

Quality thought for the day

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"Quality is the response of an organism to its environment", wrote Robert Pirsig. "People differ about quality, not because quality is different, but because people are different in terms of experience."

Quality is indefinable; it doesn't exist within objects themselves, but not only as a feeling or an experience of someone sensing the object. In the same way, the physical environment does not possess quality *per se*, but it can engender it as an emotion in an individual's environmental perception.

The nature and subjectivity of quality was the theme chosen for investigation as Hazel McKay made her first presidential visit to the Royal Town Planning Institute East of England branch in Cambridge recently. In promoting the notion of people-friendly planning, she challenged professionals to take a fresh look at how others perceive their environment.

Telling us of her childhood recollections of long walks in the Peak District, she illustrated how her parents' perception of a magnificent vantage point over the hills was to her the sight of a high stone wall blocking her view. This is reminiscent of Pirsig's motorcycle journey across America with his son - what to the author was a sense of exposure and oneness with the immediate environment was to his son the view of the back of his head.

McKay believes that our experience of the environment is more acute when younger. Therefore, as environmental professionals, we need a revival of visionary zeal, similar in response to the strength of reaction in a child's view. Recent experience has taught her that children have a very forceful and often disturbing view of the world around them.

Using this as a prompt, she adopted an interesting approach, taking us on a methodical journey past the purely visual through our range of senses into our feelings and emotions - each changing our notion of environmental perception. We should "sense our surroundings" and be ready to take a fresh look - though not necessarily go back to basics - at our understanding of environmental perception and appreciation.

We should even be able to sense our surroundings on planning applications, assessing whether a place is people-friendly by walking around the plans, experiencing the microclimate, the enclosure, the building massing and the areas of

pedestrian conflict.

We also need to change our jargonistic language to explain how people experience their surroundings and how they value those experiences - presenting to them a child's non-technical view of the environment. "Anyone who will not receive the kingdom of God like a little child will never enter it."

Fellow speaker and past president Peter Fidler began his presentation with the assumption that sustainability is synonymous with quality. In the new plan-led system, environmental appraisal is about making better-quality plans and policies. This is the goal of the recent Department of the Environment good practice guide (*Planning 1047*), with its methodology intended to help overcome inertia.

The key reason for appraising plans is to move towards sustainable development, because making good-quality plans and policies is all about saving the planet. An appraisal will make environmental considerations comprehensive, justifications explicit and systematic and thus harder to produce "sloppy policies".

Architect and planner Viren Sahai attempted to set out his understanding of the long-lost art of townscape and how it can contribute to the "memorability" of places and spaces. To him, physical quality is a defined or enclosed space to which human beings can relate, in which buildings are more than functional monuments and designers actually consider the context in which they are building.

The result of his investigations is not so much a checklist of physical quality, as he suggested, but the illustration of eccentricities and eclectic views which become part of a palette of techniques and elements to be used sensitively by designers in individual situations.

You cannot be too prescriptive and broad-brush about the meaning of physical quality, without considering the social context within which people experience their local places and spaces. The problem with a generalised list of what contributes to a "sense of place" is that it assumes that most people will experience the environment in a similar way. Quality is always in the eye - or other senses - of the beholder.

David Wright, director of Commissions East, picked up this inherent contradiction in defining quality as he gave us an entertaining presentation on art in the environment. Elements of art in a scheme can contribute to an expression of quality.

Similarly, involving an artist in

the whole design process, rather than as an afterthought, can provide another vision to the project team - an understanding of materials and a sensitivity to both people and location. This need not be expensive, and it can have enormous paybacks and benefits. On the issue of quality, Wright felt that people are often frightened of expressing what is good and bad art; thus it can all be valuable in helping to maintain our "critical faculty".

The role of planners and local authorities is crucial in persuasion - for example, through promoting the Arts Council's percentage for art scheme - and, perhaps more importantly, in creating a corporate model for others to follow. Public art is an embodiment of environmental quality, and needs to be seen and promoted as much more than ornamentation - Norman Foster's "lipstick on the gorilla".

The final offering for the day was on the more down-to-earth subject of achieving environmental quality in mineral working and restoration. Planning consultant Terry Betts set the context for the complementary factors of self-regulation within the minerals industry and good decisions and enforcement by planning authorities.

Betts saw a continuing role for planners in "building in quality", notwithstanding advances in environmental management by minerals operators. Of special interest, in this respect, are the findings of the Groundwork's *Greensite* study. This uncovered the poor image of the minerals industry as a "necessary evil", and tried to address this public relations problem.

People's perception of quality in relation to minerals sites is heavily dependent upon day-to-day working and management, more so than any potential restoration and after-use. Many of the procedural recommendations from the Study - such as voluntary codes of practice, environmental audit and management systems, and "quality frontages" - have been picked up by some of the larger operators.

Staff training and site monitoring and enforcement are areas which are lacking and which will need to be addressed by the planning professions and the institute if we are to achieve this elusive element of quality. Betts did not pass over the opportunity to lobby the current institute president on this very point.

The conference, held towards the end of March, was part of the Royal Town Planning Institute East of England Branch series on Planning at the Crossroads.