

Conclusion

Results on the ground

Part Two of this book described the redevelopment of Chelmsford at the turn of the millennium, setting out both its origins and outcomes. The challenge of guiding this redevelopment provided the basis for the pragmatic evolution of the proactive approach described in Part One. What was achieved on the ground was the result of this approach. Inevitably, and correctly, the procedures recommended here will be judged according to the quality of their outcomes. Hopefully, readers will use this book as a guide to visit the town and make their own judgements on the spot. What cannot be denied, however, is that there was a dramatic change: the town was turned around in regard to both its physical form and the way that tasks were carried out.

Much of the results of these efforts is still to come. Indeed, what has been started will be an ongoing and self-improving process. Nevertheless, some remarkable changes could already be seen. The most visible consequence to date has been the improvement of the quality of the town centre. The centre of the town is different now from what it was in the 1980s, and earlier, not just in its built form but also in the way it was used by the people. The public realm is now pedestrian-dominated and characterised by pavement cafes and an active nightlife. This lifestyle was not explicitly planned for, as people could not be compelled to be the proprietors or customers of such enterprises. What the planning process did was to provide the context in which it could flourish. Within the town centre it is not just the buildings but also the activities that accompany them and the public spaces that provide the settings for these activities. There is now an air of vibrancy and sophistication in the shops, bars and cafes surrounding the public spaces that give the lie to the old image and jokes about Essex. Architect-designed flats look out over the waterways. New architecture is also prominent in public buildings such as the bus station and the new university campus. Style is based on historic or modern themes as appropriate to the context. Moving away from the town centre to the suburbs, new development is in the form of houses and gardens reflecting the urban approach of the *Essex design guide* (EPOA, 1997). The new suburban housing is at higher density, 30–35 dph, than in the past but, nevertheless, exhibits an urban streetscape in distinctive local styles. The cars are parked behind the frontage. Biodiversity is

encouraged and back gardens provide an outdoor room. The green corridors formed from the river valleys accommodate parkland and well-used pedestrian and cycle ways linking the residential areas to, and through, the town centre.

To what degree was all this merely the result of general economic and demographic changes and of the requirements of central government and County Council policies? Chelmsford had never been within a major growth area, as proposed by national or regional strategies but, nevertheless, had met, and continues to be challenged by, substantial growth targets for new dwellings. Favourable conditions for development and expansion had been present since the 1960s but had not been taken advantage of. The evidence for this is in the buildings of all periods from the early 1970s to the mid-1990s. There is no evidence that, had a change of policy not been made in 1996, this state of affairs would not have continued for many years. This was the case both in many other parts of the country and even in some other parts of Essex. Moreover, change at Chelmsford began before the publication of the revised *Essex design guide* (EPOA, 1997) and before the promotion by the central government of an urban renaissance. Where prior credit must given, though, is to the design team at Essex County Council. Without the publication of the first Essex guide (ECC, 1973), which led to the revised version in 1997, the task of improving quality with Chelmsford Borough would have been immeasurably more difficult.

For Chelmsford in the early 1990s, the idea of an urban renaissance and high-density living was genuinely radical. Notwithstanding this, the Borough Council embraced the challenge of higher densities and high quality and raised the importance of urban design in its working practices. It secured better-quality housing on greenfield and brownfield sites, in numerous schemes, ranging in size between 30 and 500 dwellings. This was achieved by weaving urban design into the planning process, and securing better quality in new development as a result.

What was remarkable at Chelmsford was that the improvements applied to the whole town, and surrounding settlements, and represented a permanent change for the better. A uniformly higher standard of building was being realised, not just trophy architecture or exemplar estates. It was also something that has continued over time. In particular, the processes for achieving quality continued after significant staff and political changes subsequent to the 1996–2003 period.

Some important lessons

More planning means better architecture

What then can be learnt from the way quality was achieved? One of the most significant lessons from the experience at Chelmsford was the way that increasing planning intervention gave scope for more, not less, quality architecture. Over time, there was a steady increase in the quantity, and degree of prescription, of published planning policy relating to design control. Use was made of policy in national guidance, design guides, local plan policy and site-specific briefs. As these became more detailed, clearer and more purposeful, so the quality on

the ground improved. Before the introduction of the explicit controls, what was built was the standard developer product with minimal architectural input. With strong planning intervention, architect-designed schemes, tailored to the site, became the norm in the town centre and common elsewhere. This applied to the design of shops and offices as well as housing.

Developers respond to clear guidance

What was also notable was how quickly developers adapted to the situation once the guidance was definite and explicit. Conflicts between the planning committee and developers, described at the beginning of Chapter 5, occurred before this was the case. From 2001 onwards, there were almost no appeals against refusal of planning permission on design grounds. However, even with the very clear guidance, there was still an important role for negotiation. This went way beyond the processing of the formal planning applications. Two activities outside the formal process were critical for raising quality. Both pre-application negotiation and post-permission vigilance, and monitoring progress during detailed design and construction, paid dividends. When the process of effective design briefing and pre-application discussion was working properly, the processing of applications became largely a formality. Discussions started long before a planning application was submitted and the brief was written before the discussions started. They reflected a need to see how different sites fitted together and related to development over a larger area, even the town as a whole. This required considerable long-term vision regarding both the physical form and the formal process that brought it about.

Professional skills are needed

All these tasks depended on having professional officers with urban design skills operating above, and beyond, the development control process. What the Chelmsford's experience has shown is that appointing such people in sufficient numbers with the appropriate skills, and scope to carry out their job is the means to success. There was recognition by councillors that sustainable growth went hand-in-hand with design, a commitment expressed by having a design champion at elected member level. They assembled a team of people with urban design skills and, importantly, a genuine dedication to the local area. This team put in place procedures for producing and approving planning guidance and embedding design in development control. Cross-service team-work with planning, highways, housing and parks professionals was established for major developments. Good working relationships with the major developers were built up so they knew how the council operated and felt able to have a dialogue at any time. Professional officers nurtured a culture of wanting to improve development, to get the best out of sites, to insist on good designers and to have confidence in design.

Aside from new appointments, what also proved important was the influence that a leading councillor and chief officer could bring to bear in changing mind-sets of existing staff, changing the emphasis of planning from legalistic to spatial. This showed that even local planning authorities without urban design specialists

should still be able to nurture an ethos of understanding site and context, of defining design objectives and issues, and establishing the discipline of scrutiny and challenge.

All need to work together

Although attention to organisational structure was important, it was not so much the precise structure that was adopted (the council's corporate structure changed several times) but the organisational culture. What was created was not a 'design section' but a team of urban designers who were integrated into the planning authority's overall task of managing development. Although the scale of the challenge should not be underestimated, the pursuit of team-work, rather than just consultation, was very significant. The different sections of a planning office needed to work closely together and to work closely with engineers, housing, parks and legal officers as required, all concentrating on getting the best quality of development rather than pursuing sectional interests. Changing departmental boundaries alone did not bring this about. The process of writing of the planning briefs and other policy documents proved to be a means of bringing people together at an early stage.

Positive negotiation gets results

The experience at Chelmsford showed that planning authorities could change developer practices. Chelmsford got house builders to appoint good architects, to modify or drop standard house-types and to design new house-types and one-off buildings. Through negotiation the planning authority:

- achieved neighbourhoods designed around public spaces, with continuous frontage, buildings turning corners and hiding car parking;
- negotiated well-integrated affordable housing and non-residential uses in high-density schemes;
- ensured development was based on legible routes and meaningful spaces to generate a sense of place;
- treated highway design as part of the landscape architecture and, where appropriate, tried to 'lose the road' in good shared surfaces;
- adopted the procedures for integrating usable green spaces into new places;
- used the quality of the public realm to glue the whole place together.

A last word

This book has advocated a proactive attitude to urban design. This means being evangelical about design, seeing opportunities, visualising outcomes and communicating design objectives. It means being positive about development, being constructively critical and taking risks to prompt innovation. It is not necessary to be an urban designer to such an attitude, but it opens up the way to design-led development and away from schemes led by standards, precedent, expediency, car parking or engineering.

The real process is understanding the nature of the place, generating a vision for the future, knowing what its citizens want and need, shaping new communities and steering implementation. This ought to be an exciting task for a council. It is positive planning. Rather than being seen merely as regulatory constraint, it ought to be viewed as a means of allowing design to reveal possibilities. The planning process is, in reality, one of analysis, problem solving, collaboration, enabling and explaining decisions.

In short, quality achievement on the ground has come from having vision, making their implications of this vision very clear in advance to all parties and providing the expertise to carry it through. The ultimate test is how this physical form stands the test of time. Readers are encouraged to visit the town and make their own judgement, hopefully using this book as a guide. What they should find is that the life of the town now speaks for itself.