

This month, **Colin Davis** explains just what 'design' means for the streetscape.

Design notes

'When I choose a word,' Humpty Dumpty said to Alice, in a rather scornful tone, 'it means what I choose it to mean – neither more nor less.' He could have been talking about the word design.

What exactly do we mean by design? Is it an extra, non-essential decoration added to a practical solution like coloured icing to a cake? Or is it an integral part of a total concept which takes into account impressions and feelings as well as facts?

Consider the design of a bridge, one of the most tangible of engineering endeavours. Its purpose is to span between two points – a practical project that needs no further embellishment or meaning.

However, when the Forth railway bridge was built, soon after the Tay bridge disaster of 1879, in which 75 people were killed, it had to be robust. It was not just over-engineered, it was also built to look secure. It was designed to impress, and to inspire confidence. The Thames Millennium Bridge, in contrast, stretches engineering principles to the limit, and almost beyond. Designed to look elegant and defy conventional structural wisdom, it was conceived to thrust a 'blade of light' across the Thames.

Each structure has something to say which is beyond the mere provision of a means to cross a stretch of water. They are examples of total design, yet they can be comprehended in a single glance, and so are easy to appreciate.

In urban design, it is often the converse that is seen – a space created by the surrounding buildings. Instead of looking at an object from the outside, people go inside to experience the space almost as a huge room with no roof.

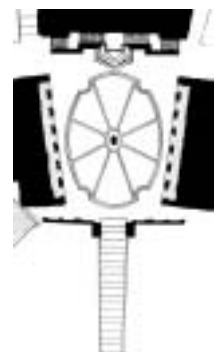
The Piazza del Campidoglio, Rome, is an outdoor civic space enclosed by three renaissance buildings. The focal point is the Palazzo del Senator, flanked by two arcaded classical structures facing each other as if mirror images. The purpose of the square is to impress. There is an impression of completeness. The square, though public, is an integral part of the group of buildings, and feels part of the grandeur of the palace. Patterns in the stone paving, sculpture, even lighting columns, are woven into the total design.

Returning to Britain's more modest towns and streets, it is still possible to weave these classical principles into practical everyday street design. Many important buildings – churches, town halls and market halls – are built in classical styles, based on symmetry and are worthy of being a focal point.

The paraphernalia needed to manage traffic usually blurs and detracts from the subtleties of a focal point but, with care, small traffic-management interventions can be made to add importance to a focal point. This way, a streetscene can be given more clarity and more easily recognised.

At the Corn Market, in Devizes, Wiltshire, the layout of a small informal pedestrian crossing has been related precisely to the design of the building, while still serving its practical purpose.

Instead of the crossing being positioned only in relation to the alignment of the road and footways, it adds importance to this already-significant building in social, architectural and urban design terms. Widened footways and dropped kerbs relate visually, but are subordinate to the main building, and give it greater importance. A wide and spacious



(Clockwise from top left): Firth of Forth bridge; Thames Millennium bridge; plan of Piazza del Campidoglio, Rome; Devizes crossing; and Palazzo del Senator, Rome



refuge in the middle of the road provides even more clarity, comfort and safety. The two decorative lighting columns are positioned symmetrically to relate to the front door of the building, and so are the keep-left signs.

Now, that is what is meant by the word 'design' Neither more nor less.