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**This paper was presented *The Future of Urban Design Education: Bridging the Gaps* conference held at Oxford Brookes University in April 1997 organised by the Joint Centre for Urban Design at Oxford Brookes and the Urban Design Group. It was a contribution to Track 5 of the conference concerned with examining ways of bridging the gaps between professions. The conference was held prior to the formation and launch of the Urban Design Alliance in December 1997.**

## **The Surveying Profession and Urban Design**

*We are quintessentially the profession of the physical environment as it is experienced by the vast majority of our fellow human beings.* (Simon Pott, President of The Royal Institution of Chartered Surveyors, 1995)

*As the leading suppliers of professional services to the land, property and construction industries ... chartered surveyors have a disproportional influence on decision making as it affects the environment.* (Jeremy Bayliss, President of The Royal Institution of Chartered Surveyors, 1996)

### **Chartered surveyors and the environment**

*Chartered surveyors, planning and urban design: friends or foes?*

It is unfortunate that when it comes to creating a satisfying public realm too many design professionals see chartered surveyors as adversaries rather than allies. Surveyors together with their clients, landowners, developers and investors, are often cast as the villains of the piece and all make useful scapegoats when treasured schemes are not implemented or fail to match initial expectations.

The Royal Institution of Chartered Surveyors is a uniquely diverse profession which has a long, and at times distinguished, history of involvement in planning and environmental issues and practice. For example, several of the founding members of the (Royal)Town Planning Institute were surveyors; Thomas Adams, William Davidge and Sir George Pepler, all past presidents of the RTPI (Adams was the first in 1914), immediately spring to mind. A later generation of surveyor-planners includes Bernard Collins, Ernest Doubleday, Leslie Lane and Nathaniel Lichfield who, likewise, were all presidents of the Institute in the 1950s and 1960s. As Gordon Cherry noted in his history of planning in the UK, from the earliest years of the planning profession, at a time when it was primarily concerned with physical shape of development, there has always been a nucleus of surveyors interested in town planning. Indeed, several surveyors were associated with the Garden City Association (Cherry, 1974, 44).

The RICS's education guidelines for general practitioners has traditionally included a strong planning component in both its own external examinations and, more recently, in accredited courses; more so than seems to have been the case with the RIBA. In 1950, the Schuster Report on the education of planners specifically mentioned the planning content of the estate management degree courses offered by the University of Cambridge and the College of Estate Management (now the BSc Land Management degree programme at The University of

Reading). As a full time student of surveying in the 1960s the writer was able to specialise in town planning and, for example, had to complete an urban site planning project as part of his studies. In the early 1970s, planning oriented members of the RICS, a significant proportion of whom worked within the public sector at that time, formed a new division of the Institution, the Planning and Development Division.

With such a large and diverse profession it is not surprising that members of other professions, let alone the public, are sometimes confused about the Institution's priorities and values. However, urban designers should be wary of artificial barriers which inhibit an adequate appreciation of how, particularly in a market economy, urban design objectives can be achieved, or the potential contribution of chartered surveyors to the quality of urban design. In 1974 Edgar Rose, then Professor of Planning at the University of Aston and a practising urban designer, wrote of the legacy of urban design, one consequence of which was:

*... (the) failure to recognise the complexity of the design process itself or the object of that process. (Rose, 1974, 121)*

The same year, Jonathan Barnett wrote, in the light of his experience in the Urban Design Group of New York City, that:

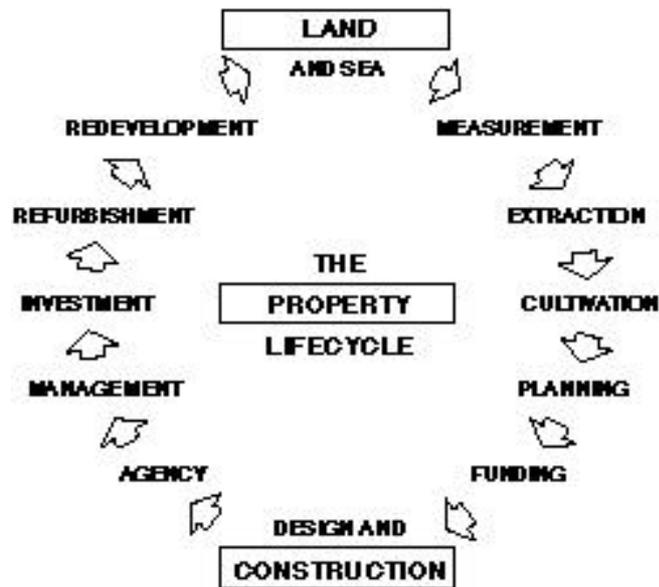
*The ... economics of real-estate investment (is) the medium of city design, as essential to the art as paint is to the painter. (Barnett, 1974, 6)*

Urban designers have been slow to learn from such conclusions. Twenty years later Jon Lang could still write:

*The position that many urban designers take is that understanding the nature of land development processes is outside their domain of interest. ... This lack of understanding reduces their role in creating the future city and places them at the whim of the development community. (Lang, 1994, 371)*

*Chartered surveyors and the property life cycle.*

The property and construction industries, in which most surveyors work, play a crucial role in the national economy and our society. They form one of the largest sectors of the economy: construction accounts for 7% of GDP, and the total value of property in the UK exceeds £1 trillion and is approximately equal in value to the equities and gilts markets together.



**Figure 1:** The Property Lifecycle

Chartered surveyors are the leading source of professional advice on land, property and construction and they advise at every stage in its life cycle which Figure 1 illustrates: a version of this diagram is rapidly becoming the Institution's unofficial second logo. In recent years the Institution, as part of a conscious strategy to improve the image and profile of the surveying profession, has actively participated in many debates about aspects of property, the economy and the environment and has successfully informed and influenced government policy. The RICS's response to the Quality Initiative illustrates this proactive approach.

*RICS response to the Quality in Town and Country Initiative*

The Institution's written response to the DoE's discussion paper *Quality in Town and Country* (RICS Policy Unit, 1994) was as well conceived and as positive as that submitted by any of the other built environment professions and from the outset the RICS has actively participated in the Initiative. One feature of the RICS's contribution was to promote a £35,000 research project which examined some of the influences on the quality of urban design, focusing particularly on the roles and perceptions of developers, investors and occupiers.

However, the RICS's recent interest and involvement in issues relating to urban quality, predated the DoE's Quality Initiative. For example, in 1992, the RICS published *Living Cities* (Watts, 1992). This report was the result of a presidential initiative by Ted Watts to examine ways of improving the quality of the life of people who lived and worked in towns and cities. It included chapters written by a range of experts on such diverse topics as land tenure, mixed-use development, affordable housing, energy efficiency, public open space and sustainable transport.

In July 1996, the Institution approved its *Strategy for the Environment*. An accompanying paper *Land, Property, Construction and the Environment*, (RICS, 1996) described the activities of these industries impacting on environmental improvement and sustainable development as a first step towards establishing a permanent framework to guide the Institution's activities and to inform and guide its members irrespective their specialism. The paper stated:

*If the purpose of our land, property and construction industries may be described as working towards preconceived functional and aesthetic goals, then no phase in the*

*(property) life-cycle is more critical than design to sustainable development and environmental improvement. (RICS, 1996, 11)*

#### *The Institution's approach to research and education*

For several years now, the RICS has promoted and funded research into aspects of land, property and the environment and has published many policy statements and reports. In 1996, for example, publications included:

- Mixed-use Development: Concepts and Realities
- Protecting our Heritage
- Quality of Urban Design (see below)
- Shaping Britain for the 21st Century
- The Environmental Impact of Land and Property
- The Real Cost of Poor Homes
- The Value of Conservation.

The RICS ceased to offer its own external examinations several years ago. All new entrants to the profession now complete an approved course and undertake a minimum two year training period in professional practice as part of an increasingly rigorous and structured process of assessing professional competence. The Institution's approach to professional education is to accredit centres rather than simply validate courses; it is currently developing a core curriculum for recognised courses. The RICS requires all its members to undertake continuing professional development.

#### **Examples and lessons from teaching and research**

##### *Educating surveyors in urban design at The University of Reading*

The Department of Land Management and Development at Reading was created in 1972 with the relocation of the College of Estate Management from London and the integration of its full time educational activities into the University. Since then, around 2,500 students have graduated in estate, and latterly land, management from the University. The University's two main property programmes are BSc and MSc degrees in Land Management. A School of Planning Studies offers two postgraduate planning courses both of which are accredited by the RTPI.

The BSc Land Management course allows students to specialise in one of four fields: development and planning; investment and finance; property markets and valuation; and rural practice. In 1995, the University launched a four year programme combining land management and urban planning and development; if this course is approved by the RTPI at their next accreditation visit in 1999, it will be the first such programme in the country to secure dual professional accreditation. All undergraduate land management students study planning in both the first and second years of the course as part of their Foundation Studies; the units include lectures and tutorials on conservation, design and aesthetic control. Final year students specialising in development and planning undertake a challenging site planning project, one of three major projects, not with the intention of making them 'designers', but with the aim of stimulating their awareness of the built environment and gaining, through first hand experience, some insight into the nature and importance of design.

All final year students can opt to take an introductory unit in urban design, assessed through a 'Good Place' project inspired by the Urban Design Group's own initiative first mooted in 1990. They can also choose a unit entitled cities, culture and urbanism, offered by Dr. John Montgomery. In the current academic year, some 35% of finalists have opted to specialise in development and planning; 28% will study urban design; and 20% have chosen cities, culture and urbanism. Finally, over 40% of students regularly choose to study property development;

design is one of a number of key themes in this major final year unit. Students on the new combined Land Management and Planning programme, are required to take all these units and others in closely related fields.

Students invariably find design studies challenging but rewarding and the standards some achieve is little short of remarkable bearing in mind their inexperience in this field. A few Reading students have gone on to study urban design or planning as postgraduates; many more become involved in urban design issues through working in development companies or in professional consultancy where they can exercise real influence over the quality of the built environment. The students appreciate the opportunity to study these subjects and most comment positively on the new insights and perspectives they have gained.

#### *Quality of Urban Design research*

This study, funded by the RICS and the DoE, was undertaken by a team, led by the writer, from the Department of Land Management and Development at Reading working in association with DEGW, planners, architects and designers. A report on the study was published in October 1996 by the RICS (Rowley, et al., 1996).

The four objectives of the research were to examine, from the perspective of developers, investors and occupiers:

- the role and importance of urban design considerations;
- the benefits from giving explicit attention to urban design considerations;
- the factors which constrain the promotion of good urban design; and
- the incentives and other measures which might encourage increased attention and contribution to urban design quality.

Most members of the Urban Design Group exercise professional *skill* as designers. In contrast most surveyors are members of a different group which includes developers, investors and occupiers; such people exercise considerable *influence* on the quality of the public realm although they have often failed to appreciate the full extent of their power.

The researchers found that developers, investors and occupiers incorporate urban design considerations into their decision-making but they differ in the range of considerations they take into account; the weight they attach to these; and the importance they attach to urban design relative to their other concerns. Property decision-makers consider urban design insofar as they derive a benefit from doing so.

The researchers also found a widespread recognition that it is possible to make better places but this is often coupled with a view that someone else is or should be responsible for taking the initiative. Developers feel they are constrained by the requirements and preferences of their customers - investors and occupiers. The needs and priorities of occupiers also constrain investors. Commercial occupiers stress that they can rarely choose a property on the basis of its quality of urban design; other factors dominate the choices they make.

A central problem, both in the research and in practice is the lack of a common, shared vocabulary between the key players in the urban design and development process. Much of the jargon of urban design is at best off-putting and at worst a real barrier to co-operation and partnership. Another issue is the difficulty of demonstrating the financial and market benefits of investing in quality of urban design.

The research concluded that standards of urban design are improving and there are examples of developments which demonstrate a broadly based concern for the quality of the public realm. A common ingredient often was a creative partnership between the private and public sectors, combining vision and resources. In other words, some of the 'gaps' which were the

subject of this conference had been bridged! Such schemes usually worked because they had recognised and sought to 'go with the grain' of change rather than sticking rigidly to a pre-determined and narrow view of the ingredients of urban design quality.

## **Bridging the gaps**

### *Initial and continuing education and debate*

The surveying profession has over 70,000 corporate members and there are, approximately, a further 20,000 student members and probationers. One of the *Quality of Urban Design* research recommendations was that the RICS should encourage accredited courses, concerned with property development, investment and management to include urban design within their teaching programmes so as to develop the awareness of the next generation of surveyors: the other built environment professions must, likewise, ensure that the courses they accredit promote a sufficient understanding of the processes of property development and investment.

We need to rediscover the sense of common cause that was evident in the early years of the century at the formation of the Royal Town Planning Institute. Then the Surveyors' Institute did not stake a total claim on planning unlike some other professions; as William Davidge wrote in a paper about planning layouts:

*... it is not too much to hope that our (surveying) profession will be privileged to perform its share of the great work.* (Davidge, 1909)

Although it is important to educate the next generation of decision-makers, the immediate challenge is to inform today's professionals. Another of the research's recommendations was that the RICS should promote a series of workshops about the value of quality of urban design for developers, investors and occupiers; the first of these will take place later this year, fittingly perhaps, in Milton Keynes. The requirements of most professional institutes for continuing professional development is a potentially important vehicle for promoting better understanding and respect within and between the professions.

### *Inquiry and future research*

Education and debate are two of the keys to changing peoples' 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.

The RICS continues to promote research relevant to urban design. For example studies into the:

- conversion of redundant office space to residential use;
- investment performance of listed buildings (part of a regular survey with English Heritage); and
- the impact of building quality on depreciation and obsolescence.

Significantly, the DoE have recently invited expressions of interest in a study which would examine the costs and benefits of urban design building on the findings of the RICS/DoE *Quality of Urban Design* research.

### *Example and leadership*

The RICS Awards are one vehicle enabling the profession to promote good practice by reference to specific developments. The award scheme is an annual programme with six categories honouring projects ranging from building conservation to greening the city, and including an urban regeneration award.

All professions and special interest groups, including the Urban Design Group, wish to maintain the profile of the organisation: the RICS is no exception. Its *Manifesto: Election 1997* contained pleas on issues including housing, urban regeneration, transport and land use, and high quality urban design. The manifesto acknowledged that better quality urban design benefits everyone but that, despite examples of good practice, more work is needed if urban design is to become an integral part of the development process.

The RICS is an active member of the Construction Industry Council. The Council published its own Manifesto for the UK Construction Industry entitled *Partners in Building Prosperity* (1996). Several of the manifesto's recommendations relating to the planning and design reflect the findings of the *Quality of Urban Design* research and echo the stance now being taken by the RICS. The manifesto should hearten urban designers: sceptics will argue such statements of good intent are meaningless; others will hope they mark a genuine change of heart reflecting a belated realisation of the costs of short-termism and the long term value of good design in the context of sustained public interest in the quality of the urban environment.

## Conclusion

In 1978, Jeffrey Switzer, a President of the RICS's Planning and Development Division, gave an address entitled *Managing the Urban Fabric*, a task he defined as:

*... essentially concerned with the decision to develop, maintain, improve, or replace buildings in their setting, in order to satisfy or provide the physical framework for satisfying human needs.*

Acknowledging that the term urban fabric was '*not very poetic*' he defined it as embracing:

*... not only the buildings themselves but streets, footpaths, open spaces, gardens grass and trees, all the pieces of equipment such as street lights ... and the whole network of utility services.* (Switzer, 1978)

Switzers' concept of managing the urban fabric is strikingly similar to some contemporary interpretations of urban design and he highlighted the pivotal role of chartered surveyors in the process of managing the urban fabric, most notably in the creation of a bridge from plan to reality. He concluded his paper with a reference to what he called 'The Collins Dictum' - after Bernard Collins, a chartered surveyor and past president of the RTPI:

*The tendency of real estate to develop is the only raw material applied town planning knows (for 'applied town planning' now read urban design?).* (Collins, 1955)

Jonathan Barnett's comment concerning the crucial role of property investment in urban design, quoted earlier in this paper, endorses this conclusion (Barnett, 1974, 6).

Urban design considerations are certainly on the agendas of many developers and investors and of the chartered surveyors who advise them. The awareness is there and the challenge is to build on this opportunity. The appreciation is being reinforced by several changes and trends within the property industry and the economy which should help raise standards of urban design. We need to find ways of bridging divisions and gaps between and within professions; education, research, debate and leadership can all help in achieving this objective. Chartered Surveyors have an important part to play in promoting better urban design and the RICS has shown its willingness to be involved.

Urban design is an inclusive process which involves many people and interests and affects us all. Urban designers cannot afford to stand aloof from the processes of urban development; even if they do not always approve, they must try to understand and be prepared to work closely with all those who have specialist expertise in the field. So, in the words of E.M. Forster at the beginning of Howards End:

*Only connect ...*

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