

# URBAN DESIGN AND DESIGN REVIEW



Merseyside  
Civic  
Society

## 1.0 Background

**1.1** The MCS makes regular pronouncements on important issues, but there is felt to be a need to back this up by establishing an agreed background of specific policies relating to the Liverpool City Region, accepting that these may differ from those being pursued by Civic Societies elsewhere. This has led to the notion of producing a series of ‘green papers’ for discussion. It is envisaged that, after due consideration and amendment, these green papers would be re-published as ‘white papers’ and would then become a part of established MCS policy.

**1.2** This first three-page white paper looks at Urban Design, together with the related issues of conservation and sustainability, with references to the World Heritage Site and the potential for re-establishing a Design Review process. This initial paper is fairly wide-ranging, but further papers will look at more specific issues. In particular, two draft green papers are in preparation, which will look at the twin issues of population growth strategy [reversal of decline] and the historic spatial structures of Liverpool and Birkenhead.

## 2.0 Urban Design

**2.1** In the 1998 report of the Urban Task Force, led by Richard Rogers, there was a vision of ‘well designed, compact and connected cities supporting a diverse range of uses – where people live, work and enjoy leisure time at close quarters – in a sustainable urban environment well integrated with public transport and adaptable to change’.

**2.2** That report signalled a move away from the default ‘suburban’ model of separate zones for work, housing and leisure based on assumptions of the widespread use of private transport. The report underpinned the approach of bodies such as CABE [Commission for Architecture and the Built Environment] in England, and the DCfW [Design Commission for Wales]. The ideas are not new, but they had moved from being an ‘alternative’ to being – at least for a while – an ‘orthodoxy’, and gave rise to mixed-use developments such as Liverpool One.

**2.3** An important aspect of this urban agenda is the idea of ‘permeability’. Higher densities bring little benefit unless accompanied by the ability to move freely across the city. What is important is how easily people can gain access to local facilities. Typically, a permeable layout consists of multiple joined-up streets and paths. Impermeable layouts include large private areas, cul-de-sacs and single-use tower-blocks [vertical cul-de-sacs]. In a permeable layout with a reasonably high density, it is possible for everyone to have easy pedestrian access to shops, school, public transport and public open space [all, not just one or two, of these].

**2.4.** These urbanist ideas continue to be challenged by those groups and forces promoting the dispersal of established inner-city communities. In particular, the Merseyside boroughs have faced the imposition of the discredited HMRI [Housing Market Renewal Initiative], which has laid waste further swathes of the inner-city, in a move reminiscent of the forced clearances of the 1950s and 1960s. Individual MCS members have campaigned against this, notably with respect to Edge Lane and the ‘Welsh Streets’ of Toxteth. The preservation of such streets and their mixed-use development patterns is in line with the principles of urbanism, which allows for organic adaptation and change. However, those new developments that have risen from the HMRI – even those within the inner-city – are suburban in character, and therefore opposed to urbanist principles.

## 3.0 Conservation and Sustainability

**3.1** It is well understood that the MCS supports the conservation of important historic buildings. However, this green paper argues that the principles of 'conservation' are also closely aligned to those of 'sustainability' in two ways. All existing buildings incorporate aspects of the community's 'collective memory'. They are thus local landmarks, even if not seen as historically 'important' in any formal sense. They also embody a great deal of historic wealth and capital investment, which has the potential to be re-cycled for further use. Tearing a building down to start again can be inherently wasteful and damaging in both respects – the loss of continuity, in terms of collective memory, and the loss of valuable capital resources, in terms of materials and structure. The way forward is for the city to adapt and change organically, directed from within by its own communities, carefully recycling its valuable and often irreplaceable assets.

**3.2** This urbanist approach supports the arguments put against any further destruction of the historic high-density and permeable street patterns - of the radial main streets and interspersed terraced housing, of the Georgian streets and squares behind the cathedrals, and of the grid-iron in Birkenhead.

## 4.0 World Heritage Site

**4.1** In 2011, evidence was given to the World Heritage Site team from ICOMOS, on behalf of the MCS, by Peter Brown and Trevor Skempton. They argued in favour of rigorous conservation of the historic fabric, but argued against an overprescriptive approach to changes to the skyline within the buffer zone, with a plea to respect the 'historic spirit' behind buildings such as the Liver Building.

**4.2** The water's edge used to be characterised by a series of tall structures, which have been demolished but live on within the collective memory. These include New Brighton Tower [taller than Blackpool's], the cluster of cranes at Cammell Lairds, the Brunswick Dock Warehouse [the 'Dockers' Cathedral'] and the Clarence Dock Power Station [the 'Three Sisters']. New developments should be seen against this vibrant historic background, and should be an appropriate extension of the original ambition and enterprise that created the city.

**4.3** The long-term notion of a second World Heritage Site, embracing the main ring of Victorian Parks [Birkenhead, Princes, Sefton, Newsham and Stanley, with their associated surrounding developments] has been discussed by various bodies, including members of the MCS. This should be supported, in principle, based on the notion that these parks represent another side, also extraordinary, of the enterprise that gave us the Mercantile Maritime city.

## 5.0 Design Review

**5.1** Design Review is an established process of multi-disciplinary peer review of projects. It forms a key element in the work of CABE and DCfW. It can focus on the promotion of objective policies such as urban design and sustainability, as well as considering the more subjective elements of design quality.

**5.2** It is a methodology used internally by many successful large developers and design practices. It formed a key element of Grosvenor's management of multiple design teams on the 'Liverpool One' project. Liverpool City Council sponsored its own Design Review Process [LUDCAP], until it was disbanded in 2010. CABE and 'Places Matter!' offer design review services but, within some authorities, there seems to be a reluctance to get involved.

**5.3** MCS supports the principles of Design Review and urges Liverpool City Council and the neighbouring boroughs to utilise the process on new proposals, as a vital aid to both developers and to the local planning authorities.

## 6.0. Summary of Recommendations

**6.1** MCS supports the principles of urban development and conservation based on mixed-use, adaptability, sustainability, permeability and sufficient density to nourish local facilities and allow integration with public transport. MCS opposes new suburban patterns of development that don't conform to these principles.

**6.2** MCS supports the established conservation principles of the World Heritage Site in the Maritime Mercantile City and the separate long-term potential of gaining World Heritage status for the ring of Victorian parks in Birkenhead and Liverpool. MCS also argues that this status would be compatible with large new well-designed developments nearby, especially those responding to the 'historic spirit' of an 'ambitious and expanding' World City, including new tall structures.

**6.3** MCS supports the principles of Design Review, based on timely assessments of projects by multi-disciplinary peer-groups, in support of both developers and the planning process. MCS envisages review focussing on objective urban design and sustainability criteria as well as more subjective issues of design quality.