urban qualities

One of the most distinguishing features of St Helier is the complexity and richness of its urban environment. Although the town has a strong physical setting, is reasonably compact and has strong landmarks and iconic features, it is not particularly easily 'read'. As shown in the previous chapter on People and Perceptions, there are remarkably few well known places or area names for a town of this size. To the visitor, large areas of the town appear as assemblages of buildings with a wide range of styles, ages, sizes and uses, often arranged in a complex plan of narrow streets. 'Something different around every corner', may well be an alternative motto for the town.

The apparent lack of clear structure and the random nature of much of the urban area raises a number of issues. Firstly, in relation to carrying out the Urban Character Appraisal, it would be easy to be drawn into traditional methods of analysis that attempted to break down the complexity of the urban environment and reduce it to the simplest terms. A one-dimensional character analysis methodology would achieve this but would not acknowledge the richness and complexity of St Helier. Secondly, the brief attaches as much importance to **action** – through policies, proposals, action areas and frameworks – as it does to data collection and the actual definition of character areas. The challenge here is to devise a method of analysis and a way of looking at St Helier which acknowledges the complexity of the place – in this way there is a better chance of future intervention also being complex, multifaceted and involving, rather than simplistic.

Previous work carried out in St Helier – by CEB Brett and by Melville Dunbar Associates in 1977 and 1984 respectively – set worthwhile precedents. Brett's work documents the remarkable stylistic richness of the town's architecture while Dunbar adopts the principles and methods of townscape analysis pioneered by Gordon Cullen. The Dunbar study identifies nine character areas and goes on to describe a series of walks through the town. The emphasis of the study is on the richness of the town's built heritage and the importance of place, scale, texture, colour and individuality. However the work is not comprehensive and has limited coverage of the town. It also does not deal with the way in which different functional areas interact.

An alternative method of dealing with the issues raised by the complexity and richness of St Helier's urban environment is to find a means of describing it without losing its qualities or complex inter-relationships. In his recent work, '*The Nature of Order*', Christopher Alexander outlines a number of fundamental structural properties or qualities which together create good design/places/centres. There is nothing particularly new in this approach – the idea of the whole being greater than the sum of the parts – but it does help to describe some of the qualities of St Helier which might be overlooked in a purely objective approach to character appraisal. Most importantly, these properties are interlinked rather than separate entities. In appraising the character of areas of the town, we would look for as many of these qualities as possible. In assessing proposals, it should be possible to ask, 'How many of these qualities does this proposal bring to the town?'

Examples of eleven properties are shown on the following pages: together they represent an alternative method of looking at and thinking about St Helier and are presented as balance to the more objective criteria used to define character areas in the subsequent chapter.

1 **Recognisable Places**

2 **Strong Centres and Focal Points**

3 **Strong Boundaries**

4 **Gradients and Changes in Level**

5 **Nodes and Connections**

6 **Repetition of Elements**

7 **Local Symmetries**

8 **Echoes and Similarities**

9 **Solid and Void**

10 **The Presence of the Past**

11 **Integration**

In addition to these properties it is also worth considering:

12 **Surprise**

13 **Colour**

14 **Little gems**

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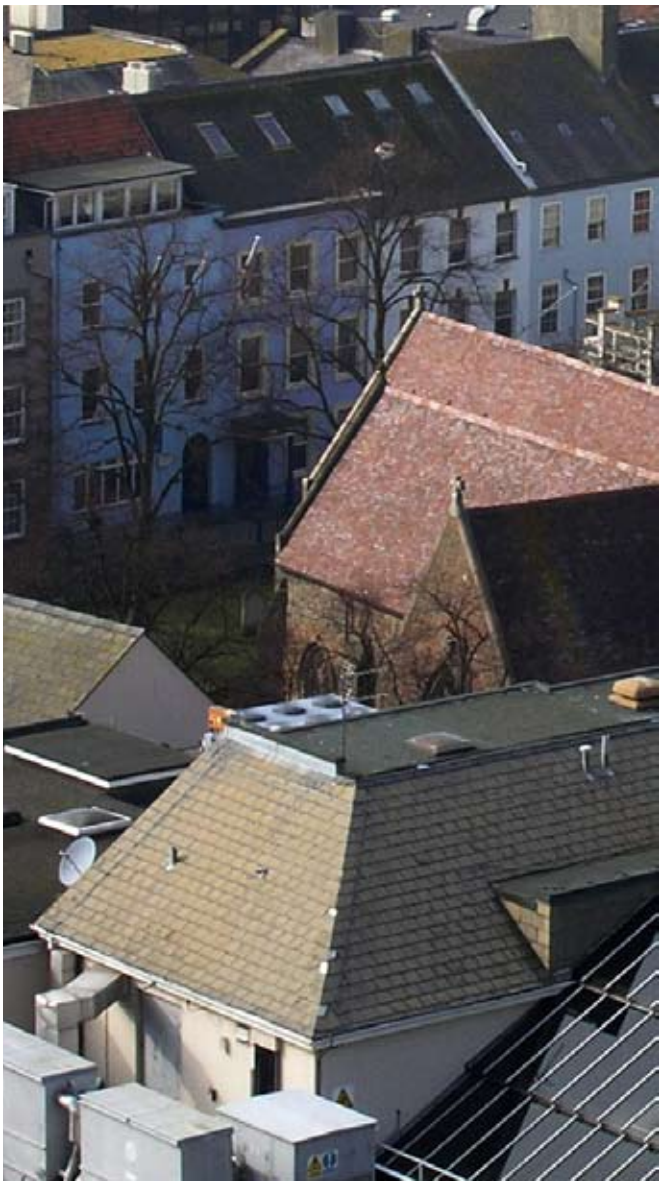

12 Surprise

13 Use of colour

14 Little gems