



What makes a good place? **Materials & delivery.**

Time frame

Each of the five urban design qualities can be presented in a 30 minute timeframe. It may take more time depending on the extent of detail covered as it relates to other curriculum work.

The 'Where are we?' exercise can take 10 minutes and takes place in the Legibility part of the lesson. It can be downloaded as a PDF handout or as a Powerpoint slideshow.

In the 3D modelling exercise the students should be allowed 20 minutes to develop their plans with discussion to follow.

Lesson notes

Pre-lesson: Before the lesson and before you introduce the urban design qualities to the students, they should be asked to survey where they live using the Neighbourhood Exploration Sheet. These questions should help the students to make connections with the qualities when they are introduced. Refer to the survey questions and solicit answers from the students when discussing relevant qualities. For instance, when talking about variety, you can refer to the question about how many different uses they discovered in their neighbourhood, then investigate how their answers support the quality of variety, is it good variety, is it a place they enjoy because of the variety, etc.

Lesson: Prior to the introduction of the five qualities, hand out the *Urban Design Qualities Handbook*, which contains extra information and examples for students to use both in the lesson and later for reference. Then open the lesson with questions such as:

- why is it important to have **good** places?
- what makes a **good** place?
- what makes a **successful** place?
- what **places do you like** to hang out in and why?

Make a list on the board of their responses to review later in the lesson.

Explain that several qualities are considered by designers and planners as desirable for achieving good and successful places. The qualities apply more to urban areas than to rural environments. (Here 'urban' and 'rural' can be discussed as they relate to the Geography curriculum).

The five qualities can be seen in the layering of elements which make up the built form:

- the first layer consists of streets and how they connect forming plots of land
- the second layer consists of blocks formed by the construction of buildings which have public fronts and private backs
- the third layer is how these buildings are used and the variety of uses they provide.



Before explaining these qualities it should be understood that there are no hard rules for achieving them. In any development its location must always be considered, and adjustment or flexibility may be required in devising methods of achieving a successful development.

For example, financial constraints may require more office space and day time parking than local residents would like but the trade off can be more trees along the street.

Introducing the five urban design qualities:

The visuals in the *Urban Design Qualities Handbook* should be used when running the discussions.

1. Permeability - movement and connections

A desirable characteristic of a place is how easy it is to get to and move through. Places should also be integrated physically or connected to their surrounding areas.

A successful movement system:

- provides the maximum amount of choice for how people will make their journey
- takes fully into account all modes of movement: by foot, by cycle, by public transport and by car (in that order of importance)
- makes clear connections to existing roads and facilities.

Questions that can lead into discussion:

- how many of you have lived in a cul-de-sac?
- what is good about it and what is bad?
- how long does it take to walk round the block? (This question is in the Neighbourhood Exploration Sheet.)

This discussion can lead on to what permeability is about.

- One of the main advantages of having connected streets is that users have more choices of route when making their journeys. There should also be clear connections to other existing streets and facilities.
- In making connections all types of movements from pedestrians, cyclists and vehicles have to be taken into account. Where possible connections should emphasize sustainable modes of transport over individual car use. (This issue can be linked to ecological issues as it suits the school curriculum. Discussion can also include transportation as an integrated part of the street system and development of traffic reduction schemes such as traffic calming, Park & Ride, etc.)
- Perimeter blocks: connected streets form plots of land designated for building and other uses. A building usually has two faces: the public face is the front of the building which usually faces the street, and is where the entrances are; the private face is usually the back of the building and faces the inside of the block. Where this layout exists it is known as perimeter block development, and its benefit is that the building's public face overlooks the street, making it more safe and secure.
- Permeability must be considered early in any planning or development process because streets are the most permanent element of any built environment. Ancient street patterns, including Roman roads, can still be identified in many historic cities such as Oxford.



Exercise: Students make a connected street map, identifying the most connected street in their neighbourhood survey. On the most connected street in their area, they identify the different uses: shops, offices, houses.

2. Vitality

Places that are vibrant, active, safe, comfortable, varied, and fun are said to have vitality.

Questions that can lead into the discussion:

- what makes a successful place?
- what are the places you like and why?

Go back to the list previously made on the board of what makes successful places, this is likely to include places that are lively, active and safe, all elements contributing to a place's vitality.

- Places which create a sense of vitality have active edges (discussed under robustness). Inactive edges are blank walls, ill-placed entrances, tunnels, places where you don't feel safe, which are not overlooked.
- Consumer demand is closely related to the economic success of a place. Variety of uses is, in its turn, closely linked to the numbers of consumers attracted to the area and, therefore, to its vitality and success.

3. Variety / Diversity - the spice of life

A successful place also offers a mix of activities to the widest range of possible users. Variety / Mixed Use may be appropriate at different scales from global to local environments - village, town or city, within a neighbourhood or a street, or in a single structure.

Questions that can lead into discussion:

- how many different uses did you see on your block? (This question is in the Neighbourhood Exploration Sheet.)
- how many different uses did you see on your most connected street?

This discussion can lead on to what variety is about.

- The most connected streets usually have a wider variety of uses because they are easier to get to and more people go there.
- Variety is desirable because it provides a choice of activities for a wider range of people, things to do and places to go, making the place more exciting.
- Other benefits of variety are listed in the *Urban Design Qualities Handbook*. It is important to get the right mix of uses as described in 'Variety' page nine of the *Urban Design Qualities Handbook*.
- Mixed use developments are more successful in higher density areas (see Variety page eight in the *Urban Design Qualities Handbook*).

4. Legibility

A successful and 'legible' development is a place that has a clear image and is easy to understand.



Questions that can lead into discussion:

- how do you get to your house? (This was in the Neighbourhood Exploration Sheet)
- what important features do you use to give directions?
- what makes some features easier to remember than others?
- how often do you ask for directions to a destination?
- how many times have you given directions to a place?

This discussion can lead on to what legibility is about.

- Kevin Lynch, a well-respected and often-quoted American planner, identified five features which create this kind of place. These are paths, nodes, landmarks, districts, and edges. (see page 10 of the Urban Design Qualities Handbook for further explanation).

The 'Where are we?' game can be played to lead discussion into 'Legibility' or before you explore 'landmarks'. The game can be generated from the 'downloads' section of this site either as acetates for an OHP or as a PowerPoint presentation.

Pupils are asked to identify seven landmark buildings. Some of these buildings, such as the Brighton Pavilion, challenge perceptions of location, architectural style and what it means to be a 'local landmark'.

Show the images and ask the students to identify the buildings from the list provided on the answer sheet. Review the answers. Ask students to consider why particular buildings come to represent certain locations and how landmarks contribute to the formation of place identities.

5. Robustness

A place's ability to be used for many different purposes by different people, or its potential for change and adaptation for different uses is known as robustness – this is a desirable quality.

Questions that can lead into the discussion:

- how many old buildings do you know that have been converted for new uses?
- can you identify places which have a variety of uses?

This discussion can lead on to what robustness is about.

- A robust place, whether outdoors or indoors, has a potential variety of uses.
- A robust building's function can change over time. The whole building can take on a new use. For example, an industrial warehouse can become new office space or a small space within a building can change use, such as a garage into a sitting room.
- Robust buildings should provide active edges as explained in the Urban Design Qualities Handbook page 17.
- Robust outdoor places are designed so that various activities can take place in and around them.

For example, Oxford's Gloucester Green has an open square, shops and cafes with outdoor seating, is used as a market on certain days and also has a bus station.

- A robust place utilises climatic conditions such as daylight, sunlight, wind, etc, to its advantage in order to exploit the orientation of buildings.



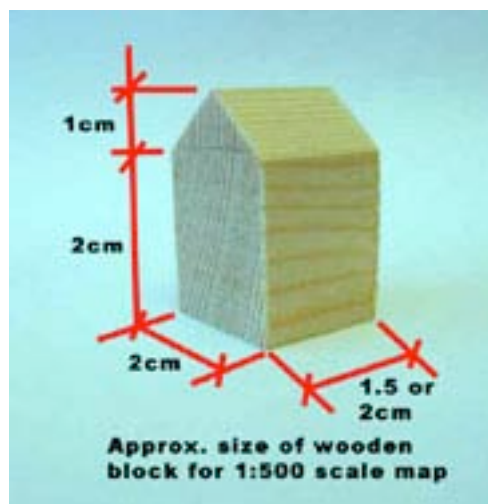
- Natural vegetation such as trees and bushes are included in such developments to act as filters for pollution and sunlight during summer but to allow sunlight through in winter.

3D Modelling exercise

Students reinforce and develop their understanding of the design qualities by applying them to a new development on a selected site. In this exercise the students will arrange blocks on a site plan to simulate the application of the design qualities.

Depending on class size, the students should be divided into groups of four or five. Where possible, students should remain in the same groups throughout the whole programme.

Site selection. Select a site which provides the opportunity to make connections to existing streets and to construct perimeter blocks. Provide a description of the site and its surroundings. Locate or highlight any key features or characteristics of the site such as major roads and pedestrian links, landmarks or architectural qualities, current land uses, and environmental features such as wetlands. If the site owner or any local community group has preferences for the types of use to be developed on the site, these should be included in the description. This information will help the students to assess the needs for the new site and select the new uses they wish to create on the site. Photographs of the site and its surrounding area can also be provided to give the students a visual idea of the local character. Reproduce a plan or map of the site (a 'base map') for each group with a scale large enough to manipulate the design components. Ideally a scale of 1:500 should be used for the base map. Plans of most sites in Britain can be obtained from the Ordnance Survey, the local library or the local council. To represent buildings, provide square and rectangular wooden blocks which match the scale of the site plan. Ideally some of these wooden blocks should be made with a pitched roof cut on one side. If wooden blocks can not be provided, Lego blocks of various sizes may be used. Coloured markers or pencils may also be used on the model.



Modelling. Ask students to create a piece of town, using the scale plan and based on the five design qualities. At first they may need prompting, therefore suggest that a starting point may be to create road connections, from which plots of land will be formed. Once the new streets are drawn across the site and the plots of land are outlined, the students should select the different patterns of use they wish to achieve and locate them on the plots of land. Using individual blocks, the student should construct the desired uses by placing the blocks side by side to create a model of the potential development. They



can be encouraged to draw images on the base plan to represent vegetation, street furniture or any other elements they would like to include.

At the end of the session, review each design, asking the group to explain what they have done. Highlight the best features of each scheme by checking them off against the design qualities.

Other teaching materials

- The *Neighbourhood Exploration Sheet* can be printed for use before the lesson as indicated.
- The *Urban Design Qualities Handbook* contains illustrations from which slides can be made as overheads or as PowerPoint slides. The handbook with notes should be printed out and provided for use by the students in the lessons and for later reference.

For additional helpful information the following books are recommended:

- **Responsive Environments**, Bentley, I et al (1985) Architectural Press.
- **The Urban Design Compendium**, (2000) prepared for and available from English Partnerships (free).

Organising the classroom

Lessons are delivered to the whole class.

For the modelling activity students should work in groups of at least five students (depending on the number of students in the class).