



Michael Hebbert
Head of School of Planning
and Landscape, University of
Manchester



Editorial

M. Hebbert

1. INTRODUCTION

'New agenda'. 'Urban renaissance'. 'New urbanism'. 'New deal'. 'New professionalism'. 'Urban innovation'. At a time when the language of policy-makers puts so much emphasis on the novelty factor, it can help to take a long historical view.

A hundred years back, in Edwardian Britain, there was a lively interest among the building professions in a new area of activity known as 'town planning'. The movement for town planning had begun with social reformers and housing activists. Architects leapt on board and became leading protagonists in the public campaign for civic design—architecture writ large. With superb graphic visualisations of a better urban future they caught the imagination of politicians and secured the first legislation in 1909.

However, aesthetic visions of the City Beautiful were of little value unless they were grounded in engineering technique. As an editorial in the journal *Engineering* put it in 1910, the 'bread and butter of utility' had to come before the 'meringues of art'.¹ And once town planning was on the statute book most of the task of implementation fell to municipal engineers who, unlike the architects, were already in place in towns and cities across the country. It was their professional body, the Institution of Municipal and County Engineers, that set up Britain's first town planning examinations in 1914. The technical basis for the new activity was derived largely from the pioneering work of engineers in German cities where sophisticated techniques of survey and analysis were already being used to integrate the subsystems of water, sewerage, road design, tramways, air quality, building control, and greenspace. By contrast, in British cities, it seemed that separately engineered elements of urban infrastructure were too often disconnected and spatially incoherent. Contemporaries felt a sense of excitement about the potential to enhance the quality and health of the urban environment through planning. Engineers played a formative role in the development of an activity that was recognised to extend beyond the scope of any single profession. The launch of the Town Planning Institute in 1916 was a collaborative venture, involving the Surveyors' Institution and the Law Society as well as the Royal Institute of British Architects (RIBA) and the Institution of Municipal and County Engineers.

2. NEW THINKING

A hundred years on, what we now call urban design bears a strong resemblance to the original conception of town

planning. It reflects a similar public mood of disenchantment with the everyday environment of neighbourhoods and town centres. There is the same sense that towns and cities have suffered because excessive professional and regulatory specialisation has tended parts but neglected the whole. Again, the example of Continental cities is being studied for useful lessons in joined-up design. Holistic design is the key idea in the Urban Task Force Report *Towards an Urban Renaissance*² and the subsequent unrolling of a 'new urban agenda'.³ At the micro scale it implies refocusing on the total environment of streets and urban quarters, instead of on separate subsystems such as traffic flow, pedestrian safety, or single sectors of property development. At the macro scale it implies fresh attention to the interactions between land use, transport and environmental sustainability, and to the linkage between growth at the edges and decline in the inner city.

There are echoes of the last century too in the roles played by the various professionals. As in the early 1900s, architects have been in the vanguard of the new urbanism, widening the imagination with charismatic designs for buildings, spaces, and for entire urban quarters. Learning that a three-dimensional vision is the most effective way to build confidence and orchestrate action, local councils and their advisors have revived the hundred-year-old art of master planning, complete with colourful graphic presentation. Millennium lottery funding has facilitated scores of projects with a radical design edge.

However, with the reawakening of vision comes also the rediscovery that a creative image needs to be grounded in a realistic appreciation of the constraints of the city as an engineered system—particularly constraints of long-term maintenance. In the old-fashioned tea-table metaphor the bread and butter of utility still has to come before the meringues of art. In other words urban design, like town planning, needs to be a joint effort. On a national scale the professions have already joined up in the Urban Design Alliance which involves the Civic Trust and Urban Design Group alongside the Institution of Civil Engineers, the Royal Town Planning Institute, the Landscape Institution, the Royal Institute of Chartered Surveyors (RICS) and RIBA. The real benefits of that collaboration begin to flow when the pattern is repeated locally in towns and cities across the country.

3. ILLUSTRATING GOOD PRACTICE

For the June 2002 issue of *Municipal Engineer* we invited

contributions that illustrate current good practice in urban design and highlight the contributions of the engineer. In the recent literature on urbanism the engineer appears too often in the role of pantomime villain, laying down concrete and putting up poles regardless of context or character. Here we have the other side of the story in a set of contributions that show the scale of fresh thinking about the design and management of highways, bridges, public transport, utilities, residential layout and street furniture.

Mark Whitby sets the tone with a paper on 'Rethinking urban design'. As a practitioner his bridges have demonstrated that a civil engineering structure can bestow as much glamour as a flagship work of architecture. As President of the Institution of Civil Engineers, he has been involved with the metaphorical bridge-building work of the Urban Design Alliance. The most significant 'rethinking' of his title is to be done at the local level, in the everyday working assumptions and techniques of traffic engineers. Whitby highlights the importance of the Continental-style home zone pilot experiments which subvert conventional notions of traffic regulation and pedestrian safety. These pilots are explored in further detail in a case study of Northmoor, Manchester, by John Delap and a policy review paper by Mike Biddulph.

Home zones are limited by definition to residential areas. Even here, their general application will take time, money and a great deal of political persistence. Other contributions discuss

the wider issues of contemporary street design. Ken Hollyoak looks at junction design for backland developments; Chris Wright and Barry Curtis make a bold analysis of the aesthetics of the urban road environment that encompasses junction design, road-markings, street furniture and even (perhaps controversially) vehicle design. One theme running through several contributions is the problem of inappropriate standards set rigidly by central government and applied unimaginatively to local contexts—an issue tackled directly in the contribution by David Taylor and William Filmer-Sanke of Alan Baxter & Associates.

The contributions from Farouk Stemmet and Edward Chorlton lead us back to the central theme of this issue of *Municipal Engineer*. Stemmet takes good and bad examples of modern tramway installations to support a wider argument that the engineer can and should be the 'key enabler' in urban design. Chorlton spells out that enabling role in terms of the practical, day-to-day operation of a highways authority and a county council. We hope their vision of engineer as enabler will prove infectious.

REFERENCES

1. Metropolitan Improvements. *Engineering*, 90, 864, 1910.
2. URBAN TASK FORCE. *Towards an Urban Renaissance*. E & F N Spon, London, 1999.
3. COMMISSION FOR ARCHITECTURE AND THE BUILT ENVIRONMENT. See web site at www.cabe.uk