd, London, 1979.
- Youngson, A. J.: *Urban Development and the Royal Fine Art Commissions*, Edinburgh University Press, Edinburgh, 1990.
- Punter, J.: *A History of Aesthetic Control 1*, University of Reading, Reading, 1984.
- Punter, J.: *A History of Aesthetic Control 2*, University of Reading, Reading, 1985.
- Punter, J.: *The Ten Commandments of Architecture and Urban Design*, The Planner, No. 39, 1990.
- Larkham, P. J.: *Aesthetic control, architectural styles and townscape change*, Department of Geography, University of Birmingham, Birmingham, 1988.
- Royal Town Planning Institute: *Development control a technical manual*, Unit 3, Aesthetic issues, Department of Town Planning, Oxford Polytechnic, Oxford, 1987.
- Hazan, J.: *The treatment of aesthetics in urban planning: a comparative study of development control practice*, Polytechnic of Central London, School of Environment, Planning Unit, London, 1979.