

This week, **Colin Davis** investigates how a foreground that is minimal and consistent helps create what the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister calls 'local distinctiveness'.

Design notes

Look at a well-known view: The parade ground at Horse Guards, London, for example. There is a well-kept sweep of Georgian buildings and a few people appreciating the view and space. Essential to this view is what is in the foreground.

A full impression of the whole imposing terrace cannot be gained if you are close up. You need to stand back. It is then that attention focuses on what is in the foreground – or in this case, what is not.

The scene is remarkably clutter-free, primarily because it is a parade ground which needs clear spaces. But the street furniture also complements the main buildings, and adds dimension and quality to the total scene.

Look closely and notice that there are only three main colours and materials in use – light grey stone for buildings, statue plinth and footways; beige gravel for the parade ground and a similar material on the highway; and black metal for the statue, lighting column and chain rails.

The foreground paving and street furniture are a suitable setting to the main scene. They have been designed to be minimal, so they do not dominate the scene, and consistent in style with the total scene, so that they appear to be part of it.

These principles can be seen in many urban spaces which have been designed as part of a complete group of buildings, both historic – the courtyard at Somerset House – or modern – the Circle court at Broadgate. In each case, the design and execution of all the paving and street furniture acts as a consciously-designed, though visually-subordinate setting for the main buildings.

Should these principles of minimal and consistent design for paving and street furniture be translated to a typical high street scene? Some might argue that disorder and visual chaos is the result of a dynamic and modern society, and should be encouraged, or at least condoned. But for many people, some sense of order is desirable to give the equally-appreciated sense of safety.

There is another advantage of a foreground designed to be both minimal and consistent. By paring away familiar foreground clutter, it is possible to see what is beyond – usually something interesting that helps people distinguish one place from another, such as the town hall or a castle, and its environment, for example, the end of a street or bend in the road.

Turning these principles into action for the improvement of the streetscene is not easy. Public streets are rarely controlled completely by any single agency, and so they are not really designed. But keep in mind the principle that the less street furniture there is, the better, and you might find some signs, bins, boxes, posts and railings are superfluous.

Co-ordinating the style and colour of all paving and all street furniture is complicated task that has been achieved only in a very few places. Street furniture is put in place over time by different people in answer to different needs. Designs that co-ordinate with what is already there are not easy to produce.

But the effects can be dramatic, as the four high street scenes show. The same clutter is applied to two different places. Only when the clutter is reduced can you begin to see exactly where you are.



Clearly better: An uninterrupted view of London's Horse Guards parade ground (top), while two pairs of high street scenes (below) show how reducing common distractions can help people identify exactly where they are