

new places, new communities



SURVIVAL OF THE FITTEST: PLACES MUST RESPOND TO SURVIVE

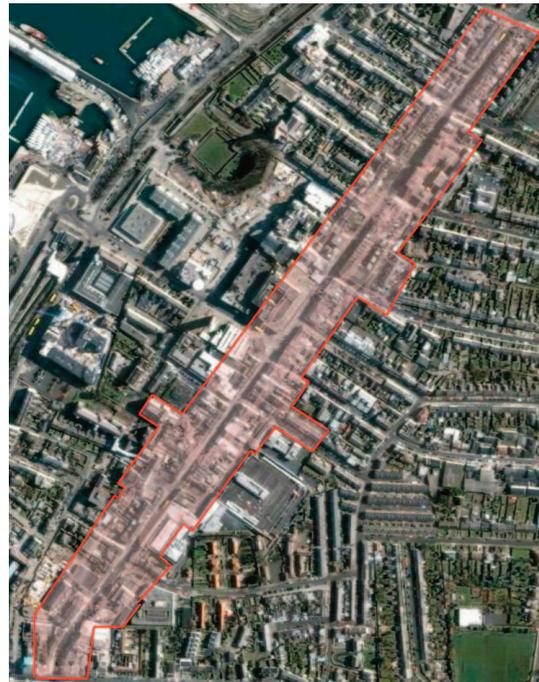
Planning meets preservation; urban design meets conservation. If we reconcile identity and technology, there is no reason why character and innovation should not go together, says Jack Warshaw

Historic town centres are not immune from pressures for change. Growth, decay, competition, traffic, the economy, housing, employment, demographic trends and other factors must inform the balance of preservation versus planned development. But promoting development-led 'regeneration' on the one hand, or resisting all change on the other, are both likely to end in tears.

Instead, why not try applying Darwin's approach to the urban scene: 'It is not the strongest of the species that survive, nor the most intelligent, but the one most responsive to change.' This juncture is where conservation and urban design meet to find a common language.

Urban design approach

The language of urban design is aimed at place making. Government guides such as *By Design, 2000*, see objectives in terms of character, continuity and enclosure, quality of the public realm, ease of movement, legibility, adaptability and diversity. Character, for example, is about local distinctiveness, and involves the creative reconciliation of local practices, on the one hand, with the latest technologies, building types and needs, on the other. Where there are no significant local traditions, the challenge of creating a distinctive place will be all the greater. There is no reason why character and innovation should not go together. New and old buildings can coexist happily without disguising one as the other, if the design of the new is a response to urban design objectives.



Dun Laoghaire Rathdown Council commissioned CAP to undertake a comprehensive appraisal and characterisation of its main street; (right) CAP undertook detailed surveys of some of the world's most important historic areas, including Trafalgar Square, Whitehall and the Westminster Abbey/Palace of Westminster World Heritage Site





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Conservation approach

The core areas of historic towns are invariably designated as Conservation Areas. Large towns may contain several, along with a considerable number of listed and other important buildings. The language of conservation is less about new technologies and more about understanding what makes a place special, going on to develop measures for preserving and enhancing its character. Guidance, in England, comes in the form of successive English Heritage pamphlets, the latest of which is Conservation Area Appraisals, and its companion, Management of Conservation Areas, both 2006. The process requires, in addition to local consultation, looking at historical development, setting, plan form, views and vistas, archaeology, character zones, uses, building age, materials, form, details and quality, greenery, negative and neutral elements.

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Hastings Borough Council, in partnership with English Heritage and South East Economic Development Agency (SEEDA) commissioned CAP, to undertake a characterisation of the town centre, embracing several existing conservation and character areas



Battersea Square: Derelict since the 1970s, CAP conceived and guided the reconstruction of early-mid 19th century buildings, and the formation of a new piazza. Residents and businesses were consulted on proposals, including encouraging restaurants and cafes to spill into the square, a new fountain, stone paving, lighting and trees which form a canopy in summer



Prospect Quay, Thames Riverside London: Restoration of Prospect House and planning consultants for a large mixed used development

<p>Key design points Evolution of standard house types Unique design response to sensitive site</p>	<p>Practice details RPS Bristol www.rps.co.uk tel: 01454 853000</p>
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The CAP matrix approach

CAP sees joined-up thinking in urban design and conservation as essential to healthy historic towns for the 21st century. It has developed systems for evaluating buildings, existing or proposed, against objective criteria, which could be applied anywhere as an effective development control tool. CAP's work takes a 'multi-lingual' collaborative approach; the key to matching local aspirations with achieving practical results.

CAP's Matrix system began with a commission for a characterisation study of Hastings Town Centre. Hastings Borough Council, English Heritage and South East Economic Development Agency (SEEDA) partnered the critical review of the town's character areas. The Council needed powerful but easy to use weaponry; SEEDA needed a positive climate of regeneration and English Heritage needed a foundation for future Townscape Heritage Initiatives (THI). Twelve distinct areas were defined, some already designated as Conservation Areas. The outputs included a series of maps identifying the key characteristics of each area, written descriptions, design guidance and the Matrix methodology for evaluating buildings.

The backbone of the study comprised three parts, defining character, urban design and building assessment. The first provided the understanding of what is distinctive about Hastings, the second a picture of how streets, terraces, squares, plot sizes, topography and settings interact and are often degraded; the third, an objective system for evaluating any building against locally distinctive characteristics. The resulting system, the Matrix, 'scored' every key building in Hastings against the characteristics that emerged from the fieldwork, quality, greenery, negative and neutral elements.