

Much has been made of expensive 'clutter-busting' schemes recently, and this month we consider the built-in clutter of traffic schemes.

Design notes

Like people, towns want to show themselves at their best. They have prestige areas, and these appear in glossy brochures to convince incomers of the business opportunities. Yet, not far from such lavish scenes, lie the typical streets which those same potential investors see on their way in from the airport. These streets, often just outside the town centre, give the impression of clutter, visual chaos and neglect.

Our streets look so cluttered for reasons that are common throughout the country. The same component parts of clutter appear from the south of England to the north of Scotland. The same, oddly-designed, poorly-located and ill-matching signs, boxes and other equipment are put up by separate agencies, renewed over separate timescales and paid for through separate budgets. They are seldom designed or co-ordinated.

Virtually all such works are permitted development, and outside the control of the town and country planning acts. In areas where there are county, district and town councils, all three tiers contribute separate services that have an effect on the appearance of a street.

Sometimes, large sums of public money are spent on street enhancement and a fresh start is made. But the day after the mayor declares the scheme complete, the chaotic system takes over once more. Alterations and adjustments to the scheme take place, with little respect for any original design concepts – bins, signs, posts and boxes creep back.

With extraordinary effort, authorities and agencies – often through the tenacity of an individual – can forge informal links which are sustained long enough to create and retain quality. For example, in small towns where people from different agencies, through a respect and fondness for a place, develop a common will to do their best for the town.

For the majority of our streets, however, the present system of constant, unco-ordinated changes by separate agencies is likely to continue.

Yet, where a completely new traffic scheme is being installed, there would seem to be an opportunity to at least create visual quality as well as practicalities. Here, we meet a quite different problem.

Traffic schemes are assessed primarily on their likely success in answering tangible traffic and safety problems. Design – character and appearance – does not appear in normal assessments of traffic schemes. Indeed, an attempt to balance the considerations of measurable throughputs and safety with character and appearance would risk accusations of quaint irrelevance.

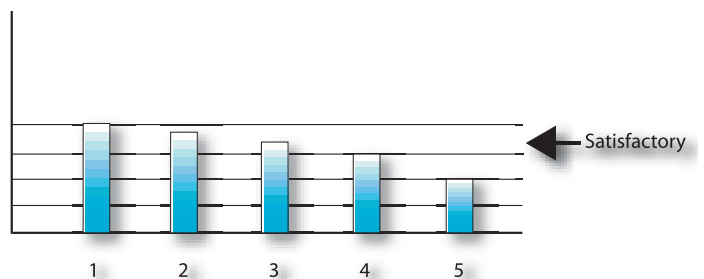
Character and appearance, handled with assurance by some professions, and even acknowledged in legislation, are totally ignored by other professions and legislation – many of which have huge influences over the places where we live and work. Add a consideration for issues of appearance into an assessment, and the best scheme may be different from that first chosen (see diagrams).

Included here is a picture of a purposely-designed bus gate (above right). It is situated in an internationally-revered historic town where character and appearance might be considered important for its image and, therefore, continuing economic wellbeing. Nevertheless, the environmental benefits of the bus gate – to prevent all but buses entering the central area – is seen as sufficient to counterbalance a remarkably ugly collection of signs and equipment.

To suggest that a bus gate should not only provide a practical purpose, but also contribute to the attractiveness and visual experience of the street would, to some, be mere frivolity. Is it possible that we could do better?

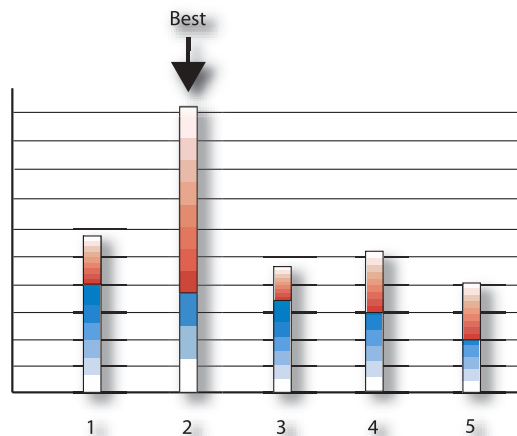


Less is more: Bus gate (above) and typical clutter outside a town centre (inset)



Single issue assessment

A: Scheme assessment diagram



Multiple issue assessment

B: Scheme assessment diagram A with issues of appearance considered