

Big Brother is watching you, as you cannot have failed to notice. This month, the retrofit of bulky cameras is examined.

Design notes

A great opportunity facing our professions is to foster more understanding between the interests of urban design and the technologies that are needed to make life in the public realm pleasant – and even enjoyable – as well as safe.

But sometimes, it feels that each step forward is accompanied by at least half-a-step back.

The first picture shows an ordinary urban street. Not the sort of street which is so bad that it justifies special regeneration funding, or so prestigious that developers donate millions for a comprehensive facelift. For much of the population, it is the local high street.

In the second picture, unnecessary signs have been removed and the guardrails are gone. Traffic signal systems have been simplified and the signal heads combined with lamp columns. The signal control equipment box has been put in a less-obvious position – possibly a radical underground solution was decided on. Paving has been simplified. Odd ‘makin’s-good’ with poorly-laid, little concrete blocks have been avoided, and the visibility of manhole covers reduced by running paving slabs across in in-set covers. The carriageway road markings are reduced to a minimum.

Suddenly – although this probably took about 10 years of painstaking discussion, negotiation and compromise, driven by someone with technical skill and perseverance – you can see where you are. Clearing away the clutter reveals the place for what it is – a charming part of town with a Victorian pub and a church spire in the distance.

Then, along comes a new problem which requires a highly-visible solution be retrofitted into the scene. The problem is security. The solution is cameras.

The design of a street never ends, roads are constantly being adjusted. But with no-one in total control, the following process is typical.

The problem of security is dealt with by a special sub-group of the local authority, with interests from local traders and police, and financial assistance from the Home Office. A scheme is produced, based on the perceived need, and the most-effective location for the cameras. Planning permission is not required. There is no formal co-ordination with other local authority services, such as planning or even traffic and highways, and so the cameras, with their bulky equipment boxes, are erected, right in the middle of what seemed to be a spare bit of footway.

The fact that their appearance may be a jarring and obtrusive is never considered. How do you measure the disadvantages of jarring and obtrusiveness? Not easily, especially when balanced against the more tangible ‘horrors’ that cameras are intended to prevent.

Well, up to a point. Technology has moved on. It is now possible to have security cameras small enough to be fitted to the sides of buildings. The last two pictures show cameras sensitively positioned on buildings in an urban area. Cables and equipment boxes were fitted out of sight.

It may be necessary to install an extra camera or two to make sure all required sightlines are covered, but the real drawback of this advance is the extra time and effort needed. So, how much time and effort should be devoted to preventing visual harm and unnecessary obtrusiveness in an attempt to keep a place pleasant, even enjoyable, as well as safe?



Out of sight: Streets may be cleared of clutter (*see above*), but the installation of security cameras can ruin the effect. Now, help is at hand in the form of unobtrusive CCTV equipment, neatly concealed from view



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Product information ☎: www.dennard-cctv.com (DM2060) or

www.honeywellvideo.com/products/KD6