

From intuition to analysis



IN THE MARCH EDITION OF *About Wales* we introduced urban characterisation as a tool to understand the way our towns and cities have developed; to distinguish different *character areas* within the townscape; to attribute historical, social and architectural significance to character areas within towns and cities; and to apply this analysis to the management of change and the promotion of regeneration and conservation initiatives.

This approach to studying urban character adapts tools used to analyse areas of landscape and townscape to the whole of a community, not just, as in the case of a conservation area study, those parts officially acknowledged to be distinctive.

Analysing townscape in this way gives a special insight into what makes places distinctive. It recognises the fact that the whole of our built environment is historic in nature, and that the sense of place we as

top left corner treatment – the Crescent/Commercial Street
below left Doorcase detail, the Crescent
main picture Bryn Street, showing the corner with Union Street

individuals respond to (in your town and mine) has many components that cannot be given a special designation.

Cadw has taken the lead in Wales in publishing studies of Dolgellau, Denbigh, Flint and Aberdare (with eight others to follow) in the hope that the methodology will be adopted in other Welsh towns and cities as an effective contribution to their management by planners, urban designers and developers.

Our Tredegar conference earlier this year showcased Cadw's initiative, but it above all highlighted the potential for urban character studies to engage the voluntary sector – civic societies, local history groups, photography clubs for example, but not forgetting the

Key elements of urban character?

After discussing the character of streets in Penygloddfa, the groups were asked to pick out some generic aspects of urban character they thought could be applied to any urban context.

These were the popular choices:

- Relationships between underlying landscape and street layout
- Patterns of use and function
- Spatial relationships between townscape elements – roads, pavements, pathways, buildings, public and private space
- Density and organisation of built elements
- Building style and ornamentation
- Homogeneity/variety of buildings and uses

Would you make a different list?



ASPECTS OF DEVELOPMENT IN MODERN NEWTOWN

top recent private housebuilding, Sycamore Drive
below public housing at Trehafren, 1970s

many knowledgeable individual enthusiasts who have studied the evolution of Welsh local communities over time. And not just engagement – taking the lead in the process can be a means of empowerment, of democratising the development of local planning policy and decision-making, of building a constructive dialogue, even partnership, between community groups and local officialdom.

Well, that’s the aspiration, anyway. In October this year, the Civic Trust and its partners (Cadw, Powys County Council, the People’s Collection) hosted a seminar in Welshpool that gave civic societies and parallel groups from north-east and mid-Wales a chance to discuss and apply some of the techniques of character analysis.

Participants worked in groups to explore two distinctive areas of Newtown (a place that has a thirteenth-century origin, but has reinvented itself more than once – most recently as a mid Wales “new town” of the sixties and seventies.

Penygloddfa, across the Severn and north of the town centre, was laid out in the period between 1823 and 1840 to house hand loom weavers, workshops and factories. By contrast, Sycamore Drive and the Barnfields neighbourhood were identified as the focus for private house building as the town expanded in the later twentieth century – at a time when the principal focus of development was on social housing (Trehafren, for instance) and industrial workspace.

Studying Penygloddfa, groups were asked to identify features in the built environment which help us to analyse its character. They went on to discuss and list elements which could be said to be generic, and which could therefore be applied to any area of townscape – such as the very different Sycamore Drive.

The discussion of Peny-





gloddfa suggested how effective careful observation can be in moving from an instinctive appreciation of local character to an analytical understanding of the elements that are significant in its make up. Groups identified features relating to built form, building use, construction, and decoration, and a lively discussion developed about the relationships between these factors and issues of use, class and status.

How far is street layout related to underlying topography and landscape? What is the significance of the way street frontages have been designed? How far is there homogeneity or variety in the density and massing of development, or in the uses of buildings? Can we detect a social hierarchy in the design of streets, choice of materials or the ornamentation of detail? How far is architectural detail a factor contributing to local character? What's significant about the choice of materials?

We've published a summary of the workshops online together with linked resources, especially some exhaustive photography of the study areas. You might look at the same material (or similar material for a place you like) and come up with your own conclusions – whether about what's locally significant, or about a matrix that could be applied to any streetscape. The seminar went on to apply its suggestions to Sycamore Drive, demonstrating the value of the methodology to the understanding of recent as much as historic townscape.

The workshop did not stop at this point, however. It went on to think out of the box about the form character studies might take in the future, and about how work in progress

top backyard entrance, Union Street
middle the Crescent, looking south toward the town centre
bottom shop front, the Crescent

Try this at home

Exercise 1: On the *Discovering Places* section of the Civic Trust web site you'll find image galleries of several Newtown character areas. Try identifying as many examples as possible of features that shape the distinctive character of these streets.

Exercise 2: Which aspects of urban character seem to be especially important in shaping the character of an area?

Exercise 3: Pick some streets in somewhere that interests you and carry out a similar analysis.

might be presented to and methodologies shared with a wider audience – whether within the community, or with participants in parallel projects elsewhere.

Do character studies have to come to an end with the publication of a book or an exhibition? Can modern technology enable them to be dynamic, to develop and evolve over time as a basic tool for the whole community to play a part in shaping the future of a town? How far can social networking (Facebook) or online communities (the People's Collection) contribute to this empowerment?

The opportunity for Welsh communities and their partners to be truly innovative in discovering places in this way – developing methodologies of analysis and engagement – is enormous, and perhaps especially exciting for go-ahead civic societies to make their mark. *MG*