

## The past we inherit, the future we build

Paul Vanner offers  
some thoughts  
on learning  
from the past  
when we design  
tomorrow's  
places



THIS IS ANOTHER “special” number of *About Wales* – special, firstly, because we have begun to make changes to the magazine that we hope readers will welcome, and, secondly, because it features articles drawn from our recent joint conference with the Institute of Historic Building Conservation. This was our first such conference and perhaps the first of a series of events as the Trust and the Institute strengthen their working relationships.

The conference title – “The past we inherit, the future we build” – is particularly relevant to a Wales where the Assembly Government is trying actively to improve the quality of our built environment through initiatives such as the Spatial Plan, TAN 12 (Design) – which emphasises the need for local context to be taken into account when new projects are evaluated – and the creation of the Design Commission for Wales (of which I happen to be vice chair). Let me therefore be a little provocative.

I have never understood why architectural education programmes and the technical press lay so much emphasis on creating something different, or even sensational, in order to pander to fashion and the whims of their peers, and I was recently reminded of the importance of precedence when visiting some of the *bastides* of south-west France – “new” towns of the thirteenth century.

The bastides derive their urban form from the wish of feudal lords to have their subjects living in close proximity to one another – enabling them to be taxed and managed more efficiently. From such ignoble intentions a remarkable design for a town evolved. These new towns were mostly built to an identical grid-based street layout, as far as the terrain allowed, with straight streets intersecting at right angles. At the centre of the grid there would always be a square, while the lord's surveyors ensured that the surrounding plots were as narrow as possible, maximising revenue from the space within the walls. A tight-grained layout generated an active street frontage, while shopkeepers constructed arcades around the square to increase the area of upper floors and keep customers dry and protected from the summer sun. Invariably the square became the centre of communal life, often containing a covered market, with churches and court houses nearby.

This was an urban framework that superbly satisfied the commercial, cultural, retailing and spiritual needs of communities. I suggest that it could be a model that might serve us well, almost 700 years later, when we design new communities, just as it suited Edward I's urban planners when he laid out his own bastides at Conwy and Caernarfon. Likewise we need to take account of the potential of the often maligned high street or ►

### Conference papers

This conference, which took place in Llandrindod Wells on 4 November, was jointly organised and presented by the Civic Trust and the IHBC. It was generously supported by Cadw. Both organisations hope that its success will enable further collaboration in the New Year. The meeting was chaired jointly by **Gwilym Hughes Jones** (IHBC) and **Paul Vanner** (CTW).

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building form and materials are inevitably linked with the geography and geology of an area. Too often as designers we have failed to recognise and value regional distinctiveness; we have been too often seduced by the “international style”, too ready to kow-tow to “economically-driven” solutions.

The past can teach us much; if we look for the reasons why certain urban forms and building styles have stood the test of time and thus become “traditional”. Replication and pastiche are superficial means of pandering to a form of misplaced nostalgia; the conference featured in this edition not only enabled a recognition of the value people and communities place on their past, but provided insights into how a better understanding of this legacy can enable us to build a better Wales.



▲ **Bastide towns today above** Cordes-sur-ciel  
**below** Réalmont (© Paul Vanner)

main street, an accepted and understood urban model, often forgotten today.

I am not suggesting that we should simply copy such solutions, but we should learn from what has worked well in the past and adapt such solutions for twenty-first century living. Building forms that respect urban grain, location, pedestrian movement, and structures that use local materials are not inevitably pastiche. And as designers we have an enormous responsibility to create enduring and sustainable building solutions for future generations. This should mean that we seek to fuse contemporary materials and construction methods with appropriate urban solutions.

Tradition is about bringing the best of the past into the present for the benefit of the

future. We can't ignore the way our lives are changing – with new means of communication, and an instantaneous lifestyle that presents consumers with a multitude of choices.

But I propose that we should see the needs we have as town dwellers as evolutionary. As individuals and communities the basic elements of social interchange, exchange, administration, leisure and cultural and spiritual needs endure largely unchanged. Not least, what we require from our public spaces has altered little in seven centuries. Study of the historic environment in Wales provides an opportunity to recognise the cultural, social, educational and economic factors that have shaped our built environment.

In terms of physical development, the elements of



▲ **A Welsh bastide**  
**Conwy** grid layout and town square (© Bill Davies)