



Urban Design Network News March 2021

Welcome to your Urban Design Newsletter

A belated happy new year and welcome to our new members.

I was delighted that many of you were able to join the Network's online event back in December. We heard from a range of excellent speakers including Joanna Averley, Matthew Carmona, Vicky Payne and several of our RTPI design champions. If you missed it the recording of the event can be viewed here on the [RTPI's YouTube channel](#).

We have a packed edition with some excellent insights with five articles supplied by fellow members of your Network. If you are short of time, links to the articles are also copied directly below:

- [Community Engagement, eye-tracking analytics and virtual reality](#)
- [Delivering housing design value – is the momentum building?](#)
- [Confluence of design in planning](#)
- [Water Resilient Places for Scotland](#)
- [Whatever happened to perceived density?](#)

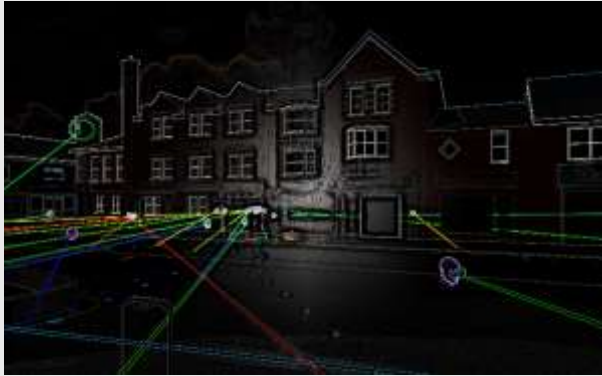
The views expressed by authors are their own and do not necessarily reflect the views of the RTPI.

The most significant news in terms of the design dimension of planning is the [current MHCLG consultation on the National Planning Policy Framework and National Model Design Code](#), in England, which the RTPI will be responding to formally. If you have any comments then do please send them to max.tolley@rtpi.org.uk by Monday 8 March 2021.

On the heritage front, the Government has announced the [22 areas that will receive extra funding](#) for developing registers of local heritage assets, while [all historic statues across England have been given blanket protection through the planning system](#) as a result of a recent reform. Given the value of 'local lists' and the key role of planners in their development, any additional funding and focus is positive, while the monuments development is one the RTPI are currently reviewing in terms of the potential implications on the ground.

Finally, we are always seeking articles on planning and design matters for this newsletter. If you would like to contribute content for future editions, please also email these to Max. All the best to everyone for staying safe in these challenging times.

Justin Webber
Chair, Urban Design Network



CEE VR: Community Engagement with Eye-tracking analytics in Virtual Reality

Dr. Bobby Nisha,
Department of Urban Studies and
Planning
University of Sheffield

CEE VR is an immersive gaming experience developed at the Department of Urban Studies and Planning, led by Dr. Nisha at University of Sheffield. CEE VR was developed to engage local community, especially young adults in the redevelopment of their neighbourhood. The project sought to understand the experience, interaction, and perception of space while engaging in an immersive walkthrough.

Eye tracking is the process of measuring and recoding gaze positions and eye movements of an individual. This study employs eye tracking to understand how urban areas are actually used and, obtain insights into users' ways of reasoning and problem solving in spatial navigation. The immersive gaming experience was a playful task that combined predefined Areas of Interest (AOI's) and on movements between the AOI's. The predefined AOI's were targets, users are supposed to search for in the VR set up as an immersive scavenger hunt game. Participants are dropped off inside a bus stop in the market square and tasked with finding three hidden objects (predefined AOI's) and bring them back to the basket placed near the bus stop. The predefined AOI's were: Teddy bear, Blue dice, and Volley ball. The transitions between the AOI's and their temporal order is captured to discover the user's strategies in visual exploration, search and performing given tasks. The cross-disciplinary approach that brings urban design, planning, gaming and virtual reality had led to the creation of CEE VR ([watch video summary](#)).

The project thus far, has worked with 105 participants and video simulations of eye-tracking

data was collected as live viewing, storytelling and heat maps.

- Live viewing: identifies patterns in the gaze behaviour
- Story telling: visualisation of gaze data to capture user behaviour(s) as a third person narrative and mapping spatial voids in the environment
- Heat maps: visualising how participants look at the environment, which key elements they look at and what areas attract most attention

The engagements at Shirebrook market fostered intergenerational dialogue establishing key words that channelled community belonging and sense of identity. The temporal order was captured as eye-tracking data to discover participant strategies in visual exploration, way finding and behavioural insights in performing the given task. This triggered discussion on what participants like/dislike about the marketplace and what they wish to change/not change.

CEE-VR demonstrates the use and application of immersive virtual reality as as community engagement tool.

Delivering housing design value – is the momentum building?

Dr James White MRTPI, Senior Lecturer in Urban Design, University of Glasgow

At the tail end of 2020, the Place team at the [UK Collaborative Centre for Housing Evidence](#) published [Delivering design value: the housing design quality conundrum](#), a wide-ranging evaluation of planning, design and housing development that was sponsored by the RTPI and the four UK Governments. Since the report's publication, the Westminster government has released its [National Model Design Code](#) for England and set out its expectation that local authorities create local design codes that align with a national standard. In Scotland, significant change is also afoot. The Scottish Government is currently consulting on an ambitious [position statement](#) for its fourth National Planning Framework, which explores how the Climate Emergency might be addressed through enhanced place-based and design-conscious planning, including creating '20-minute neighbourhoods'.

While there are significant problems with some of the wider reforms to the planning system in England, and further detail is needed on the proposals emerging in Scotland, the foregrounding of design at a national level is a step in the right direction. National decision-makers have begun to recognise that design quality is not an optional extra but instead a fundamental means of addressing the Climate Emergency and creating just places that support people's long-term health and wellbeing. In our recent report we recommended how this could be actioned through the regulation of a design value standards, similar in scope to England's National Model Design Code or the latest iteration of the Building for Life toolkit, Building for Healthy Life.

More needs to be done, however, to address the 'design deficit' at the local level. One of the key findings from our research is that a sizable gap exists between the (often conflicting) aims and objectives of national politicians and the complex local reality of delivering new homes in UK towns and cities. Design quality is invariably swept aside by more pressing concerns like housing delivery targets or is stymied by housebuilder's opaque assessments of development viability. Changes at the national level, positive though they are, will not be sufficient to reset this status quo, which so often yields to the demands of powerful housebuilders and their consultants.

Our report recommends that changes to the national policy landscape must be accompanied by local investment to support over-worked local authorities charged with delivering design value through the planning system. This could be achieved through a variety of means, including training and skills development, enhanced place leadership or simply by hiring more design professionals to support local policy making and development management. Without these changes, it will remain extremely difficult to realise the emerging national design value ambitions and truly harness the power of design to address the Climate Emergency.

Confluence of design in planning

Oliver Mathers, Design Officer at
The Architecture Centre

In 2020, our society was confounded by change unseen since the Second World War. We now find ourselves in dual crises of Climate and Health Emergencies. The challenges we face have brought urban planning to the forefront of public discourse, with a conversation centred on how we design our spaces and [who we design them for](#).

The notion of a renewed attention to design in urban planning was given further credence in August 2020, when the UK Government produced a 'Planning for the Future' white paper proposing a radical overhaul of the [UK planning system](#). A central pillar of the reforms comprises '*Planning for beautiful and sustainable places*' with an introduction of design

codes and guidance. In January 2021, this was reinforced with the newest draft of the [NPPF](#) and the publication of a new [National Model Design Code](#) which contains a 'Coding Process'. The coding process details a three-stage procedure of *Analysis, Vision* and *Code*.

The proposed step-by-step Coding Process will, however, take extensive human and monetary resources. For many Local Planning Authority's (LPA's) already in precarious financial situations due to a decade of Austerity and the COVID-19 crises, there is an implementation gap that must be bridged. The financial implication of such an undertaking raises concerns that design may fall victim to cost-cutting exercises, with a nationally prescribed 'fall-back position' taking over in the absence of the LPA's ability to produce robust codes.

There is, however, an opportunity for this to be implemented successfully. If anything, 2020 proved that people and businesses are resilient and adaptable. There is certainly scope for existing services to adapt their offering and evolve with the changing landscape. [Design Review](#) is one such service that could be transformed to help unlock the inevitable impasses that will befall LPA's in their delivery of nationally prescribed design policies.

Design Review Panels currently assemble experts from a myriad of professional backgrounds to act as a critical friend in the design of developments. Such review sessions could expand their offering so that expert panellists can offer design coding advice and ultimately achieve more contextually responsive and locally distinctive codes. The plethora and convergence of perspectives will help to ensure great success in this endeavour.

In recent decades, the divergence of the planning and architecture professions has been a stark and counterproductive narrative in the shaping of places. The reintroduction of design in the planning profession presents an opportunity to deliver positive change and shape great places on a national scale akin to how Design Review Panel's do at micro, more nuanced levels. In the words of RIBA's president-elect Simon Allford, you don't need to be an Architect, to be the Architect of great places.

A New Policy Framework on Water Resilient Places for Scotland

Heather Claridge,
RTPI Urban Design Champion for Scotland

Placing water at the centre of placemaking stepped up a gear on Friday 5 February with the publication of the 'Water Resilient Places' framework for Scotland. This new national policy aims to support the transition to a 'water first' approach, where communities can continue to thrive as the impacts of our changing climate play-out over the coming years.

Water is already a key consideration for the design of new and existing places. Despite this, examples of where it has been marginalised, hidden or largely ignored are much easier to come by than schemes which have opted to celebrate it as a key design and development feature. The emergence of this framework looks set to reverse this trend and support greater use of green and blue infrastructure to visibly manage increasing rainwater.

Presenting a positive image of future places, making the link between water resilience and thriving neighbourhoods, and engaging with a broad range of stakeholders to adapt activities to contribute to a water resilience future, are just some of the intentions of the policy. A series of recommendations on how surface water management in Scotland should be approached are outlined and this places planning and urban design with a key role in the implementation.

Whilst there is still a long way to go to shift the mindset to fully integrated water within placemaking processes, the framework will help shift from the current position where a few organisations are responsible for fixing all water issues to a multisectoral approach.

Putting this policy in to practice over the coming years will likely see a 'greener' and 'bluer' emphasis to the emerging planning guidance such as National Planning Framework 4, local development plans and local place plans, ultimately supporting efforts to design for our changing climate while protecting quality of life.

The new framework is available at: <https://www.gov.scot/publications/water-resilient-places-policy-framework-surface-water-management-blue-green-infrastructure/pages/6/>

Whatever happened to perceived density?

Fabrizio Matillana, Principal Urban Designer, Enfield Council

The consultation of the NPPF has introduced 'beauty' and 'design preferences' to the planning debate (NPPF Draft Para. 125 and 127). I propose that perceived density, which is both objective and subjective, can inform how these new concepts are tested and implemented in design policy.

Perceived density is not about dwellings per hectare, but spatial stimuli. Academic research considers it as reactions triggered from changes in space, time, symbolism, and culture. For example, a space that restricts interaction with others and movement, can lead to perceptions of crowdedness. A symbolic space evokes density via socio-cultural stereotypes (e.g., "busy as Grand Central Station"). This becomes part of language and in turn cultural setting which influences a person's tolerance to density.

Current research on perceived density by [Beatrix Emo](#) from ETH Zurich links crowdedness to sky and road visibility, and number of buildings, people, and vehicles. LSE's [Alan Mace's](#) research shows that a person's reaction to density is less where there is an acceptance of need for homes due to the housing crisis. The former is finding a response to crowdedness via measurable spatial metrics and the latter is a cultural value influencing a personal tolerance. Density is therefore not only just an output, but a reaction, and one where each person has a tolerance to stimuli that triggers either a positive or negative response.

The following recommendations could inform how one can plan for perceived density and tolerance to densification. Vu.City visualises emerging settings and tests impact on visibility. Designing denser versions of historical typologies would respond to cultural sensibilities. Planning for spatial variety in density, allows for heightening and loosening of a person's stimuli. Locating these varied typologies in mixed communities would address personal acceptance. The aim is planning for gradual transitions, moving towards a broader approval of densification without alienation.

Perceived density might be the conceptual tool that bridges conflictive and highly personal concepts like beauty and design preferences. Research has shown that equally personal is perceived density but has spatial and cultural metrics that can inform design policy. Addressing this broader definition of density would help in transitioning to denser cities, with community buy-in and developed from familiar typologies.

RTPI News

Support our vision and share the campaign
#PlanTheWorldWeNeed

[New RTPI mentoring programme opens for applications](#)

NURTURE, the RTPI's mentoring programme designed specifically to support the professional development of chartered RTPI members in the UK and Ireland, is now open for applications. The pilot programme will provide structured, professional mentoring for 25 of the RTPI's members who are mid-career and looking to progress. Applications for mentees and mentors are open until Monday 8 March 2021. The commitment will be six one-hour sessions between June 2021 and February 2022.

[Groundbreaking 20-year spatial strategy welcomed by RTPI Cymru](#)

A landmark strategy setting out the direction of development in Wales over the next two decades has been welcomed by Royal Town Planning Institute (RTPI) Cymru.

[NPF4 must be 'deliverable, connected and influential', says RTPI Scotland](#)

Responding to the Scottish government's NPF4 [position statement](#), RTPI Scotland said it broadly welcomed the direction of travel and was pleased to see 'a clear synergy' with the Institute's [Plan The World We Need](#) campaign.

[Town planning 'heroes' to be recognised at RTPI Awards 2021](#)

The innovative work of planners in response to the Covid-19 pandemic is to be recognised at this year's Royal Town Planning Institute (RTPI) national awards ceremony, to be held online on 29 April (16.00-18.00), use the above link to book your place.

['Resilient' town planning apprentices succeeding despite pandemic, says RTPI](#)

The Chartered Town Planner Apprenticeship, launched in 2019, is going from strength to strength despite the effects of the pandemic, the Royal Town Planning Institute (RTPI) has said.

Apprentices on the scheme are able to gain practical experience in the workplace while studying for their degree. Successful completion of the apprenticeship leads to chartered membership of the RTPI.

[Click here for all the latest RTPI news](#)

RTPI Events



[Learning from Covid – how the pandemic has shaped the way in which we will live in the future](#)

8 March 2021 at 12:00 PM - 01:00 PM

[Urban Design for Northern Ireland](#)

23 March 2021 at 10.00 AM - 11.30 AM

[Click here for the RTPI events calendar](#)

[Click here to catch up on past events on the RTPI YouTube Channel](#)



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