



RESPONDING TO LOCAL CHARACTER - A DESIGN GUIDE -

March 1998

PLANNING, TRANSPORT & DEVELOPMENT SERVICES

BRISTOL LOCAL PLAN
POLICY ADVICE NOTE 15



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INTRODUCTION

- This Policy Advice Note (PAN) is one of a series of documents aimed at encouraging high standards of development and environmental quality. It provides supplementary planning guidance on how to achieve the principles contained within Policies B1-B7 of the Built Environment chapter of the Bristol Local Plan.

- Bristol City Council's key objective in terms of the Built Environment is:

'To recognise the quality and special character of different parts of Bristol and welcome new development that improves the existing environment through good urban design'.

- In providing this design guide, the City Council does not intend to establish rigid design principles, or to stifle architectural or artistic expression, but rather seeks to offer advice and suggestions (through the use of illustrations and local examples) as to how good urban design may be achieved. In assessing applications for new development, the City Council will take a positive view of proposals which demonstrate that the following issues have been addressed.





CONTEXTUAL CHARACTERISTICS

The successful integration of new development into the environment is dependant upon a knowledge and understanding of the visual and functional characteristics of the local area. To gain such an understanding it is often therefore necessary to carry out detailed research and analysis.

Local character and identity is derived from:

- land use/activities
- the height, scale, bulk and design of building
- topography
- landmarks
- layout of streets and spaces
- colour, local materials and texture
- landscape
- local history

For each of the 30 Conservation Areas in the city, the City Council has begun the process of identifying important local characteristics and key development issues in the form of Policy Advice Note 2: 'Conservation Area Enhancement Statements'.



Often the best way of carrying out an assessment of local context is in the form of an annotated plan of the local area which identifies key characteristics such as landmark buildings, important views etc. Such material is often submitted with planning applications to explain a development proposal and demonstrate how it has responded to the contextual issues raised.

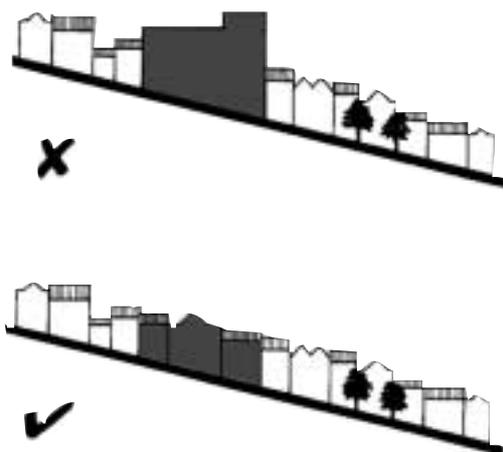


SCALE AND TOPOGRAPHY

With regard to scale of development, the following table outlines the type of characteristic which should be addressed, in terms of a response to the local context.

<u>SCALE OF DEVELOPMENT</u>	<u>IMPORTANT CHARACTERISTICS OF LOCAL CONTEXT</u>
Estate/Large	Density, open space, long distance views, road layout.
Street Infill	Plot size, building heights, landscape treatment. Building organisation, rhythms, roof form, materials (general).
Extension	Detailed form and materials, details of roof covering, window and door details, architectural mouldings.

In a city such as Bristol, which is characterised in many places by its steeply sloping hillsides, it is important that the local topography of any site is recognised and respected in the formulation of a development proposal.

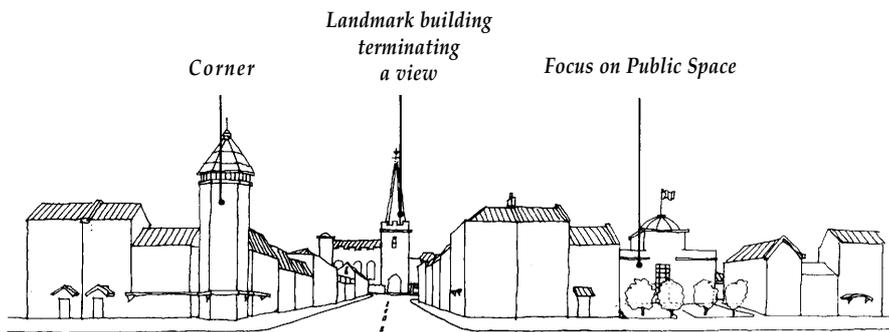


St Michael's Hill :
Example of sympathetic modern housing development which steps down a sloping street



LANDMARK BUILDINGS AND SKYLINES

In any city townscape there are 'background' and 'landmark' buildings. 'Background' buildings, which predominate, are designed to conform to the scale, rhythms and predominant materials of the area, and together combine to define spaces of a particular character. In many cases, new developments will be expected to respect this character, and should not therefore be designed as individual set pieces.



Uses: Public Buildings
Prestigious Buildings



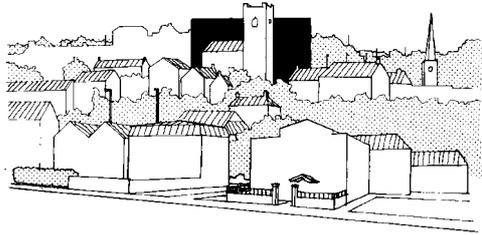
Christchurch: Example of prominent landmark building in the city centre

Certain developments, which often relate to public or prestigious uses, do however warrant 'landmark' buildings, which in townscape terms, effectively act as pointers to guide people around the city and make a significant contribution to local distinctiveness.

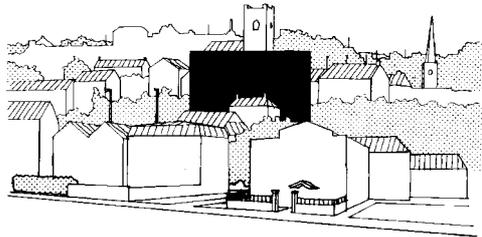
The number of such buildings within a city should be limited and it is important that they are appropriately located, either at important junctions, as a focus to a specific view, or to highlight a building of a specific use (see above).



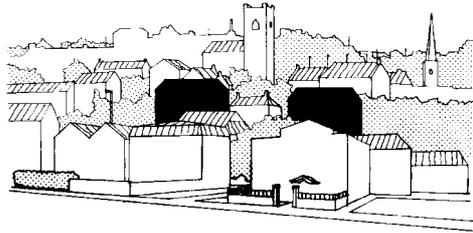
LANDMARK BUILDINGS & SKYLINE



X *Development obscures background*



X *Development obscures foreground*



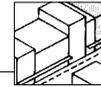
✓ *Development preserves view*

Given Bristol's topography and proximity to surrounding countryside, which provides for extensive and striking views in many places, it is important that existing skylines are protected.

Opportunities may exist to enhance views by using new development to frame them, thus creating vistas and focusing attention on important landmarks.

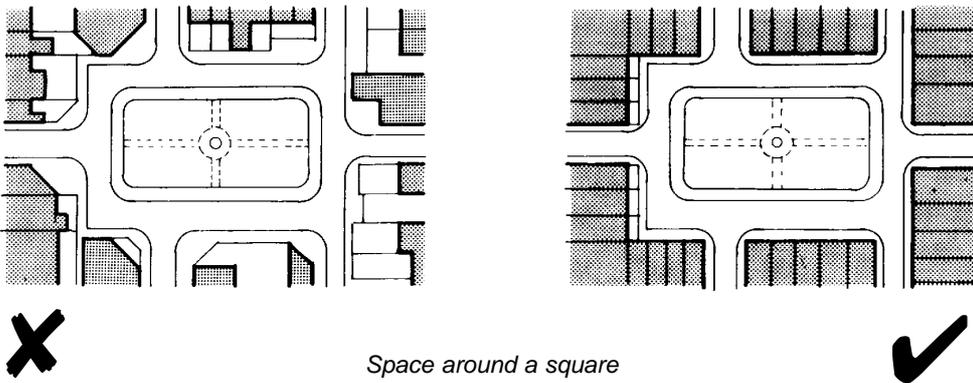


Clifton Spa Terraces: Example of layered development which respects the historic skyline



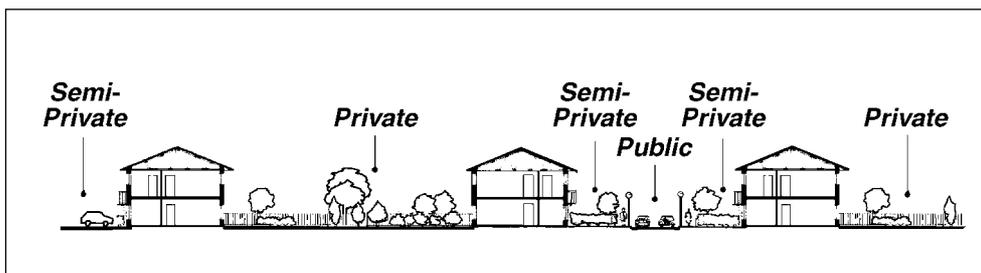
LAYOUT AND FORM

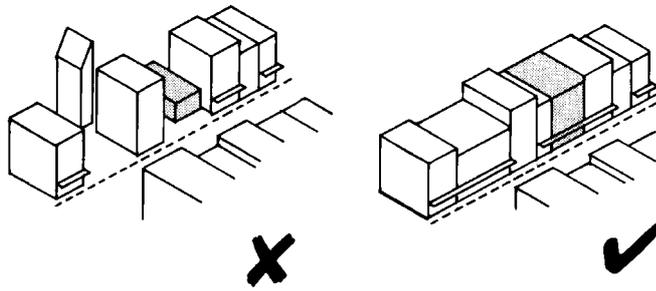
The creation of successful urban environments and quality streetscapes is often dependent upon the way in which buildings, together with appropriate landscape treatments, define the perimeters of streets, alleys and courts, squares and other public spaces. The height, scale and massing of buildings should relate to the type and size of space with which they are associated to ensure a satisfactory form of enclosure. If modern buildings are to be successfully incorporated into an historic city such as Bristol they should respect the traditional building lines, established layout and plot sizes of the area.



Space around a square

The layout and form of new development should clearly define areas of public and private use. Private areas such as gardens or service courts need to be screened from public spaces. This is best achieved by containing private outdoor space within a city block, separated from the public areas by the surrounding buildings. If this is not possible, and a private space directly adjoins a public space, then any screening required should provide visual interest, such as walls, railings or fences in association with planting, or traditional high rubble walls using quality materials.

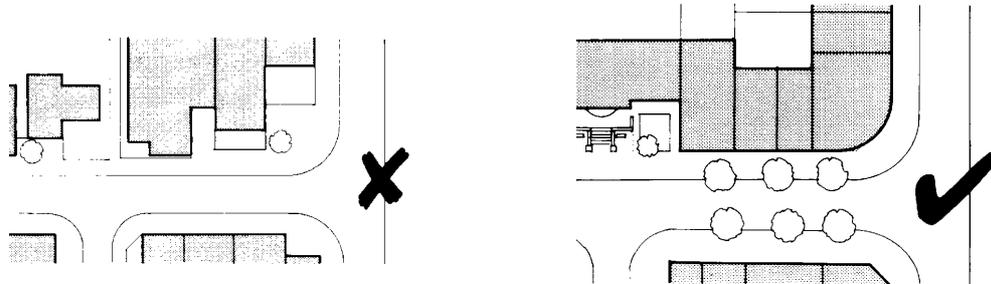




strong building lines



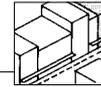
Merchants Landing: Infill housing which has followed the existing building line



Variations to the building line should only be used where they denote important or public buildings, create well defined spaces that are both useable and pedestrian friendly, or where they serve a townscape function such as marking a junction or particular view.

Colston Street/Host Street: Interesting modern development at a street junction





An interesting and stimulating city contains streets and spaces of varied character, set within a coherent framework that gives the city as a whole its identity. Designers should consider how their proposals respond to the following principles:-

- *contrast and variety between identifiable areas or neighbourhoods can be achieved by reinforcing existing patterns of scale and enclosure and where appropriate, concentrating active uses.*
- *drama and interest is provided by the introduction or protection of appropriately sited landmarks and local points, including existing buildings and trees of merit.*
- *linkages between streets and spaces can be strengthened through the use of vistas and framed views.*

The City Council has assessed the existing character of nine identifiable neighbourhoods within the city centre. In addition, policies, proposals and a design framework, which will be used to guide future changes, have been set out as part of the 'City Centre Strategy'.



College Green: Enhanced civic space providing high quality setting to surrounding historic landmark buildings

The massing and siting of buildings together with structural planting can have an effect on local climatic conditions and energy consumption. In many cases buildings can be orientated to maximise the capture of solar energy and/or provide shelter for pedestrians. Adverse wind conditions and overshadowing producing uncomfortable conditions for pedestrians, and high levels of heat loss from buildings should be avoided. Where building forms could give rise to such adverse conditions developers should be able to demonstrate how they have addressed potential problems.



BUILDING EXTERIORS AND ELEVATIONS

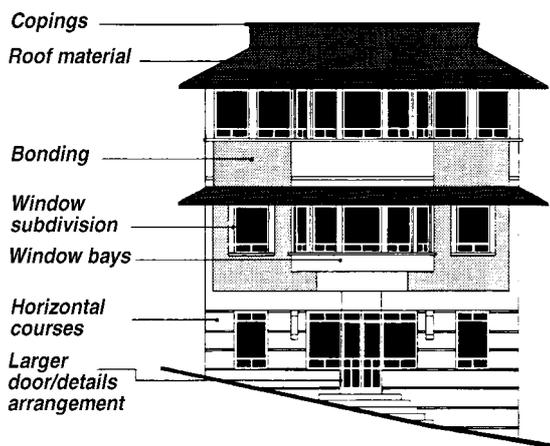
The detailed design of buildings is central to the quality of the built environment. The City Council will encourage innovative, contemporary design that is sympathetic and appropriate to its surroundings.

Proposals for new development should assess how a building will be viewed, and be designed in such a way that close to, medium and long distance views are taken into account.

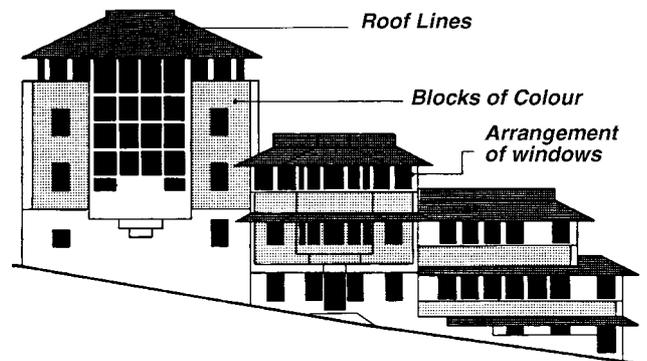
Building surfaces should be well detailed at both small and large scale. At ground floor level, small scale detail is important to create interest for pedestrians, whilst at longer viewing distances large scale details, variations in colour /tone and the treatment of the skyline is important.



Brandon Hill: Example of a new office development which responds well to close and distant views



LARGER DETAILS GIVE INTEREST FROM MIDDLE DISTANT VIEWS



OVERALL ARRANGEMENT AND FORM GIVE INTEREST FROM DISTANT VIEWS



Choice of materials and the use of architectural features play a large part in establishing local character and identity. It is essential when designing new buildings that predominant local colours, materials, patterns and features (existing or proposed) are investigated. The specific type of new development will establish whether it is appropriate to harmonise with existing local buildings or whether to deliberately contrast with them. Levels of external maintenance will also have an implication for the choice of materials and the use of detailed features.



Appropriately located signage and a well designed obvious entrance provides a more user-friendly building



The re-use of material from demolition work carried out in the process of redevelopment will also be encouraged and negotiated by the City Council in the interests of both maintaining local character and identity within new proposals, and promoting more sustainable forms of development.

New developments should consider how the use of the building can be expressed in its design. Entrances or front doors should be obvious and any signage or advertisements that may be required should be designed as an integral part (even if the end-user has not been determined). Any other external additions, such as communications equipment for example, should be sited away from public view.





URBAN LANDSCAPE AND ENVIRONMENTAL WORKS

The use of integrated hard and soft landscape treatment, together with carefully considered site planning, can significantly enhance the quality of the built environment, and needs to be taken into account at an early stage in the design process.

Landscaping schemes should take advantage of valuable existing features such as trees and hedgerows, stone walls, railings, paving and topography. Consideration should also be given to the time it will take for a scheme to reach maturity (this may affect the size of trees selected for example), the local climate and ground conditions, position of underground services and potential for vandalism/abuse.

When selecting new materials, an assessment should be made of the surrounding area to ensure that they are consistent or compatible, and reflect the locations character and use. Designers need to be aware that landscape can provide a visual link between a site and its surroundings, and within the context of a larger public space, street or riverside it is particularly important therefore to achieve consistency in not only materials, but also planting and street furniture.



Planting fulfils many functions. As well as increasing visual interest, it can be used to create shelter and windbreaks, enclose and define spaces, soften or screen hard building forms or featureless elevations, give seasonal variation and colour, attract wildlife, encourage play, and act as a focal point. The choice of plants should respect the landscape context, locally indigenous species, and the uses of the site. Furthermore, consideration should be given to seasonal variation, the value to wildlife, and longer term maintenance implications and available resources.



In places where activities or views encourage people to linger, the provision of seating should be considered. Seats or benches should be robust, comfortable to use and appropriate to the setting. Seating should be sited in areas which can benefit from available sunshine or shade. Seats in exposed, cold or dark locations are unlikely to be successful. The provision of litter bins of a suitable design, should be integrated within public spaces, with arrangements made for their emptying.



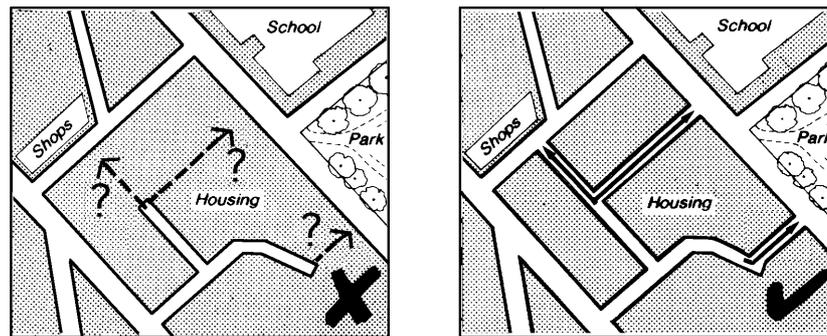
The City Council is committed to promotion of public art, particularly where it can be used to enliven street frontages and provide visual interest alongside pedestrian routes. Further information and advice on this issue can be found in Policy Advice Note No. 9: 'Public Art and Development'.





ACCESSIBILITY

One of the ingredients of a good quality environment is the choice of safe and convenient public routes through it to streets, spaces, facilities and amenities.



A permeable environment allows access to local facilities



In assessing the permeability of an area applicants should be aware of desirable public routes through or around sites, and take opportunities to enhance existing routes or provide new safe, attractive routes, especially where they can contribute to the wider aspirations of greenways, cycleways or footpath systems. Any proposal which would result in the partial or complete loss of a public route will be unacceptable unless a satisfactory alternative, linked to existing facilities and adjoining public spaces, can be provided.

Detailed guidance on this issue can be found in the 'Pedestrian Policy for the Avon Area'.

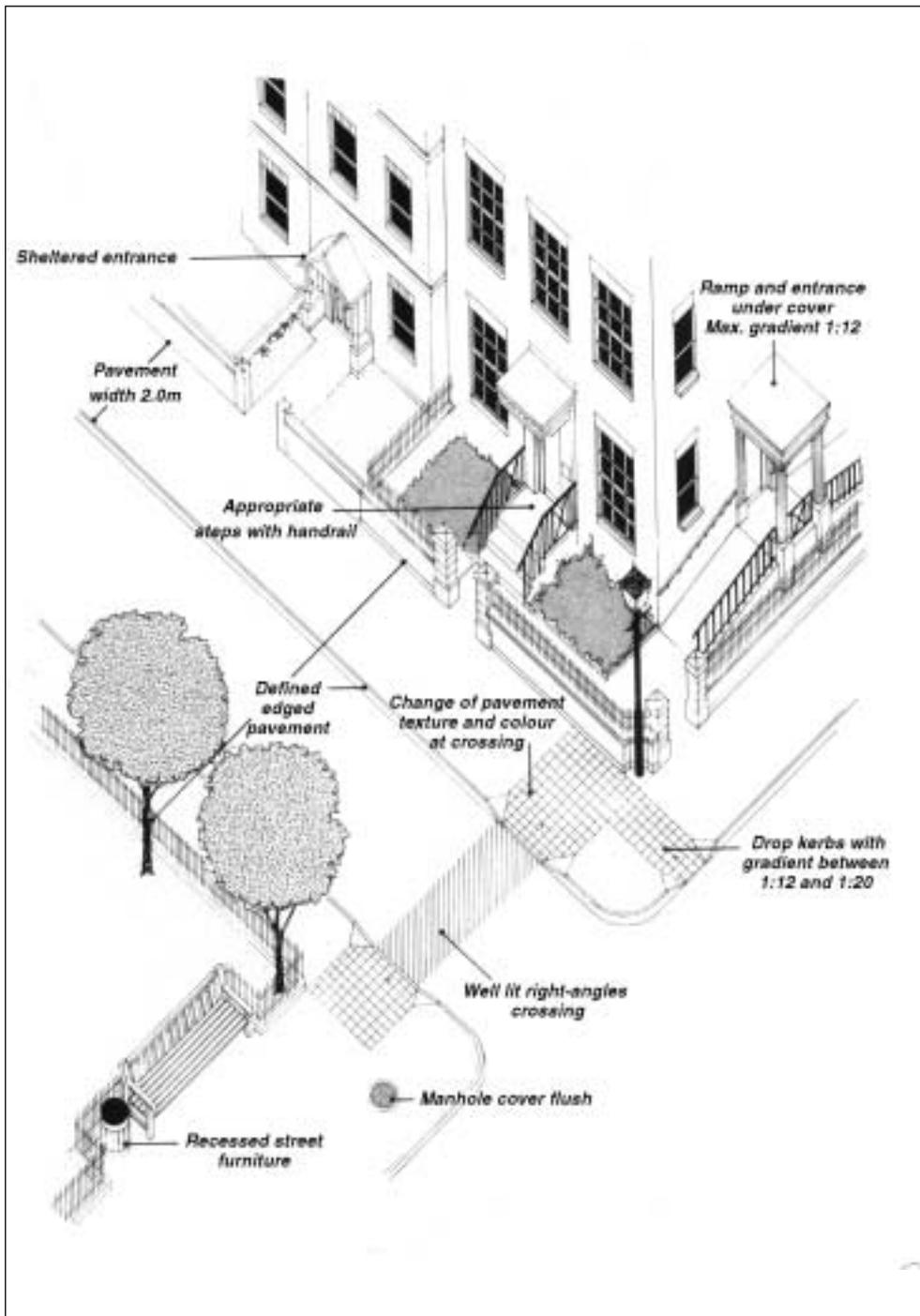
Care should be taken to avoid creating routes which are segregated from their surroundings and secluded as they are likely to be unsafe and prone to vandalism.



Baltic Wharf: Pedestrian routes through a new housing development



The City Council will encourage the satisfactory provision for full and appropriate access arrangements for all members of the community, particularly disabled people. Detailed advice on how this can be achieved in new developments is contained in Policy Advice Note 11: 'Creating an Accessible Environment', but an indication of the type of issues which need to be addressed is given in the figure below.

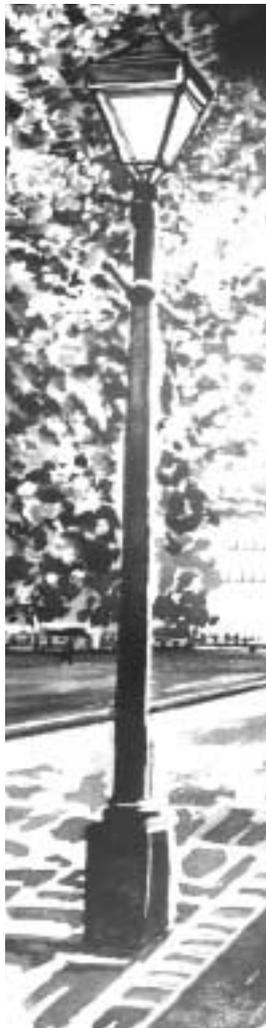




SAFETY AND SECURITY

In formulating development proposals, designers need to be aware of potential problems that can arise both in terms of accidents caused by physical hazards, and the opportunities presented for criminal activity.

The City Council provides detailed design guidance on these issues in Policy Advice Note 14: 'Safety and Security', and Policy Advice Note 3: 'Shopfront Security,' but some of the key considerations which need to be taken into account relate to the following:



- potential for traffic conflicts between vehicles, pedestrians and cyclists**
- surface treatments and the location of street furniture**
- location of parking and play areas**
- provision of lighting and landscaping/planting**
- the need for safe and secure public routes, minimising both actual and perceived opportunities for criminal activity**
- opportunities for self-policing and surveillance**

Further advice can also be obtained from the Police Architectural Liaison Officer (Tel: 01275 816948), and the City Council's Traffic Management Team (Tel: 0117 903 6825)



Have you:-

- **identified the contextual characteristics of the local area through detailed research and analysis?**
- **identified the contextual characteristics which are most likely to be affected with regard to the scale of the development?**
- **ensured that the local topography of the site is recognised and respected?**
- **assessed whether the development itself will provide a 'background' or 'landmark' building, and that it respects existing public spaces and views?**
- **ensured that existing skylines are protected, and where possible, enhanced?**
- **considered how the layout and form of the development will affect traditional building lines, established layout, plot sizes, and areas of public and private use within the local area?**
- **considered how the massing and siting of buildings, along with structural planting, will affect local climatic conditions and energy consumption?**
- **given careful attention to the detailed design of building exteriors and elevations e.g. through choice of materials, location of entrances etc., to provide interest from close to, medium and long distance views?**
- **incorporated appropriate hard and soft landscape treatment, and considered the incorporation of other environmental works such as seating, litter bins and public art?**
- **ensured the development is accessible, both in terms of public routes through, and in the detailed design of the building eg. entrances?**
- **considered any potential problems which the development may pose in terms of safety and security?**



ADVICE AND FURTHER INFORMATION

This guidance is intended to help you towards an appropriate design solution that positively responds to the local character and identity of the area in which you have chosen to develop. In most cases it is advisable to consider using an architect or competent agent who has experience of this work in order to achieve a successful design which will gain planning permission. Planning Officers can give further advice if you make an appointment with them. Before any such meeting however, it is often extremely helpful if some sketch drawings can be prepared to clarify the nature of your proposal and demonstrate how the issues raised by this Policy Advice Note have been addressed.

An appointment with a Planning Officer can be made through our Reception staff, preferably in writing (along with any associated drawings). The use of an appointment system ensures that Planning Officers can make time to see you and maximises the benefit of your visit.

The address is:

Planning Reception
Planning, Transport & Development Services
Brunel House
St George's Road
Bristol BS1 5UY **Tel: (0117) 922 3097**

References

(These documents are available from Planning Reception)

- Bristol Local Plan, 1997
- Policy Advice Note 2: 'Conservation Area Enhancement Statements'
- Policy Advice Note 3: 'Shopfront Security'
- Policy Advice Note 9: 'Public Art and Development'
- Policy Advice Note 11: 'Creating an Accessible Environment'
- Policy Advice Note 14: 'Safety and Security'
- 'Pedestrian Policy for the Avon Area', September 1995
- 'City Centre Strategy'

