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Citation: Paterson, Elaine (2005) What makes successful design in historic market towns?
In: Town and Country Planning Summer School, September 2005, University of Edinburgh.

URL:

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Paterson, E. (2005) 'What makes successful design in historic market towns?' Conference proceedings from the town and country planning summer school. University of Edinburgh, Edinburgh, UK, September 2005.

Design in Market Towns

I teach urban design to surveying students with a developer mindset, often influenced by negative media on planning, and this presents a challenge. This is especially so when trying to convince them that planning can play a positive role in design matters.

Exactly what that positive role might be and how it might be further improved is central to promoting the planning role in a positive light. In 2003 I was awarded funding by the RIBA to investigate this.

The best value process provided opportune timing for the study as increasingly attempts are being made to measure qualitative outcomes of planning or "added value". Examples of good and bad practice might contribute to devising benchmarks in this exercise.

I looked at the role of planners in helping to ensure good design quality in new development in English historic market towns with reference to four case study towns: Durham, Ludlow, Chichester and Dorchester. These towns are geographically spread throughout England, and a range of development types were looked at within them. The case studies, which include a good and bad example for each, were selected using a postal questionnaire to all civic societies within English Historic Towns Forum towns. Civic societies were used as informed but lay interested parties. As there are obviously limitations in using civic societies to define success they were asked to refer to some recognised urban design criteria used by CABI to assist.

The key players in the statutory planning decision making process for each case were interviewed and conclusions drawn about factors (relating to process and policy used) tending to result in "successful" schemes and factors giving rise to "unsuccessful" schemes as perceived by civic societies. Pointers to improved process and policy are considered.

The findings indicate that planning can play a significant role in securing a successful outcome, but many factors have to work together to help ensure positive outcomes. As well as a need for better training for those making planning decisions relating to design, which has been well documented, other factors must work alongside this. These include organisational issues and political will. Mechanisms to ensure clear communication between players as well as clarity of roles is essential. Design must be accorded a high political priority, and there must be more comprehensive and

systematic use of design guidance with greater government clarity being given on how to do this.

Current opportunities to improve planning process and policy with respect to design have emerged recently with LDF's and promotion of design codes. A recent CABE publication "Making Design Policy Work" (2005) discusses how to deliver good design through LDF's and addresses some of the issues raised in my research.

CABE strongly promotes design champions, together with partnerships, at a high level in local planning authorities. It encourages use of design codes and briefs as useful tools as well as pre-application design advice and design and access statements with applications (the latter being a new requirement following the Planning and Compulsory Purchase Act 2004). A hierarchy of design policies within a LDF is also set out.

There are many positive design initiatives in planning policy and practice and the time is right for potential improvements, but what will it take for widespread implementation?