

APPLYING DESIGN THINKING TO REGENERATION

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the results of a project with 2nd year product design students who were tasked with providing solutions for social issues in the urban environment. It shows how this brief has significance in helping students to understand design as a medium for developing ideas which benefit society. In design education it is important to introduce students to the idea that in many cases design has to serve a social function. It is also important to show students how their design skills can be applied in a non-traditional sense of product design.

In the urban environment the consideration of social aspects is essential. Well designed urban environments and those rich in design quality, in terms of street furniture for example, can instil a sense of civic pride in the community and assist social cohesion. This is particularly important when considering the regeneration of the urban environment in order to achieve viable and sustainable outcomes for the community.

Keywords: Urban regeneration, design, quality of life, transferable skills

1 INTRODUCTION

The role of the designer is transforming in modern society and increasingly, designers find themselves applying their skills and expertise in areas considered not to be within the traditional product design parameters, for example in the service sector. The Design Council's RED Paper 02: *Transformation Design* [1] highlights the changing nature of the designer and challenges the traditional view of producing a manufactured object as the outcome. The paper asserts that the ability of designers to form ideas and produce creative and desirable solutions is desperately needed to tackle pressing social issues.

One such opportunity for designers to use their skills in this way is in the regeneration of communities in cities and towns. Regeneration in this sense can be defined as a response to the economic, physical and social issues experienced within communities, generally as a consequence of industrial decline. The design quality of buildings and spaces in the public realm can have a profound effect on the quality of life experienced by communities. An environment in which people can feel safe and which helps to foster a sense of civic pride within the community can have a positive impact in terms of social cohesion and collective wellbeing.

When an area experiences regeneration these positive effects that the urban environment can have on the community carries an even greater significance as regeneration endeavours to revive an area which has experienced social, economic and physical urban decline. Designers respond to briefs by way of providing creative solutions to problems or issues. The application of those skills in the context of urban regeneration can be seen as a logical and creative way of finding user-centred solutions to the associated social issues.

2 PROJECT BACKGROUND

Design is a pivotal part of everyday life and has an influence on the decisions we make both consciously and subconsciously. In the urban environment, design can play a crucial role in shaping the lives of communities and how they function socially and economically. In areas which have experienced the decline of industry, the regeneration of such areas involves the provision and implementation of solutions to combat the problems associated with industrial decline.

These problems concern, firstly, the economic impact that industrial decline has on a city or area. Under these circumstances economic activity is adversely affected due to the reduced industrial

activity and the unemployment of those who worked within that industry. That leads, secondly, to a significant reduction in local authority expenditure which, in turn, has a detrimental affect on the urban fabric of the area as less financial assistance is available to maintain the public realm and the facilities within the environment. Finally, the social effects of industrial decline are felt within communities with increased unemployment and associated hardships of deprivation. In addition, the negative effects of urban environments which are badly designed are more likely to impact on the lives of those who already experience hardship such as poverty and ill health in disadvantaged areas [2].

On going regeneration in Glasgow since the decline of industry has improved the local economy and physical elements of the city to a certain extent. However, the benefits of such improvement show few tangible results in many of Glasgow's communities and various social issues remain in some of the city's most disadvantaged areas.

A recent CABE [3] publication highlights several projects in the UK where artists and innovative thinkers used their creative abilities to engage in regeneration and have a positive impact on the lives of communities in order to provide something meaningful for the area. The success stories from these projects point to how creative thinking helped to engage the community with something unique and emotionally appealing as well as creating a sense of ownership and pride. The projects had a strengthening effect on the community and provided the platform for further development. The aim of the project this paper will focus on is to illustrate how the process, principles and thinking employed in design can be applied to the urban realm in order to find creative solutions to social issues within communities which would, in turn, facilitate the sustainable regeneration of an area.

3 METHODOLOGY

The students were asked to consider how quality of environment has an effect on quality of life. The students were then split into 8 groups of 4 students and each group was assigned an area of Glasgow on which to focus their project. The four focus areas were Barlanark, Calton, Easterhouse and Shettleston, all of which are situated in Glasgow's East End and are shown in Figure 1. It should be noted that very few of the students were from these areas and, in some cases, had never heard of them. In order to aid their understanding and further their knowledge, the groups were given an information pack on their assigned area. This starter material included local statistics, news stories and images of the urban environment. Each of the focus areas had a particular social issue as its design impulse for the project: Barlanark – Safety and Wellbeing; Calton – Pride vs. Hopelessness; Easterhouse – Vandalism and Opportunist Crime; Shettleston – Lifestyle and Diet

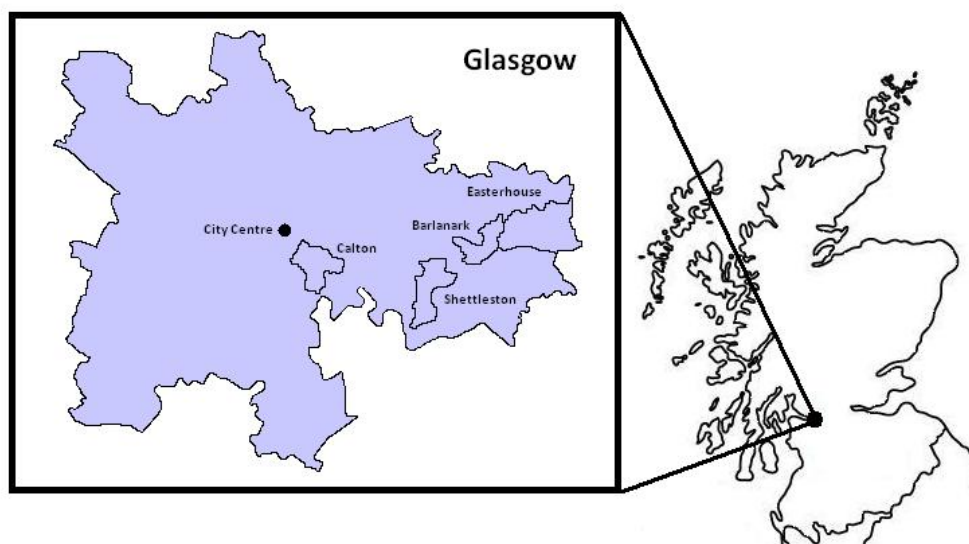


Figure 1. Project Focus Areas

In those groups, the students were asked to use design skills and creative thinking to establish solutions which would have a positive effect in the community they had been assigned. The brief dictated that the solutions should tackle the particular social aspect within the community which has a

detrimental effect on the area and show clearly how a design-led solution would impact positively on quality of life. The students were encouraged to develop user profiles of community members to help focus, and later to explain, their design solution.

4 DESIGN SOLUTIONS AND OUTCOMES

4.1 Barlanark – Safety and Wellbeing

Students in this group had been asked to address issues of safety in the public realm in Barlanark and were asked to consider how a design solution would contribute to the overall wellbeing of the community. The group identified particular issues within the area as: vandalism, lack of community spirit and feeling unsafe in the streets. The group's solution to such issues was the construction of a public space which would be maintained by the community and facilitate social cohesion.

This corresponds to research by Elkin, McLaren and Hillman [4] which emphasizes that cities require a built environment which promotes social interaction while simultaneously deterring vandalism and other petty crime. Using collected research and referring to the user profiles which were created, the group identified key areas in which they felt their design solution would contribute positively to the community, these were: Promoting safety, bringing the community together, utilizing an underdeveloped environment and offering community involvement.

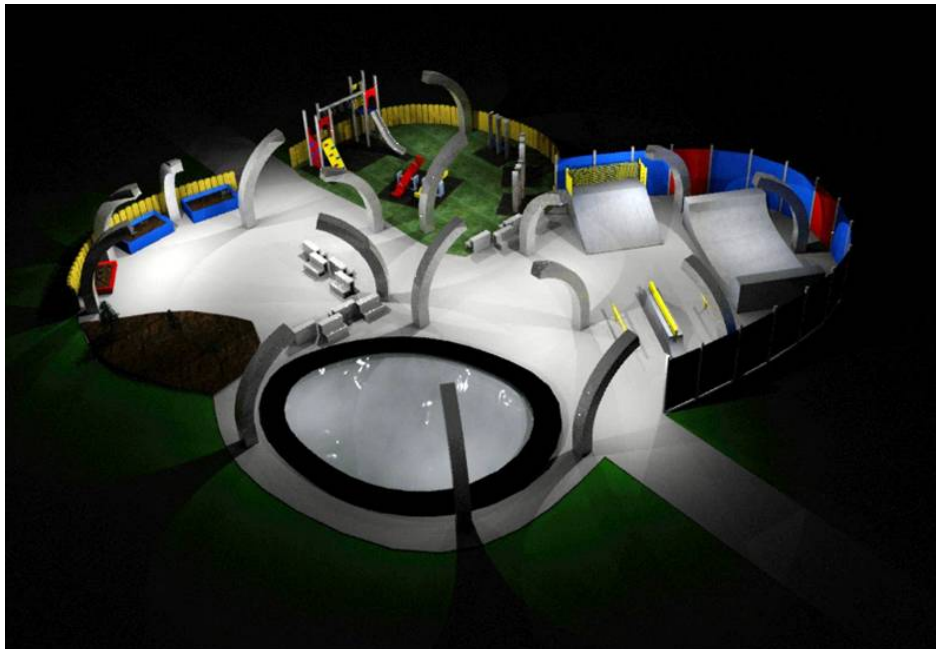


Figure 2. Student Design Solution for Barlanark

The concept itself, shown in Figure 2, is for an area “built” by the community which would then be inherited by the community. The group highlighted the merits of the concept as helping to create a sense of ownership in the environment which would in turn help to deter vandalism of the space. The space itself offers the opportunity for different activities to take place at the same time and so different members of the community can come together in one space to take part in their own particular interests. Open space and recreational facilities play a major part in promoting healthy living and social development through activities and interaction [5] and this is one of the stronger aspects of this concept. Lighting plays a significant part in the concept providing both an area with natural surveillance and a safer area to pass through. The space also includes a pond, play area and a garden which, it is proposed, would be maintained by members of the community. The group also produced a simulated Local Authority poster, shown in Figure 3 to help contextualize their concept.



Figure 3. Student Concept Poster for Barlanark Design Solution

In this case the students have understood that the improvement of public places can have a significant impact on the conditions of life within communities and can instil a sense of civic pride in residents and convey a much improved social image as corroborated by Madanipour [6]. The recognition of this can be contributed to the creative approach the group took to addressing social issues by exploring the root causes of such issues and arriving at a concept which not only reacts to problems but could also provide the means to make progress. CABE [7] highlights how the maintenance and design of parks and public green spaces affects people and uses The Hub in Regents Park, London as a positive example of such a space. It is important to aspire to have similarly praised examples of public parks and spaces in more disadvantaged areas.

4.2 Calton – Pride vs. Hopelessness

The second design solution this paper will examine is that of the group assigned to the Calton area of Glasgow. Their brief was focused on restoring pride in the face of general feelings of hopelessness in the community regarding the area, that is to say feelings of pessimism and resignation which are linked to and intensified by negative aspects in the immediate environment. Hopelessness is a term introduced by Dr. Aaron T. Beck in the 1970s which referred to feelings of negativity related to the future [8]. The group identified factors in the area such as neglect of the urban fabric in terms of maintenance as having a negative impact on the outlook of community members. Criminal activity, in particular vandalism, was also highlighted as an issue which the group mainly attributed to the fact that there were few leisure opportunities for youths in the area.

It was suggested that this social scenario was linked to loitering and anti-social behaviour due to discontent. Once again, the group identified the dilapidated condition of many parts of the urban fabric as contributing to feelings of hopelessness in the area and of being forgotten about as a community. It

was suggested that if the Local Authority show little interest in the area in terms of maintenance that the community feel that acts of vandalism within such an environment, for example in Baird Square will make little difference. In an interview with the Authors, Constable Rob Hay [9] (Regeneration Liaison, Strathclyde Police) asserted that crime is a way for certain members of the community to manifest their discontent with their environment.



Figure 4. Baird Square, Calton

The solution attempts to reverse the negativity of vandalism by putting it to positive use. The group propose an outdoor graffiti gallery in Baird Square to encourage the use of a designated space for this activity and to detract potential vandals from defacing the public realm elsewhere. The space would be brightly lit in hours of darkness and is intended to facilitate a sense of ownership and responsibility. A visualisation of the concept is shown in Figure 5 below. Although the concept has its shortcomings the creative approach helped the group to consider means of making positive contribution by directly utilising a negative issue and could perhaps have a more positive effect if implemented as part of a package of measures. Alternatively, the idea could be implemented as part of a community scheme like Graffiti Art Programming [10] in Winnipeg, Canada which aims to promote the positive aspects of youth art and to provide environments for young people to express themselves creatively.



Figure 5. Student Design Solution for Calton

5 CONCLUDING REMARKS

The solutions delivered by all groups were adequate in that they used a design-led creative process to construct ideas and develop a final concept. However, the solutions themselves were not well explored in some cases. It should be noted that the project lasted just one week and a longer timescale would be

preferred if the project was run again. Despite this short timescale some of the groups delivered more viable solutions than others and showed an ability to use design thinking and creative exploration to develop concepts in a non-traditional Product Design context.

5.1 Barlanark Group Remarks

The solution put forward by this group showed the potential that the application of transferable design skills can have in an atypical product design context. In a more extensive project the group could certainly have applied their creative skills very well to the regeneration of an area. They identified key issues in the community and the environment and attempted to deliver a holistic solution which, with further development, could provide the kind of space which would positively impact on a community and environment in an area like Barlanark.

5.2 Calton Group Remarks

The group which investigated the Calton area did so with a view to restoring a sense of pride in the community. The concept the group delivered of a designated graffiti area shows creative thinking in attempting to reverse a situation without completely prohibiting it. The viability of such an idea is perhaps questionable in that central to the concept is the acceptance of potential vandals to use the area when it has already been highlighted that the dilapidated state of other parts within the area makes them prime targets for vandalism. However, by thinking creatively the group proposed to use the problem as the solution and such an idea could prove successful if implemented as part of a package of measures in an area like Calton.

5.3 Overall Project Remarks

The students worked well and applied their design thinking to the process of conceptualising outcomes which could have a positive effect on communities. For all students involved it was the first time they had been asked to use their design skills and thinking in a non-traditional product design context. It should be added that some of the students struggled to contend with the idea that product design skills could be applied in such a context and this emphasises the need to prepare product design students for the eventuality that they may not design objects or tangible products as such in a future career. The skills which product designers possess could and should be used in a broader context of the social, political and economic issues which affect communities and the environments in which they live.

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