Informing design review:
Discussion of the findings of a visual preference study in New Zealand

Morten Gjerde *

Victoria University of Wellington, PO Box 600, Wellington 6140, New Zealand

Abstract

The appearance of the built environment plays an important role in people’s physical, financial and psychological wellbeing. In light of this, it is important to ensure that transformation of urban streets and public spaces through individual projects can satisfy the aesthetic needs of those who regularly use them. Within projects, outcomes are regularly controlled by a steering group working on behalf of the project sponsor and other internal stakeholders. To ensure that the needs of those outside the project group are also met, some local authorities in New Zealand review project design at the planning approval stage. This process invites experts, who in some cases informed by design guides, to evaluate the architectural design. This paper addresses the question of whether the ways places are changing align with public expectations. A mixed methods approach was used to elicit people’s preferences for building and streetscape characteristics, where stimuli were first presented as photographic representations and secondly as real streetscapes in two New Zealand cities. The findings identify the streetscape design characteristics that were best liked by people as well as those that were disliked. Of particular interest was a comparison between the preferences expressed by lay members of the public with those of design and planning professionals. The paper concludes with a brief discussion about the obstacles that may be limiting the achievement of well-liked streetscapes in the New Zealand context.

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* Corresponding author. Tel.: +64 4 463 6233; fax: +64 4 463 6204.
E-mail address: morten.gjerde@vuw.ac.nz
1. Introduction

Around the world, people continue to flock to cities to live, work and play. People come to cities to enjoy civic and social amenities as well as the many economic opportunities that arise when people live more closely together. As populations rise and business owners respond to new opportunities, the built environment must change to accommodate these. While a considerable amount of growth takes place around the edges of cities, leading to sprawl, transformations also help to reshape existing built-up areas. Changes take place over varying scales and timeframes, with steps ranging in scale from single buildings to large scale redevelopment of entire blocks undertaken to meet market demands.

In order to help ensure that change outcomes are appropriate to all stakeholders, many cities have adopted urban design review processes. All projects are carefully scrutinised within the project team setting, however the outcomes sought by an owner can often conflict with those sought by the public [1]. This is particularly true where development is undertaken as a business activity. Urban design review is a way of balancing the needs of the public with those of the specific project [2, 3]. Design review can have considerable influence on project outcomes and is therefore relevant to any discussions concerning form and content of contemporary cities.

This paper is concerned with the results of incremental changes and in particular the effects these have on the visual appearances of towns and cities. Are places changing in ways that reflect the aesthetic preferences of the people who use them? If not, what are the challenges that need to be overcome?

2. Visual preference studies

This paper reports on a part of a project that aims to evaluate the effectiveness of different design control methods being applied in New Zealand cities. This part of the project is driven by the question: what are the characteristics of well-liked buildings and streetscapes in New Zealand? There is general consensus that there are significant gaps in evidence based knowledge about people’s aesthetic experience of cities. Most of the literature has been developed on the basis of normative theory [4: 171-173], reflecting the fact that aesthetics in the visual design fields from architecture to the fine arts has generally been the domain of philosophers and theoreticians [5]. However, since the 1960s a number of critical studies have examined people’s perceptions and judgments of their environments through application of social science and psychology methodologies [6-10]. This research fits with these in the growing area of environmental aesthetics.

A well-known research in this area was carried out by Nasar [9], who used mapping techniques developed by Lynch [11] to examine visual preferences of people in two American cities. He set out to identify the general characteristics of likeable places, which led him to identify naturalness, openness, upkeep, historical significance and order as those having greatest significance to people. Findings like Nasar’s, which are based on empiric data, provide evidence on which planners can base design policy and guidance.

This project builds on the findings and methods of earlier visual preference studies. Two studies were undertaken in sequence, one that asked people to evaluate urban streetscapes on the basis of photographic representations and the other inviting them to rate buildings and streetscapes in real life, as they walked along them. The streetscapes were each selected on the basis of the particular characteristics of individual buildings along their length and the relationships they formed with each other. The aim was to present a range of conditions encountered in design review processes.

More than 200 people responded to the representations of buildings along six different urban streets to the first study (figure 1). In addition to contributing robust data to inform the overall findings, these preliminary results also informed the design of the second study. In the second part, respondents were invited to visit two streets in Auckland and one in Wellington. At least 40 people participated in each of the three cases, and they were asked to evaluate the design characteristics of individual buildings, the relationships between adjacent buildings and the overall streetscape composition along both sides as they walked along each street. To help tease out the key issues that influence the ways people perceive the environment, two focus groups comprising people who had participated in the survey of College Street in Wellington were held. Meetings of lay participants and of change professionals
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