

# A culture of quality.

**Design Commission for Wales looks to the challenges ahead and shares perspectives from the people who have led and been closest to its work, gathered from 20 years of promoting design quality in Wales 2002-2022.**



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# Foreword

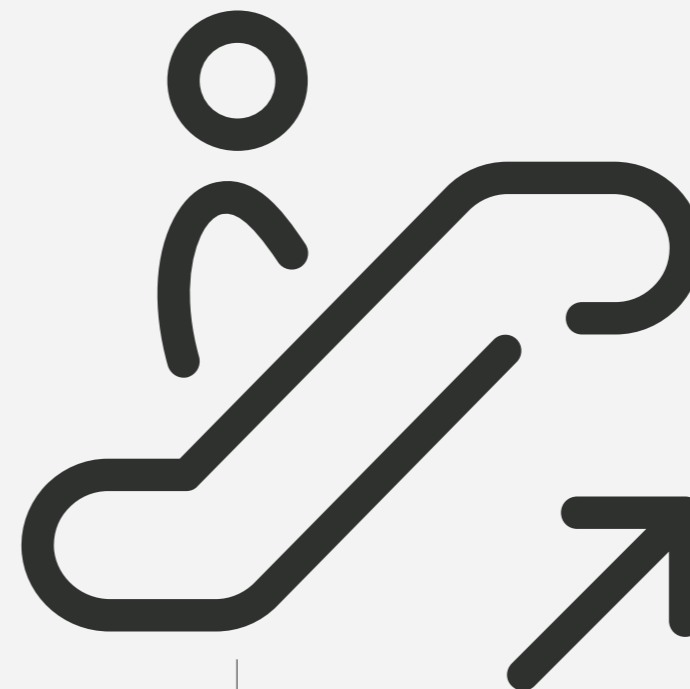
**Julie James MS**

Minister for Climate Change

Design excellence and sound placemaking are already at the heart of Future Wales our National Development Framework and Planning Policy Wales. We know that early strategic decisions play a key role and that it is vital for us to collaborate to capture opportunities early in national and regional strategic planning. Wales has led the way in putting such principles at the forefront of our thinking. The Well-being of Future Generations Act has enshrined in legislation the need to think and act in a collaborative and integrated way. We must continue to strengthen and develop collaborative practice with common purpose and to better recognise and respect the value of a multi-disciplinary design community capable of delivering excellence in our every day. I know how passionate the team at the Design Commission for Wales is about this and about shaping places that provide for the needs of the people of Wales which they can cherish and take pride in.

The quality of our homes and neighbourhoods, the ease by which we can choose to walk, cycle and use public transport to get to work, access services and enjoy leisure, are all enabled or frustrated by how well we address the challenges that are present in making and regenerating our villages, towns and cities. Now these challenges include the threats of climate and nature emergencies. We must work harder to find creative solutions to how and where we live and how we reduce our demands upon finite resources. If we are to achieve our aim of decarbonisation and support the well-being of our communities we must be better problem solvers. Design and designers have a major role to play in this and we cannot do it without them.

This book includes perspectives from the expert practitioners and professionals who have seen at first hand the nature of opportunity – and frustration – in the built environment and the forces that influence them. The contributors here are multi-sector professional practitioners – many giving their time and expertise without financial reward – drawn together by the Design Commission to help advance a sense of collective responsibility and positive structural change, to ensure we shape better and high quality environments. They are sharing their perspectives drawn from many years of real-world practice as well as their learning from observing the trends



in investment, design, planning and development that must change as well as those that must be supported and mainstreamed. They are passionate about raising awareness, stimulating debate and increasing understanding about the importance of quality and innovation in the way we shape the world in which we live. And I share that passion.

This book has some clear and challenging messages about the need for change, increased skills, resources and greater collaboration – and about getting better at involving our communities. It also shares expertise and infectious, sustained optimism, shining light on the vast talent pool available to us and the ways in which we can equip the designers, planners and developers of the future. We can pursue and deliver quality; we can lead responsible innovative practice and we can bring about the positive change. We have the policy and legislative tools and huge political will. We should not be daunted and we must push through the barriers.

The Design Commission was born in the first term of devolved government in Wales. Its work and its commitment has enabled close collaboration on ground breaking and now mature policy that underpins our common purpose – to shape a Wales that is, simply, a better place.

# Introduction

## Gayna Jones

Chair, Design Commission for Wales

**This year the Design Commission for Wales marks 20 years of promoting design for a Wales that is simply a better place. We are not looking back. We are looking ahead to the next two decades – a critical period when the climate and nature imperative and the needs of people can be addressed, and met, only if we do things very differently and only if we make a commitment to quality in all that we do.**

From its beginnings in 2002 the Design Commission has recorded, analysed, published and reinvested its learning from the first ever national Design Review Service in Wales which became a core part of our work. In our findings we referred to a series of critical design issues that the review process repeatedly had to address, and which continually threw up barriers to better built environment practice, challenging the pursuit of the Commission's remit and objectives – as set out by the Welsh Government and reflected in policy and legislation. Most are technical and could be overcome with the right skills, support, collaboration and leadership – provided the right culture exists. Addressing quality and promoting design excellence is far less a technical challenge, than a cultural one.

Learning from our national Design Review Service – gathering the jigsaw pieces to build

the big picture – the Commission has in the last two decades acted to drive positive change, informed by the reality of the influences of development finance, procurement, gaps in training and skills, policy-into-practice challenges, and client confidence.

Our dedicated Client Support takes commissioning clients through briefing, procurement, strategy, masterplanning and into delivery. Our Training is bespoke to every client, sector and region of Wales – responding to particular needs and circumstance. Our Seminars and Publications examine major issues of our time – urbanisation, climate change, landscape, homes, people and places. Our best-practice guides and contributions to national planning, design and placemaking policy and practice, support Wales' ambitious legislative and policy tools and were highlighted by the Commissioner for Future Generations in her comprehensive inaugural report.

Our networks and partnerships – including the multi-sector Placemaking Wales Partnership – involve others in pursuing the collective responsibility we all share towards a better quality, more environmentally sound nation. They help us to advocate for the value of good design – the value of the design economy; the social and environmental value and long term public benefits of good places.

The Coronavirus Covid-19 pandemic shone a spotlight on failings in our built environment and the importance of good design; of good, flexible homes, of daylit and naturally ventilated education and healthcare environments, and of inclusive high quality public spaces. We cannot go back to design, development and refurbishment practices which deliver meanness, minimum standards and unacceptable, costly compromise.

Informed by what we have observed, learned and influenced in 20 years of built environment practice in Wales, we now hear from members of our team who are closest to our day to day activity and from the wider Design Commission 'family' as they share their perspectives and set out thoughts on critical actions, given what is ahead. Now, we focus not on the technical but specifically on the cultural and ask what it takes to develop a *culture of quality* in which Wales can thrive.

It has been my great pleasure to Chair the Board of Directors of the Design Commission

for Wales since 2016, to pick up the baton from my predecessor Alan Francis and from founding chair Professor Richard Parnaby and to work with Commissioners, staff and the team of dedicated inter-disciplinary design, development and construction professionals who give voluntarily of their time and expertise to support our nationwide services. We continue to value working closely with Ministers and officials across portfolios, and with countless colleagues who share our vision and passion for a Wales that is a better place.

From my experience with the Design Commission I know that a commitment to quality and the importance of design must be made explicit and must be accelerated. It is time to step up. We have had the policy and legislative tools for twenty years in Wales and they have been used to clearly express considerable ambition. Now we urgently need the leadership, capability and culture in practice, across sectors, that attends excellence, every day.





# Creating the conditions for success

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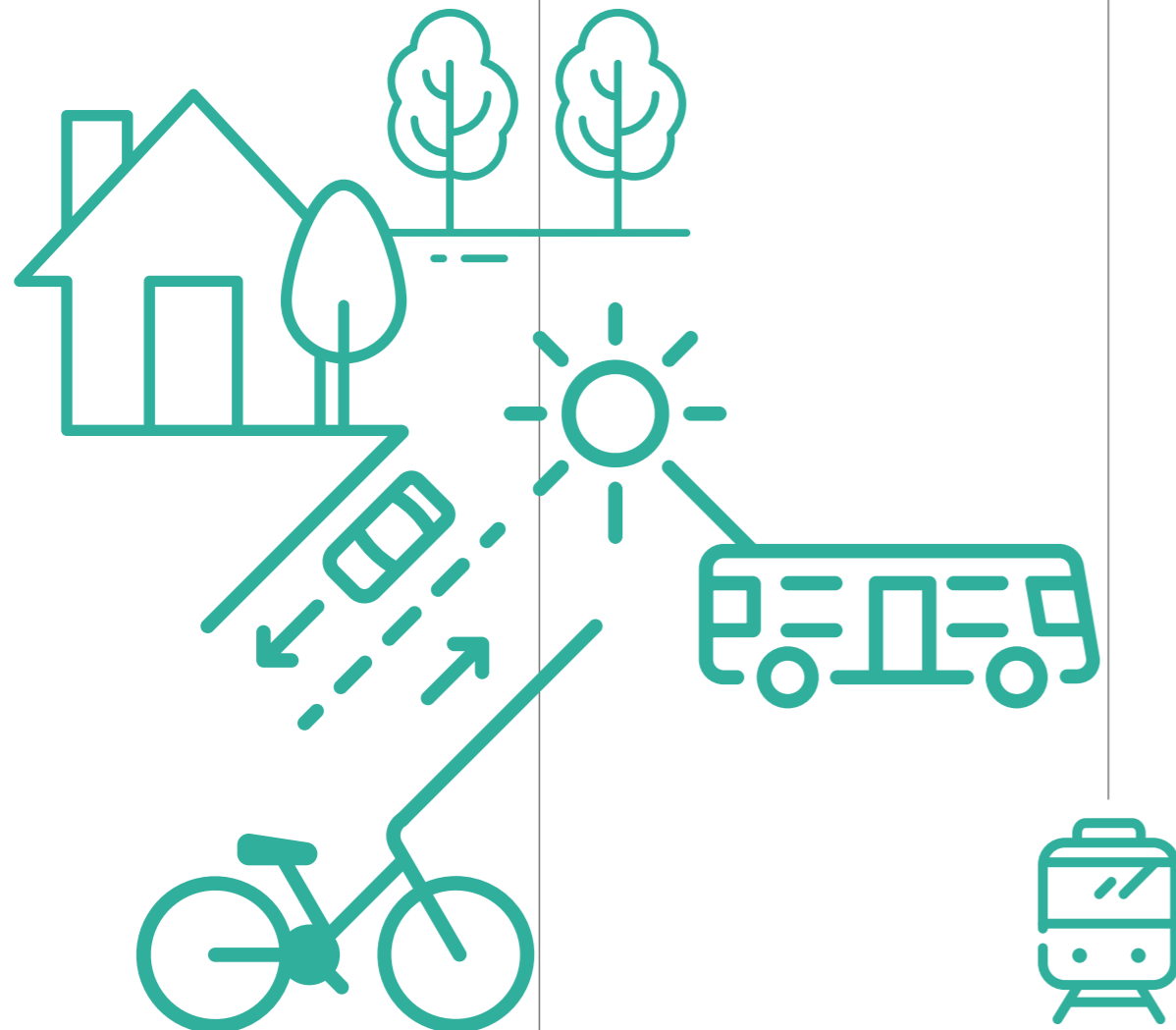
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# A culture of quality



## Carole-Anne Davies

Chief Executive Design Commission for Wales

**The built environment hosts every human interface. Whether we are catching a train, attending school or university, using healthcare services, living in comfortable homes or enjoying green space, safe drinking water and clean air – we rely on our built, made and shaped environment to support us in our way of life. A large proportion of the people who shape that environment are designers of one kind or another.**

We already know from observations and interventions over the last 20 years that many barriers to better development and regeneration practice, and a high quality environment, were and are technical and attitudinal – and could be resolved. The greatest challenge presented in addressing the barriers is to address the culture in which they are allowed to survive and even thrive. Given the challenges of de-carbonisation, climate and nature crises, extraction and depletion of material resources, and the health and well-being of our societies – practice in all spheres of the built environment must change.

In the series of perspectives set out here, the barriers and opportunities are considered again – in thoughts on the conditions necessary for success; in calls for the repositioning of heritage as a catalyst for positive action toward a decarbonised environment and as a driver of inclusive change, and in a restating of the importance of a clear vision, coordinated common objectives and how best we can involve and enable our communities, and equip our essential, creative problem solvers of the future. Our climate and nature emergencies, energy crises, conflict and the trepidatious critical path we must now pursue, is their inheritance and they must be fully equipped to lead profound and lasting change. If that sounds scary, it's because it is.

We cannot keep talking and acting as if these crises exist in the future. There is an urgent 'nowness' that requires serious change – quickly.

We have known for years that built environment practice and processes are directly responsible for some 25% of the UK's carbon footprint – this rises to 42% if we include surface transport (UKGBC, 2022); that construction,

demolition, and excavation work generates over 60% of total UK waste (UK Government, 2022). Materials and mineral extraction further deplete finite resources and alters environmental conditions significantly – the course of rivers, the stability of land forms, the quality of the air we breathe.

Given the scale of this impact, the scale and pace of change must go well beyond anything we are currently doing and must rapidly accelerate.

Aside from the climate and carbon cost there are other alarming numbers that provide cause for concern and ought to galvanise accelerated change. The Get It Right Initiative has carried out arguably the most comprehensive and thorough industry research in the last twenty years, illuminating the causes and costs of avoidable construction error. Drawing on their own and international studies GIRI found that *'measured direct costs of avoidable error represents 5% of project value equating to some £5 billion per annum across the construction sector in the UK - higher than average profit levels across the industry. When unmeasured and indirect costs are included the situation gets much worse with estimates of total costs ranging between 10% and 25% of project cost or between £10-25 billion per annum across the sector'*. Seven of the top ten – seventy percent – of the root causes of avoidable error identified in the research occur in the design stages. Among them a critical factor – poor culture in relation to quality.

One other set of numbers is worth reflecting upon.

Collaborating across the UK – Design Council, Design Commission for Wales, Architecture & Design Scotland, Northern Ireland Ministerial Advisory Group, RSA and many more – recently researched and published *Design Economy: People, Places and Economic Value*<sup>2</sup> setting out the value of the design economy to the UK. The report reveals that the design economy growth is twice the UK average, contributing £97.4bn in GVA to the UK economy with Wales seeing an increase of 18% in GVA to £2 billion. The data also reveals a significant, skilled industry, employing 1.97 million people – one in twenty workers - in the UK in 2020 including architecture, product design, fashion,

digital design, craft and graphics plus those working in service design roles in other sectors, such as the NHS and financial services. In 2019 the design sector accounted for over £70bn in exports, including work commissioned for overseas projects from the UK.

The report notes that alongside digital innovation, and faced with climate and nature emergencies, the scale of what the UK needs to design – and re-design – to achieve net-zero targets by 2050 is immense. To achieve such goals investment in design education, careers and a skilled workforce must be prioritised. The research demonstrates the value designers bring in many forms – shaping public spaces and services, creating good-quality homes and neighbourhoods, and playing critical roles in many disciplines, ensuring that our built environment and transport infrastructure as a whole, can capture quality and wider public benefits.

It appears from these three sources that continued inertia toward the role that the quality of our built environment plays, or could play, in addressing carbon and climate imperatives, combined with our apparent comfort with huge, avoidable, financial loss and an absence of investment in an economically significant sector – essential to us if we mean to address the challenges we face – is increasing risk in an already perilous context. How did we get to this position and what can we do about it? Clearly I will need to pick some of this up in a more extensive (and no doubt best-selling) memoir, but for now I venture a few thoughts.

In twenty years, pursuing the possibility of positive change one sees, hears and learns a great deal. The great privilege that has been my good fortune is that I have witnessed extraordinary expertise at play – seen it at work, realised its importance, watched many interventions closely and listened intently to thousands of remarkable conversations between peers of huge skill, intellect, expertise and creativity.

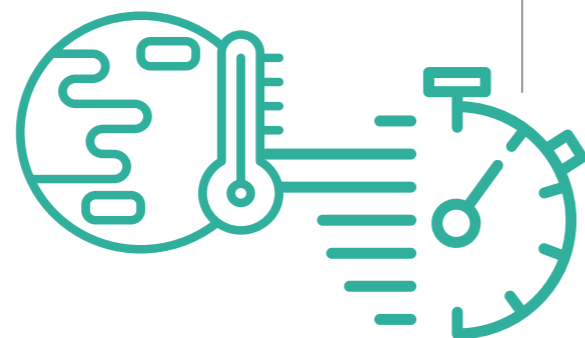
In Wales I have seen positive change in some local authorities and public sector clients, in some quarters of the private sector and certainly in the public housing sphere. Individual capital projects and buildings in the cultural sectors are often good, some excellent, attracting coveted industry and professional awards. Bespoke dwellings with healthy budgets, good clients and excellent designers thrive, and some have rightly found their way through RIBA awards to the Stirling Prize

shortlist, House of the Year, and Manser Awards. Many such projects not only provide unique homes but often make outstanding contributions to their sensitive landscape and coastal settings.

Excellence in the arena of the bespoke, the unique and one-off is apparent and deserved. It is in our everyday that we still face the greatest challenge to quality and it is in the everyday that the Design Commission most desires and strives for positive change and routine excellence. Regrettably it is in this most important sphere that I have too often seen creativity and design excellence frustrated and stopped in its tracks. I have seen expertise summarily dismissed – at times by an absence of skill, competence or experience; by straightforward fear and lack of support and resource, by expedience and simply by the engrained way things get done. And I have seen it crushed by pernicious mediocrity. All of the above combine to starve ambition of the resource it needs to thrive, and feed a culture that shies from excellence.

Much everyday development in Wales is in some form enabled, procured and/or financed wholly or in large part, by the public sector – affordable homes, infrastructure, public transport, healthcare, education. It is directly influenced by public sector investment models, procurement structures, grant making and financial stimuli. Large swathes of housebuilding remain the purvey of the private sector which is increasingly having to respond to Wales' comprehensive planning and legislative requirements.

The *Planning Act (Wales) 2015* followed a robust national conversation about fitness for purpose and the practice and culture of the planning system in Wales. That work identified a fundamentally sound planning system with a clear need for skill and resource development alongside



essential culture change. Work since 2015, with the exception of the still fledgling regional picture, provided Wales with a current, integrated and comprehensive national planning vision and policy framework – arguably the most comprehensive and ambitious in the UK – set in the context of *Future Wales – the National Plan 2040*<sup>3</sup> which sets out the national vision and direction for development in Wales to 2040.

*Planning Policy Wales (PPW 11, updated Feb 2021)*<sup>4</sup> is 'place-led' and reiterates the purpose of planning 'The planning system manages the development and use of land in the public interest, prioritising long term collective benefit, contributing to improving the economic, social, environmental and cultural well-being of Wales. It must reconcile the needs of development and conservation, securing economy, efficiency and amenity in the use of land, ensuring the sustainable management of natural resources and protecting, promoting, conserving and enhancing the built and historic environment.' PPW 11 also integrates the commitments of the *Well-being of Future Generations Act Wales* with a place-led approach emphasising well-being objectives, sound spatial strategies and sustainable placemaking. This integration is a key strength of national policy and unique to Wales.

Wales has made its ambition and commitment to environmental quality explicit in all its policy and legislation – it has been world leading in doing so. The Welsh Government recognises the importance of the task of delivery and was outspoken in its commitment to rebuild post-pandemic. *Building Better Places 2020* highlights 'the key existing planning policies and tools which should be used by all sectors in the environmental, social, cultural and economic recovery of Wales. It clearly sets out priorities and actions for places, for staying local and building neighbourhoods'<sup>5</sup>.

With this admirable suite of policy and legislation in place we might reasonably expect improvement in the quality of our everyday places and some change is evident. But not enough – not yet. All of our everyday belongs to us – to the public – immediately or eventually, in some form. The benefits should be tangible in public good, in enabling enhanced quality of life and well-being; they should be evidently environmentally sound and responsible. To bring about these conditions we must have skilled people and organisational cultures that deliver upon them. We must be able to recognise and properly value skilled design teams

and practices. We cannot continue with an under-resourced; under-trained, under-invested in public sector – out-skilled and out-resourced by the private sector on whose partnership it is so often so heavily reliant. Support for capacity, competence and confidence are essential characteristics we must invest in, and be able to identify, in what is in effect, the largest client body in existence.

For a built environment of the quality Wales wants, needs and deserves and to deliver on our ambition and environmental imperatives, we must rapidly develop a culture that commits to quality; that engenders professional respect among planning, design and construction disciplines; that rewards expertise and real, ingenious, problem solving design work and genuine, effective collaboration toward well-defined common objectives. Technical challenges can be to a large extent resolved – technology in design, energy, construction and development is rapidly accelerating and we must keep pace in order to use it effectively. This is not a task for the future – the future is now.

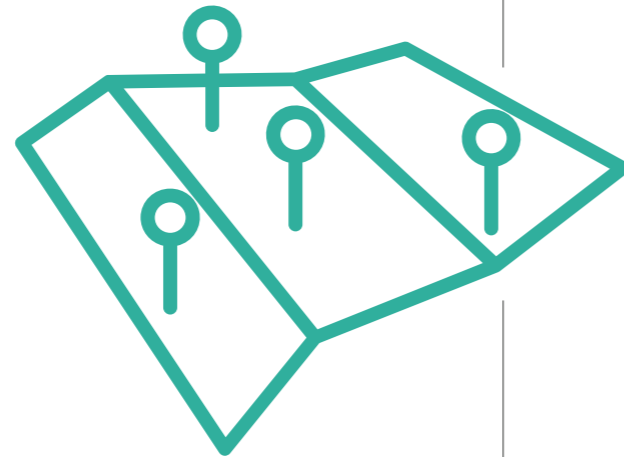
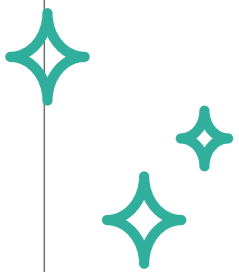
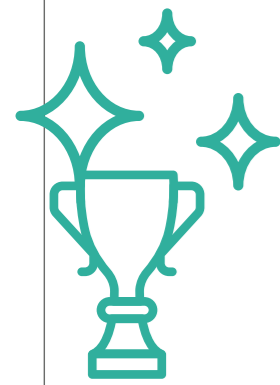
For this anniversary year, whilst determined to look forward, I admit to peeking back into the archive of anonymised participant input from our training and seminars that make such exercises so enlightening, rich and rewarding. Two comments come to mind. Handwritten on a now crumpled slither of paper in answer to the question 'What do you want from your built environment?' is the answer 'I want the pavements to light up just like in the video for Billie Jean' – at once an amusing ice breaker and a telling indicator of how design might be perceived and understood.

The other comment raises an altogether different prospect in response to a 'What can we do?' question, arising during our Places for Life conference. It stood out not least as a glorious clash of handwritten crimson felt tip on a bright pink post-it note. Hard to miss. And because its message was devastatingly simple 'Develop a culture of quality in all things'.

- 1 <https://getitright.uk.com/reports/strategy-for-change>
- 2 [https://www.designcouncil.org.uk/fileadmin/uploads/dc/Documents/DC\\_DE\\_Eco\\_Value\\_Exec\\_Sum\\_digital.pdf](https://www.designcouncil.org.uk/fileadmin/uploads/dc/Documents/DC_DE_Eco_Value_Exec_Sum_digital.pdf)
- 3 <https://gov.wales/future-wales-national-plan-2040>
- 4 [https://gov.wales/sites/default/files/publications/2021-02/planning-policy-wales-edition-11\\_0.pdf](https://gov.wales/sites/default/files/publications/2021-02/planning-policy-wales-edition-11_0.pdf)
- 5 <https://gov.wales/sites/default/files/publications/2020-07/building-better-places-the-planning-system-delivering-resilient-and-brighter-futures.pdf>



# Conditions for success



## Ewan Jones BSc (Hons) BArch (Hons) RIBA

Partner, Grimshaw Architects LLP

Commissioner, Design Commission for Wales 2011 – 2020

Co-chair, Design Commission for Wales Design Review Panel 2008 – current

**In a nation such as Wales, where public investment in some form or other underpins most significant development, public policy, skills, and capacity establish the conditions that enable or prevent success.**

The Well-Being of Future Generations Act (Wales) is a major Welsh legislative innovation that recognises the long-term impact of decision making, the climate imperative and the need for high profile advocacy.

The Act has, in a further innovation unique to Wales, been woven into national policy. In particular it has galvanised the place-led approach now reflected in *Planning Policy Wales* and informed *Future Wales*, the National Development Framework. Arguably, there is no more coherent suite of planning policy and legislation in the UK. But the practical business of building the Welsh environment remains beset with short-term expedience, and an urgent need to accelerate high quality delivery.

Expectations for high quality should be universal, not limited to a few special projects and DCFW rightly promotes the primary importance of places ahead of individual buildings. Icons and landmarks have roles to play but ordinary, everyday places play a more significant role in more lives, and they should be better – far better.

A comparison of RSAW<sup>1</sup> and RIAS<sup>2</sup> awards from 2016 to 2021 reveals discouraging results for Wales. Scotland had 2.2 award-winning designs completed per million population each year: Wales, just over half of this at 1.2. Significantly, Welsh awards were also to a much narrower range of projects. There were no prizes for infrastructure, industry, housing (other than one-off homes), offices or schools: the everyday places where we spend our time. Scotland even had an award for exemplary student housing.

Examples of the problems faced can be drawn from DCFW's archive and publications documenting the first 20 years of its design review service, but one in particular comes to mind - a new community health centre to be located right on the edge of a valleys' town, easily accessible only by car. The project was located there rather

than the town centre, near more homes and a bus route, simply because the Welsh Government already owned the site.

It is not difficult to see the flaw in that decision or to have some sympathy for trying to make best use of inherited assets. However, this example illustrates a key condition for success: getting early strategic choices right and understanding the broad impacts of those choices. No amount of ambition or innovative policy can fix poor decisions like choosing the wrong site. Location and site selection are among the most important early strategic considerations influencing good or poor outcomes. They are fundamental, critical design decisions. If legislation and policy clearly set out expectations, the relevant decision makers must be sufficiently skilled and resourced to deliver against those expectations.

Alongside strategic decision making, design of the built environment is influenced by the detailed wording of policy. Anyone who has been through a planning appeal will recognise the planning inspectors' precise scrutiny of the text in planning policies. England's National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) (July 2021) says: "*Development that is not well designed should be refused*".<sup>3</sup> *Planning Policy Wales* (February 2021) is less clear: it requires development plans to "*promote*" good design and be "*sufficiently robust to refuse poor quality development proposals*." This is rather like the **old** English NPPF policy: "*Permission should be refused for development of poor design*."<sup>4</sup> Professor Matthew Carmona of UCL assesses the shift in English policy and highlights the crucial change: in England "*the test is now the achievement of good design and not just the avoidance of bad design*."<sup>5</sup>

The big picture of policy context must be effective at both preventing early poor decisions about location and site *and* providing clarity on the required design quality in applications for planning permission. There must be more explicit support for the refusal of badly designed planning applications, among officers and politicians. Between these two sits a third vital requirement – the capacity and level of skill to recognise, assess

and advocate expectations of design quality in every proposal. Where the public sector is client, as well as decision maker, both policy and practice must make a key difference – requiring quality, appointing creative and capable design teams, and raising the bar at every opportunity.

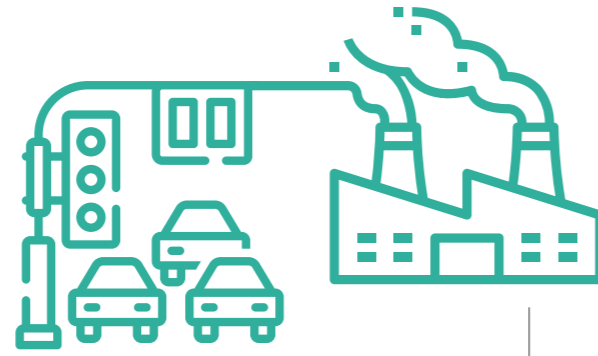
To provide sound, clearly expressed policy; properly assess early decisions; and have skill and strength of conviction in development control, it is clear that ambition and critical awareness of quality, across the built environment spectrum, are key ingredients for future success.

Looking ahead another 20 years, we will be close to the UK's 2050 deadline for net-zero greenhouse gas emissions.<sup>6</sup> As power supply rapidly decarbonises, the focus is already shifting from operational energy (and carbon) to the carbon that construction embodies within our buildings, infrastructure, and landscape. In 2021, for the first time, a planning inspector cited *“very high embodied energy and an unsustainable whole life-cycle”* as a reason for refusing the “Tulip” viewing tower proposal in the City of London.<sup>7</sup>

This is changing the balance between new-build and re-use and is now a further critical ingredient in the drive for quality. Increased adaptive re-use of existing buildings requires different skills and creativity from clients, designers, and builders. It will also require a more flexible approach to planning, including where use types are located and how mixed uses can sit comfortably together. The fiscal elephant in the re-use room remains new-build housing's usual VAT advantage compared to repairs and alterations:<sup>8</sup> a clear example of policy delivering, in practice, the wrong outcome.

Consideration of carbon should be a fundamental feature of larger scale strategic planning, beyond individual buildings. Where we chose to live and work defines the built environment that we need: schools, hospitals, utilities, and transport – the elements of our ‘foundational’ economy. The establishment of city regions centred around Swansea and Cardiff recognises the inter-connected nature of our infrastructure, especially transport, yet the many individual local authorities are not always an effective means of planning or managing major infrastructure. It is easy to see the benefits that Transport for Wales can bring by integrating public transport for major cities, and Transport for London-style regulation of bus networks in Wales cannot come too soon.

But a fundamental feature baked-into the infrastructure of most Welsh towns and cities is



the physical separation of work, home, and leisure. Either the local work has gone, or homes have been built away from new employment, at low densities. Geographic and topographic features of the country add to the challenges of connectivity. London has a population density of 5,701 per square kilometre.<sup>9</sup> This density enables public transport that is widely used and convenient. Wales has a low population density, in the UK only Scotland is significantly lower. Most of Wales is in the 0 – 199 per square kilometre range, the most densely occupied local authority, Cardiff Council, only gets up to 2,620.<sup>10</sup> Rural settlements and low-density suburbia make convenient (and therefore widely used) public transport a huge challenge to provide.

For much of Wales, public transport is not the answer that it can be in densely populated areas. Only big cities, and perhaps only one Welsh city, can provide buses at frequencies and hours that enable reliable and convenient “turn up and go” services without worrying about a timetable. Many Welsh journeys will be impossible by public transport but too difficult walking or cycling. If only one city region can thrive through public transport, what is the plan for everywhere else? Can future land use planning, transport planning and policy align to change the future, and who will take the lead on this?

Currently, the car remains king in Wales, leaving busy locations suffering from pollution and congestion. With the sale of new petrol and diesel cars banned from 2030, in 20 years' time we will be well on the way to ending carbon emitted from cars and vans,<sup>11</sup> but what about traffic congestion and space consumed by parking? Cars are typically driven for just 1 hour each day.<sup>12</sup> This is clearly inefficient, but tied to individual convenience, peak demand, and cars as status symbols.

The decoupling of pollution and congestion raises crucial questions for planning and design. For example, what value do we place on congestion, for those stuck in their vehicles

and the environment in which they sit? Where all this machinery gets parked has a huge effect upon places and how they are designed. Will car clubs or subscription models be an answer, or do we continue to build low density suburban development where highways, pedestrian routes and open space are dominated by parking for multiple cars per dwelling? With Government commitment to electric vehicles, who is going to ensure that fast-charging facilities are universally available in sparsely populated areas?

Planning is crucial but delivery is vital too. Planning, design, and construction for the built environment take a long time, certainly longer than any political cycle. Success requires a degree of consensus across political voices and eras to deliver long term aims.

Clients define how good their projects will be. There are excellent clients working in Wales, but the overall level of ambition across public and private sectors is not yet high enough. Public sector spending dominates the Welsh economy and there is a clear opportunity for political leadership to shift the dial from adequate to excellent.

A risk averse, de-skilled and under resourced public sector addicted to lowest capital cost inevitably leads to mediocre results provided through the easiest route. The quality of the built environment should be more highly valued. It must become a higher priority amongst competing demands in the public sector: this requires focus and hard decisions. Under investment in skilled human resources only serves to narrow opportunity and undermine policy ambition. Government and local authorities need to exercise more leadership and greater commitment, following the example of the best public sector clients. To do so they need to be properly resourced and enabled.

Design is part of this, but policy, planning and procurement are crucial foundations. Good design can't fix bad decisions, better long-term thinking is a necessary structural shift. Good design also requires more care, hours, skill, and experience. The harsh reality is that better design work does cost more, even though the project, overall, may not. Even within procurement systems weighted towards quality, the metrics used often result in lowest cost winning over better quality. There is good work being done and exceptions to this, but a widespread change of attitude is needed – DCFW's client support services can be effective here but will need greater resources if it is to build on its success stories.

You can't achieve good results without good

people: individuals and professional practices, informed clients and visionary leaders all make a difference. Achieving better design means employing the best designers you can, looking further afield – seeking out new talent and different practices – looking outside the procurement simplicity of framework agreements with one-stop shop multi-disciplinary firms, to focus on assembling the best design team for each project. DCFW can provide excellent advice and a helping hand to achieve this.

Wales has uniquely beautiful natural landscape that is valued and respected, but most of us live and work in towns and cities. These ordinary, everyday environments – the places we laud in policy and legislation – should be brilliant places too. The ambition and innovation of policy and legislation in Wales must urgently be matched with skilled and well-resourced public authorities, with capacity to fulfil in delivery, the promise of policy.

Our work is not done – it has perhaps only just started. The best is very good – and there needs to be more of this – but the ordinary is barely adequate: for the whole of the built environment; for all our ordinary places, Wales deserves excellence – everywhere, every day.

1 Royal Society of Architects in Wales

2 Royal Incorporation of Architects in Scotland paragraph 134, 2021

3 paragraph 64, 2012

4 [matthew-carmona.com/2022/04/26/87-appealing-design-the-tide-turns-on-poor-and-mediocre-housing-design](https://matthew-carmona.com/2022/04/26/87-appealing-design-the-tide-turns-on-poor-and-mediocre-housing-design)

5 Though the Committee on Climate Change's recommendation for Wales is slightly lower, at 95% of 1990 levels: [www.theccc.org.uk/publication/net-zero-the-uks-contribution-to-stopping-global-warming](https://www.theccc.org.uk/publication/net-zero-the-uks-contribution-to-stopping-global-warming)

6 [www.gov.uk/government/publications/recovered-appeal-land-adjacent-to-20-bury-street-london-ec3a-5az-ref-3244984-11-november-2021](https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/recovered-appeal-land-adjacent-to-20-bury-street-london-ec3a-5az-ref-3244984-11-november-2021)

7 <https://www.architectsjournal.co.uk/news/vat-chance-can-tax-reforms-spur-a-retrofit-renaissance>

8 <https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/populationandmigration/populationestimates/bulletins/annualmidyearpopulationestimates/mid2019#population-age-structures-of-uk-countries-and-english-regions>

9 <https://statswales.gov.wales/Catalogue/Population-and-Migration/Population/Density/populationdensity-by-localauthority-year>

10 (putting aside dust particulate and embodied energy issues). The average age of a scrapped car in the UK was 13.9 years in 2015. ([www.smm.co.uk/industry-topics/sustainability/average-vehicle-age](https://www.smm.co.uk/industry-topics/sustainability/average-vehicle-age))

11 [www.racfoundation.org/research/mobility/still-standing-still](https://www.racfoundation.org/research/mobility/still-standing-still)

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# What does a culture of quality mean for the future of our everyday places?



## Jen Heald BSc (Hons) MA MRTPI

Design Advisor, Design Commission for Wales

Co-Chair, Design Commission for Wales Design Review Service

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**Improving the quality of everyday places, not just the large scale, civic or multi-million-pound homes, has always been one of the core aims of the Design Commission for Wales. Everyday places can shape and positively influence the lives of large sections of the Welsh population, and they should also be a critical component of our national response to the climate emergency. Getting them right is vital and highly complex.**

The complexity comes because the realm of the everyday place is not the responsibility of any one person or organisation. We do not live in a Truman Show-style bubble where everything is choreographed under ultimate control, there are multiple owners, contributors, managers and participants all with varying objectives. Sadly, these objectives are not always about making a great place, they can often be about profit, avoiding the least bad outcome, or simply getting the job done. These are some of the reasons why the opportunities to see and experience well designed, high quality and sustainable everyday places remain so limited.

The quality of our day-to-day environment has an important part to play in instilling a greater demand for quality more generally. A quality environment can ease everyday challenges, inspire and instil a sense of worth which encourages people to want more of the same. Not only that, it also has an impact on quality of life, well-being, sense of justice and cohesion – all of which are critical for a sustainable future. The next generation should inherit better and expect more. This was highlighted by the *Getting Things Done: Evolution of the built environment in Vorarlberg* symposium and exhibition that was brought to Wales by DCFW and Cardiff University in 2016. It demonstrated how a focus on design quality can permeate through a region and influence the design of individual homes, community buildings and everyday places. Addressing small, everyday items such as bus stops allowed people to see the difference that design can make.

*'The goal is not compliance, it's about creating opportunity.'* This was a comment made by a planning

inspector regarding placemaking for a residential development that was the subject of a planning appeal. It stuck with me because it is a reminder that we should not be aiming to do the bare minimum, or enough to get by, we have a responsibility to do the best we can, creatively, with what we have in terms of time, resources, and energy.

So what does quality in the everyday look like? It is not a subjective conversation about the look of a place, although character and appearance do play a part. Quality is not about excess and frivolity, but it is also not mean. For me quality in everyday places have the following characteristics:

**Considered** – thought and care has been given to who will use the environment, what their needs are and how the design of the place can work to meet those needs. The place is shaped with concern and compassion not simply a formulaic process. When a project is being reviewed through the DCFW design review process it is evident if a design is rushed, or no care has been taken over it. There may be many reasons for this, but the solutions involve recognising and valuing the design and planning process, writing a good brief, appointing a great design team, and allowing sufficient time for ideas to be explored and tested.

**Creative** – achieving design quality is not about following a set of rules or meeting a set of standards. A creative approach allows for space where the question is challenged, and the solution is not yet known. This space is not just required in the design professions but also in planning and strategic public investment.

**Efficient and sustainable** – it should go without saying that, in the context of a climate and nature emergency, the places we design and build should be as efficient as possible and minimise the impact on the environment. We need to learn to do more with less, we can't keep on infinitely consuming resources. This matter is urgent, but that urgency is not reflected sufficiently in most of the plans and development projects that come forward.



## The right skills, tools and process are needed but fundamentally it is the right attitude that bring about true change.

**Robust** – urban design principles have incorporated robustness for decades, but we still see places that are not built to last or are not adaptable. Pulling down buildings that are 30 years old and replacing them with buildings that may only last another 30 years should not be acceptable. The way we use places is constantly changing so it is essential that the buildings and spaces we created are adaptable to future change.

**Simple** – places are complex enough without added layers of ill-considered design complexity. There is often a moment (or several) in the design process where taking a step back and reviewing all of the design decisions that have been made can result in opportunities to strip back one or two ideas to create a more simple solution. The design review process often provides this opportunity.

**Comfortable** – places should be easy to use and offer people a sense of comfort and security no matter who they are. Progress is being made on addressing inclusivity in the built environment, but no doubt unconscious bias remains that needs to be continually addressed.

**Functional** – this should perhaps be the minimum expected of a place, but aspects of usability and function can sometimes be lost in the complexity of design and developing a place.

So how is Wales doing on this front? Of course there is significant room for improvement, but big steps have been made in the lifetime of DCFW that shouldn't be overlooked. For example, the introduction of *TAN 12: Design* and the requirement for Design and Access Statements have meant the language of design has become much more integrated into all projects including everyday places. Active travel legislation, design guidance and funding is working to improve day-to-day movement and the *Placemaking Wales Charter and Guide* are helping to instil the principles of what makes a good place into organisations across a range of disciplines. There is a much broader and deeper discourse about

design taking place between organisations, decision makers, educators and clients.

However, there is a danger that standards, requirements and toolkits take over from the considered and creative approach outlined above. It cannot become a tick box exercise where demonstrating compliance alone dominates the process and sucks out time for design. This is why a *culture* of quality is so much more important than policy and guidance alone. The right skills, tools and process are needed but fundamentally it is the right attitude that brings about true change. Resources are often a challenge, especially in the public sector, but this should not be an excuse. Everyone involved needs to be aiming for quality and take a sense of ownership and pride in their own part of the process.

The right culture requires the right leadership at national, local and individual organisation levels. Leadership sets the tone and the expectation for any organisation and instils the values that people work to. DCFW's own culture of quality and ability to achieve so much with limited resources is a testament to its leadership. Amongst other things,

this culture: trusts people to do their job well and removes barriers and concerns that may get in the way of this; provides space to think and time to be inspired; galvanises the support of likeminded professionals, and focuses on delivering excellence. Targets are always exceeded, new ideas are part of everyday conversations and thinking about how to do things better is engrained in the way things are done. Specific expertise is valued, drawn upon and invested in; there is a culture of collaboration aiming for a common purpose. Much value could be gained by other organisations benefitting from this approach to leadership and the culture it creates.

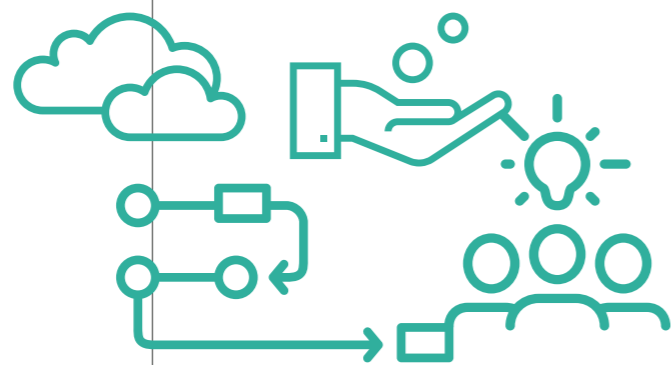
As the Design Commission for Wales marks a 20-year milestone, a key challenge is to continue to find ways to, not only share and impart knowledge and experience, but further support clients, design teams and decision makers by helping to build

their confidence, shape their culture and enhance their capacity. We want everyone working in the planning, design and development of everyday places to *want* to make a real difference, to know what that looks like and to know how to do it.

Over the next 20 years we need many more examples of great everyday places that inspire others and continue to drive the demand for better quality. It would be helpful to have a clearer and more widely recognised understanding of the benefits and public value of quality everyday places so they can be recognised as essential rather than nice to have. And underlying all this is a need for a greater sense of urgency about designing and adapting our everyday places to respond to and help minimise climate change. These things cannot come through policy and strategy alone, they need leadership that sets the tone and shapes the culture.



# Capacity, continuity and quality.



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Design Commission for Wales, Design Review Panellist  
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**The majority of the parts of the built environment that have most impact on people's day to day lives are likely to be delivered and changed through public sector investment, be they public spaces, key buildings, or the high street. Achieving substantial value for money on public spend is dependent on delivering high design quality. The layers of process involved can limit or expand this potential.**

Changes to the built environment, from project conception to delivery on site, are shaped so strongly by local authority functions and grant funding processes that we must consider how these may need to adapt. At present, these processes can be rigid and segregated in nature, preventing flexibility and iterative design processes.

At each stage of the design and delivery process, improvements and adaptations would be possible to ensure projects make the most positive impact on a place and its community. These changes range from the team involved in identifying and designing a project, through the bidding process for funding, all the way to delivery on site.

### Talent in the team

From project conception to delivery, the value of the local authorities having in-house, multi-disciplinary design teams cannot be overstated. Including talented, creative problem solvers within local government is crucial if public sector projects are to be truly place-based. Too often external consultants make up most of the team designing a project, and opportunities to engage long term with local people and understand needs, are lost. At the same time, the opportunity to retain talent and build skill within the local authority by leading and delivering projects in-house can be lost – leading to an endless cycle of further outsourcing.

The benefits of multi-disciplinary council placemaking and regeneration teams are numerous. Officers are better connected to a place and well placed to engage and co-design with the community. These relationships, understanding of place and passion for the community, undoubtedly improve the design process and outcome. These

are creative and fulfilling roles, allowing designers to take projects from concept to delivery whilst gatekeeping design quality. Internal designers can set a well-considered, creative brief for external consultants, strengthening the scope and intention behind the design problem to be addressed. The awareness of strategy, policy and projects across the local authority is better understood so complementary opportunities, or conflicting challenges, beyond the immediate project scope can be identified earlier. Working in-house in this way builds skill, capacity, and corporate cultural memory – valuable learning to be reinvested next time around.

A culture change is needed to re-frame local authority placemaking roles as valuable and well-respected, giving leadership back to officers rather than outsourcing for skills. A mix of specialisms within a regeneration team, such as urban design, community engagement, arts, and culture, heritage, and project management, facilitates a more holistic understanding of a place and the projects therein. The skill-sharing amongst the team and across the local authority creates a rich legacy beyond individual project delivery. Discussions about place and design quality are shared collaboratively and across departmental boundaries so that cross-team working would be strengthened towards a common goal – far more so than external designers being parachuted in for a limited period. Along with the community having a consistent and accessible team to build relationships with over time.

Whilst investment in recruitment of talent should be a priority for local authorities themselves, the building of such a team can also be achieved by incorporating officer time into project funding bids alongside any technical consultancy resource, therefore avoiding additional revenue strain on the authority and releasing skilled officers to be deployed where their work can make a real difference. This is no more costly than a traditional project bid in that the same value for design and technical expertise can be used to greater effect and more efficiently on salaried officers rather than entirely external consultants.

### Funding and programming

In scoping and delivering projects, public funding mechanisms need to be flexible and adaptable to suit the needs of individual places. Where funding streams have historically been clearly assigned to individual types of projects, such as heritage, transport, housing, energy, we will need to think more creatively about how they can adapt as we think more holistically about place. To respond to changes in how we live, the climate and biodiversity emergencies, and the decline of the high street, projects will need to cut across these categories to be effective. Funding programmes will need to reflect this and not be limited by narrow focus – they need to address the ‘whole place’ opportunity.

Funding streams need a clear focus and intention, but they should also be adaptable to respond positively to creative solutions which meet their funding objectives but do not fit into an isolated category. Using the high street as an example, the solution is not in a single piece of public realm, green infrastructure, building regeneration and renewal, or public art – it is much more likely to be in the form of a project which considers and includes all of these as a phased package. Funding organisations must be

ready to respond to this and provide a package of investment which allows the most creative and well-considered project to be fully realised. The funding scope must be moulded to fit the right design solution, rather than the other way around.

This requires a change in how we measure the value of a project, both at bidding stage and post-completion. How we define ‘good’ should be different across localities, project objectives and typology. Funding bodies could work with the project team, and in turn the local community, to define what success would look like in this case and measure a project against it. This may mean diversifying measurement tools, such as economic uplift, towards less tangible outcomes which could have a greater positive impact on the quality of a place, such as cultural value or community cohesion. That which is easily measured, may not always be that which really matters. Assessment tools and criteria need to include evidence of meaningful community engagement and robust design review, rather than falling back solely on economic assessments which can fail to paint a complete picture. Investment bodies need to get closer to the realities of project development and delivery – to see at closer range the approach and outcomes that matter and how to accurately assess them.



## We know that the process of design is iterative rather than linear and that testing then learning can be a key part of reaching a design solution

Demonstrating outcomes matters too and like much else needs to adapt to reflect the necessary agility of approaches to projects – both in bidding and reporting. This could consider whether the impact of a project can be better demonstrated and communicated through video/photography, community engagement or arts interpretation, rather than formal reporting paperwork and the ever present ‘tick-box.’ This information gathering and analysis exercise by funding bodies could then begin to paint a fresh picture of what a successful and high-quality piece of public investment in the built environment is and can be. Many investment pots seek ‘transformational change’ just so long as it is approached, managed, and reported in exactly the same way as it always has been.

### Delivering quality

We know that the process of design is iterative rather than linear and that testing then learning can be a key part of reaching a design solution. Funding programmes and local government processes need to reflect this if we are to adapt to the changing approaches to living, environment, energy, health, and movement.

In responding to the complexities of place there is often not a single project response. By establishing a programme of phased funding, pilot projects can allow us to engage, test, inform and feedback into a more robust design process. These pilot projects throughout the design process could be used to inform and unlock next stages of funding. Not only would this encourage co-design

with the community it also gives a level of certainty to funders, as learning and evaluation from each phase feeds into the design and development process. These pilot projects can allow the community and stakeholders to re-imagine a place through immediate projects which then directly inform long term plans.

Phasing gives an opportunity for additional analysis and opportunity to refine a design throughout the programme, adapting to unforeseen issues which in a more rigid funding model could have caused a stall in delivery. Where movement patterns and modal shift, for example, are changing in response to working patterns, technology, and the climate emergency, we must be able to adapt our approach to suit these changes. The alternative is that a project is delivered which was designed in one context at the very start of a programme and which is now defunct, unsuitable and expensive to put right. By piloting and refining a design or engagement approach, more certainty is developed leading to better value for money for the public purse.

Funding programmes are often restricted by political terms, which creates the challenge of making a project ‘fit.’ Although this is an inevitable challenge of public funding, far more flexibility within the life of a funding programme could be established, to acknowledge varied approaches and design solutions.

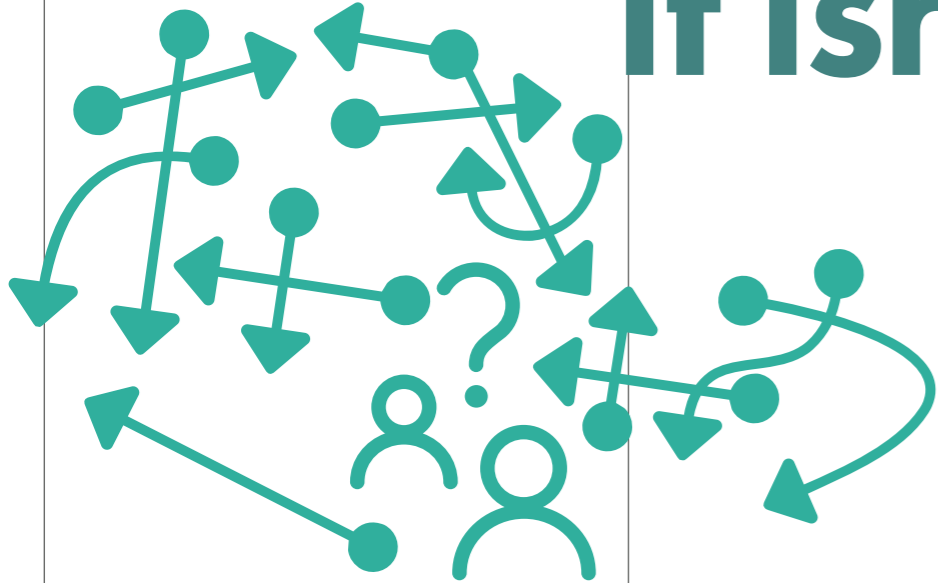
Although it is quite possible to deliver quality design and wonderful places through the public sector now, practitioners across the built environment public sector need to be better supported to do so by improved systems and processes, so that it is possible everywhere for everyone irrespective of geography. These approaches to the composition of a team, project conception, bidding for funding, iterative design and testing, and flexible delivery are better suited to meet the needs of rapidly changing places – no matter where those places are.

There are several unknowns within the challenges we face, to adapt the built environment to changes in climate and the way we live or need to live – the future does not look anything like the past. Only skilled teams working closely and consistently with communities and delivering projects through flexible, aspirational funding mechanisms, will be effective in testing, learning, finding and applying creative design solutions for real change and lasting value.





# What is Good Design (and what it isn't)?



**Craig Sheach** BSc (Hons), BArch (Hons), ARB, RIBA

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Design Review Panellist, Design Commission for Wales

There is growing confusion about what good design looks like. In recent decades built environment practice has placed a greater emphasis on aesthetics over problem solving, reinforcing the notion that architects are there to 'decorate boxes' rather than bring ingenuity and develop creative responses. While 'beauty' is an important part of successful buildings, towns and cities, good design is infinitely more than composition, proportion and manner. It starts at the very beginning of the process, before the visual, which is perhaps why it is harder to isolate its intrinsic value, and also what makes it so important.

So what is it? The answer is complex and we have to move away from seeking a definitive description and embrace the uncomfortable areas of ambiguity. This is because good design doesn't know the answer straight away and doesn't apply a shorthand, a stock or previously developed solution. Good design takes a step back and asks questions first. It looks at first principles and remains alive to new opportunities. Good design tries to understand what lies beneath, around and inside a problem or situation. In essence, it is the inquisitive questioning of a challenge with an open mind, rather than an immediate answer of a predefined solution, applied verbatim without inquiry, testing and rigour.

To some extent one could recognise good design as much by the process of achieving it as by the end result. Exploring the motivations of a design approach tells us that rigour and integrity are present and create a framework that exposes how successful the outcome may be. Thought that is structured and explores the challenges and opportunities of a site inform rationale that more often than not results in place specific good design. Thought that rigorously goes from beginning to end simply solving issues with as few moves as possible is often evident in something that is well designed. Good design is characterised by a thought process that facilitates a clear, legible and compelling narrative – easy to communicate and understand. Ultimately evidence of a strong process, captured

by diagrams, sketches and models, explain far more about a proposal than a set of elevations and precedents. They provide the narrative.

Precedents are not necessarily proof of thought. They are useful tools to show that something is possible. However, they are also dangerous because they are visually seductive and too easy to use carelessly – too often they can become the visual driver for design and act as substitute for absent design work. Oscar Wilde once said "Imitation is the sincerest form of flattery" but almost always the second part of the great writer's words are ignored: "that mediocrity can pay to greatness". Nowadays precedents are over utilised and focus too heavily on what a building or place 'looks like', rather than the building's idea – its genus. They often replace the designers 'workings out in the margins' – their thoughts, explorations and testing evidence. Maybe this is to do with the time available, or confidence, or even fee invested by the client. However, thoughtless mimicry is not what good design is about. Precedents have their place in providing comfort and scene-setting, for the audience and certainly for the designer, but knowing where you are going before you get there is pushing another's narrative from a different context. A design emerging from the end of the process should be a welcome stranger to the designer; whose arrival is anticipated but pleasantly surprising.

How does one ensure good design happens? The natural instinct is to standardise it into regulations and compliance rules. This approach has become more prevalent over the last two decades as one of the primary ways of regulating the industry to improve design. Setting benchmarks and targets for us to meet is laudable in order to place quality at the front and centre. But here-in also lies the problem. By providing a minimum 'to comply with' standard, boxes are created to be ticked but with no incentive to exceed or with no space to question, test or challenge. They create a yes/no mentality to quality without articulating what is important and whether creative alternatives might be more fitting or successful. If you've hit the metric then the design is inherently acceptable,

irrespective of whether it is of the highest quality it can be, or appropriate to the specific challenge. Acceptability is such a poor yardstick for quality.

In the housing sector we see this time and again. Living rooms with contorted spaces; inflexible and impractical furniture layouts and deep-set areas with little or no access to daylight – all in the name of meeting standards for minimum room sizes. Ironically the very standards that were brought in to ensure functional and flexible homes are a key driver for achieving the opposite. Instead of worrying about finding that extra square metre to tick the box, we should be looking at the relationship of the room zones and their proportions, the flexibility of spaces to accommodate different furniture layouts and meet changing lifestyles and needs over time. We should be ensuring greater access to daylight, views and ventilation. Good designers understand the difference between standards. Those that ensure safety must always, and will always, be adhered to. However, those that speak to perceived quality actually limit the designers ability to do more, create better, resolve conflicts creatively. In essence, minimum design standards actually become, in practice, maximums.

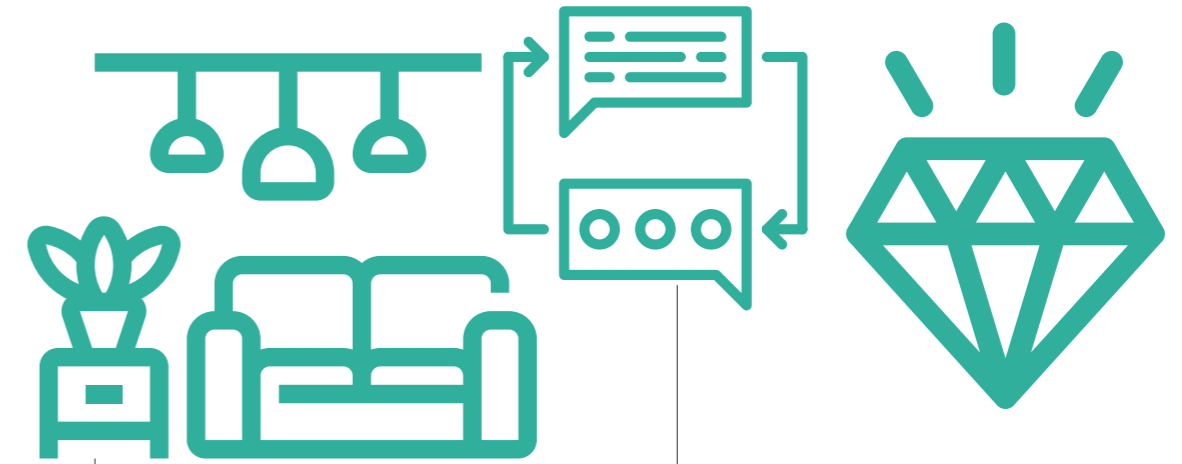
Without understanding the nuance of good design, standards and regulations are blunt tools. They often express only 'one way of thinking' or general rules of thumb about one specific area. What they don't do is deal with the complexities required to tackle multiple challenges and opportunities that every project has. We know that eliminating north facing single aspect homes is good for daylight but the direct consequence of this can often be slab-sided forms with gable ends defining north and south-facing streets. However, urbanism is a multi-dimensional consideration and for our streets to be joyful and safe, they need to be activated on all sides, not just on the east and west orientated ones. Standards don't help us to navigate conflicts such as this but good design does, often with creative solutions that calibrate the standards to place specific responses. This is because good

**Without understanding the nuance of good design, standards and regulations are blunt tools. They often express only 'one way of thinking' or general rules of thumb about one specific area.**

design is about trying to understand the essence of complex problems and how to maximise optimum solutions that facilitate multiple benefits.

Standards come with loopholes generated by a lack of 'joined-up-ness', especially between differing documents or areas of interest. For instance, loopholes existing for openable windows between overheating and acoustic regulations where, for one report, the windows stay open, and for the other they are closed. We have seen in the past this approach taken to tick the box but it's not acceptable if you are the person living in the home who has to make a choice between sweltering at night or being constantly being disturbed by traffic noise. The designer's role is to recognise the flaws in the system and resolve them, with practical design-led solutions, not to exploit them and the perverse incentives they afford.

This leads to possibly the most important role of good design – advocacy; being evangelical about quality; encouraging, supporting, educating and enthusing others as to the implications of decision making; highlighting where doing more than the bare minimum can have wider benefits. Advocacy brings benefits on quality and value in



its widest terms. It brings ingenuity and buildability and can even help reduce cost. The designer is in a unique position to articulate the bigger picture – to see opportunities in the grey area between disciplines, to extract maximum value and quality.

Now, more than ever, advocacy should be at forefront of design. At a time when construction costs are spiralling upwards the natural instincts of the industry is to cut things out, especially around the environment. At a time when, as planet dwellers, we need to push ourselves further, higher and strive for more we are in danger of barely scraping over the bar. The standards stay silent on what more could be done beyond the minimum so advocacy needs to raise its voice clearly and loudly and push to promote better environmental credentials.

There are currently successful alternative approaches that supplement an approach through standards alone; design review, peer review, design champions coupled with an informed and supported client with a well written brief. These are all more site specific and bespoke to the project but require a level of openness, and experience, in order to be successful. They are, however, extremely hard to 'standardise' and because of this and the

perception of subjectivity, it is often a challenge to persuade process gatekeepers.

So design standards are not the sole arbiter of good design, nor are precedents or aesthetics. Good design lies behind the successful proposition, in the testing demonstrated in the diagrams, the narratives and explorations; through the reviews and dialogue with others and the processes constructed and applied. In writing this piece I have purposefully tried not to define what good design is in empirical and rigid terms because it is a nebulous creature that works differently for different designers in different situations. Because of its very nature, constraining and containing it with words and rules dulls it and makes it less successful. In the end good design comes down to three things: It can be ephemeral – like quicksilver to describe; it will not be about what it looks like; and when we experience it we really know it – we feel it.





# Place, heritage and identity

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## Perspectives—

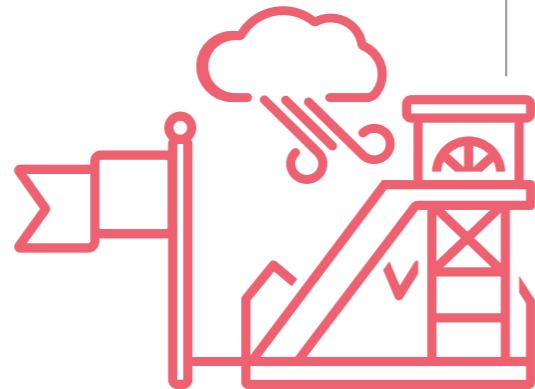
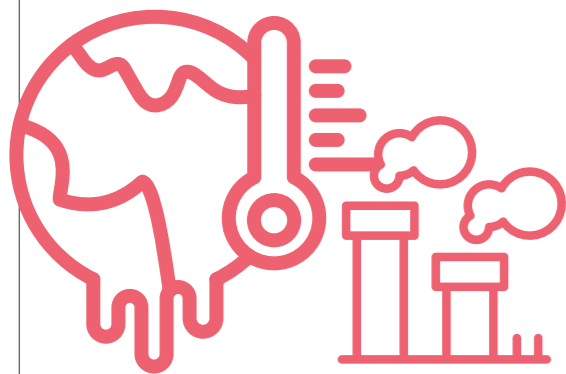
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# Gadael Gwales: Approaching the future of Welsh heritage in a changing climate



**Efa Lois Thomas BA MArch**

Place Advisor, Design Commission for Wales

*'...Agori'r drws a wnaeth, ac edrych ar Gernyw, ac ar Aber Henfelen. A phan edrychodd, yr oedd yn gyn hysbysed ganddynt y gynifer colled a gollasent erioed, a'r gynifer câr a chydymaith a gollasent, a'r gynifer drwg a ddaethai iddynt, â phe bai'r pryd hwnnw a cyfarfyddai â hwynt...'*

In the second branch of the Mabinogi, the seven who return from the brutal and tragic war in Ireland spend eighty years on the island of Gwales, where time doesn't pass. They don't get older, and they can't remember their sorrows, until Heilyn fab Gwyn, curious about what lies beyond the door, opens it. Then their memories of the past return, and they must leave Gwales.

Bizarre at it may seem in the 21st century, at times, it feels as though we too are living in the ancient myth and place that is Gwales. The climate crisis is raging outside the door, but we're suspended, both in disbelief that it is happening, and by mass inaction.

The Welsh Government has made declarations of both climate and nature emergencies and bought forward policy and legislation to help address those imperatives. What more can we do to shake ourselves and take on what lies beyond the door? How do we ensure that we don't lose our cultural and architectural heritage, when faced with rising tides, increasing temperatures and increasingly extreme weather events? How should we approach Welsh architectural inheritance – a tangible history – in a changing climate? And how can we seize the opportunity presented by the sustainable use and re-use of built heritage in the midst of the appetite for new-build?

Wales is rich in history and heritage, but a lot of it is invisible to those who aren't familiar with the stories. Architecture is a cultural inheritance – it tells us about the lives of the people who used to live, relax, work and worship in these spaces. It can become a memorial to industries and ways of life that have long since left the place. But it could also present an opportunity for the future.

Growing up in Ceredigion, I was familiar with landscapes of abandoned cottages and lead mine workings that were scattered around parts of the

countryside. As I became familiar with the South Wales Valleys, I became familiar with forests filled with lime kilns and abandoned cottages, which are now homes to immense biodiverse landscapes which have grown up to reclaim the spoils of industry. There are stories like these across Wales – stories of forgotten, or uncomfortable heritage.

In Henllan, outside Newcastle Emlyn, there's a hut with a sign above its door which says '*Questa e la casa di Dio e la porta del cielo*', or, '*This is the house of God and the gate of heaven*'. In the 20th century, it was the site of a prisoner of war camp, and this hut became a chapel, transformed with paint made from vegetables and fruit and a pulpit made from Red Cross boxes. It is the only example of this kind of building on the British mainland. Its nearest relative is on the Isle of Orkney.

To ignore these stories is to give us an incomplete picture of the past. In a nation steeped with history, these uncomfortable histories are important, as they tell us about what Wales is. Without preserving these buildings, and their histories, we cannot truly understand the past.

It is vital for the cultural importance they represent, that we protect, promote and interpret our historic assets as inheritance for future generations, so that they can experience history in the places where it happened, and connect with their history on physical, temporal, spatial and tactile levels. This safeguarding of the cultural dimension of the places and buildings that tell our stories comes with other real and quantifiable environmental advantages and needs both a technical and cultural response.

Built heritage represents a large proportion of the built environment as whole – in Europe and across the globe, historic sites represent a significant share of all existing buildings, a factor recognised in the *European Cultural Heritage Green Paper 2021*. Dr Antonia Gravagnuolo, a member of the expert advisory group to **Europa Nostra** and **ICOMOS** (International Council on Monuments and Sites), the partnership which authored the report, argues eloquently for heritage conservation at the core of their green paper. '*Heritage conservation is the antithesis to the consumer society ethos*

of single-use disposability. It fights for the repair, use and reuse of existing buildings, landscapes, knowledge, and resources.” The document was supported by the *European Investment Bank Institute* and the *Creative Europe* programme of the European Union who invited policymakers, heritage organisations, climate scientists, and environmental professionals, to join forces in putting the cultural heritage “at the heart of the European Green Deal”. At a time of multifarious challenge across the world, of conflict and climate change, such national and international collaboration and commitment is essential to the success of all our routes to a decarbonised environment and economy, and to the protection, enhancement and safeguarding of our culture, wherein resides our meaning and our identity.

A better future is possible, but to get there we need to leave Gwales and approach sustainability practically in all projects within the built environment by better technical practice and the behaviour that creates the necessary culture. None of the issues we face are new in 2022. The Government in Wales has the sustainable development commitment enshrined in the Government of Wales Act and has pursued legislation and policy toward a more sustainable climate responsible Wales since devolution and the Design Commission, a first term initiative of that Government, has promoted critical action on sustainable development and for climate impacts since its beginnings. Why then might we be said still to languish in Gwales?

#### Y Dyfodol: Approaching the Future

In Wales, Identity takes its place among the six pillars of the Placemaking Wales Charter – without it, without this distinctiveness a place might be any place – Welsh places could be anywhere, or nowhere. Approaching identity and protecting our culture, our histories, while facing the climate emergency is no mean feat and requires a commitment to the value of culture and heritage combined with the technical practicalities of physical refurbishment.

The built environment is responsible for around 40% of the UK’s Carbon footprint (UKGBC, 2018), and 80% of the buildings that will exist in the UK in 2050 have already been built (UKGBC, 2018) – many no doubt, to standards that will increasingly fail to perform well enough to meet future standards. Construction, demolition and excavation work generated around three fifths (62%)

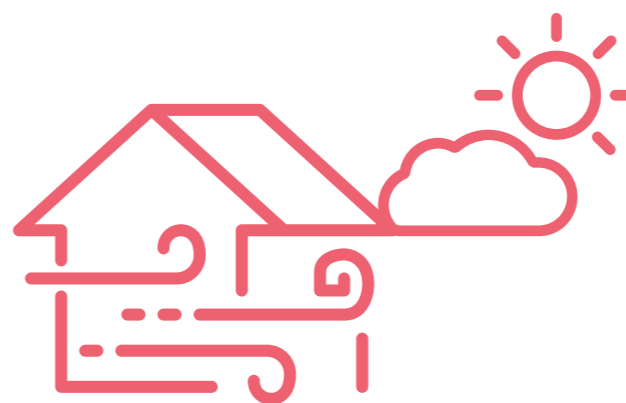
of total UK waste in 2018 (UK Government, 2022). As our climate continually changes, and in order to meaningfully reduce carbon, we need to prioritise waste reduction and the conservation of resources which inevitably means more reuse than demolition.

Some years ago, as part of my MArch thesis, I considered how we could better approach sustainable design, reuse and refurbishment for historic heritage projects in Wales, with a methodology that overlays the RIBA work stages 0-7, based on research by multiple heritage bodies, the RIBA Green Overlay (2013), and the work of Sofie Pelsmakers, co-founder of *Architects for Change* and author of the *Environmental Design Pocket Book 2012 and 2015*.

On a practical level, when approaching the adaption of an existing historic building, it is necessary to begin with ‘Understanding the Building’ (RIBA Stages 0-1); how it relates to its context – the surrounding landscape, microclimate and macroclimate, and investigating access, current material use, the prevailing wind direction, biodiversity on site, noise, and solar access. This should then be followed by an assessment of the condition and quality of the existing building or structure, and a thermal comfort analysis of those elements.



**A better future is possible, but to get there we need to leave Gwales and approach sustainability practically in all projects within the built environment by better technical practice and the behaviour that creates the necessary culture.**



Next comes ‘Setting Objectives and Planning Improvements’ (RIBA Stages 2-3), identifying measures that are likely to be appropriate in order to integrate any new design or technology elements into the existing building fabric. It’s also at this stage that designers should consider greening initiatives to modify the microclimate of the site, as well as planning for warmth, comfort, building use and occupation patterns.

‘Analysing Existing Building Fabric’ (RIBA Stage 4) next addresses requirements for the specification of any new building materials and products which must be made be explicit in order to ensure that they aren’t replaced with lower quality alternatives. At the same time, any new materials should be assessed for their compatibility with the existing building fabric in order to try to reduce drafts and minimise the risk of condensation and mould. This stage also highlighted that clients and design teams benefit from looking for the most appropriate construction contract in order to ensure delivery of the highest quality of building work possible.

Step 4 (RIBA Stage 5) is ‘Construction’, and it specifies that all installers would have sufficient training and expertise for the delivery of a sustainable project. It also suggests that ‘as built’ documentation is collated in order for it to inform future care and maintenance work.

Step 5 ‘Post Occupancy and Ventilation’ (RIBA work Stage 6 + 7) suggests that advice regarding ventilation and its importance be imparted to occupants of the building to develop understanding of how the building works. It suggests that inspections be carried out annually in order to check for signs of decay, mould or condensation on any fabric improvements, as well as conducting post-occupancy evaluations.

Irrespective of the overlay and despite the widely recognised and quoted RIBA stages – almost none of the above is brought forward in

DCFW’s experience of re-use and refurbishment except in the case of the highest significance site and building in what might be termed our ‘cultural estate’.

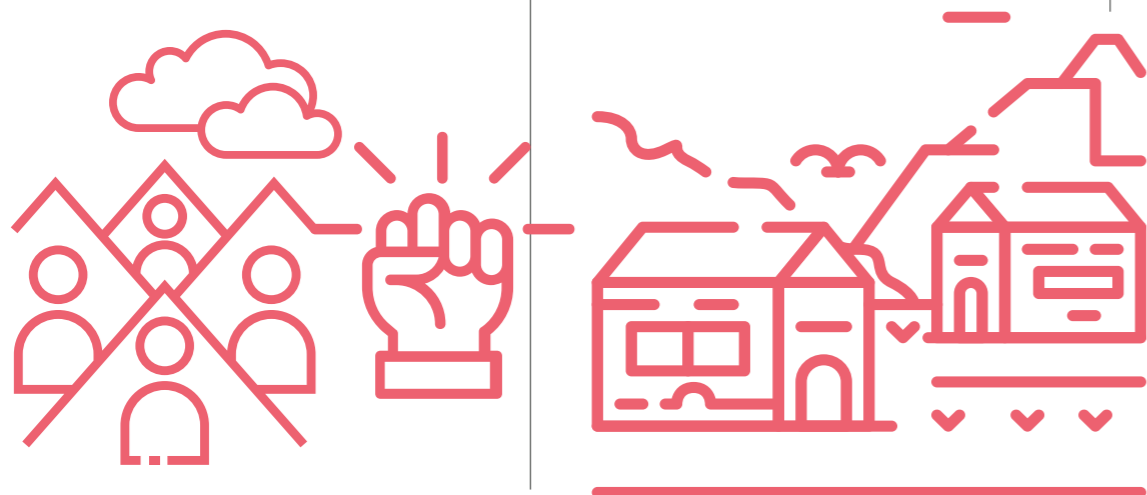
Heritage, historic and cultural fabric has meaning often of a significance well beyond its official ‘listing’ status. It is part of the fabric of place and certainly of social and cultural significance to communities than its recognised status may imply. The way in which design and construction practice is carried out at such sites must change technically to ensure appropriate treatments. But it must also change ‘culturally’ so as to recognise the social and environmental value for a community, and for a place, of cherished historic fabric.

The 7 Well-being Goals of the Well-being of Future Generations Act include ‘A Prosperous Wales: An innovative, productive and low carbon society which recognises the limits of the global environment and therefore uses resources efficiently and proportionately (including acting on climate change)...’ and a ‘A Wales of vibrant culture and thriving Welsh language: ‘A society that promotes and protects culture, heritage and the Welsh language.’

By approaching our heritage with an eye to the future and the long term, we can ensure that the future generations of Wales can experience their history in situ, and we can provide them with an architectural heritage which is both eye-opening, and resilient.

Earlier in the second branch of the Mabinogi, before the seven survivors return from Ireland, we are introduced to ‘Y Pair Dadeni’, a cauldron in which the dead are brought back to life. Perhaps, by approaching our heritage in this way, we can ensure that cultural assets across Wales are reborn, and they tell everyone’s stories, that they expound the complexities of those stories, rather than simply elevate a mythical notion of a one-dimensional Wales.

# Inclusion is critical for living heritage



**Stephen Anderson** BA (Hons) BArch PGDip RIBA  
Director, Buttress Architects

Our built heritage forms the most tangible cultural legacy of our forebears. It manages to be both extraordinary and every day. It includes routes and familiar buildings we walk past on our daily commutes; a constant comforting presence, or sites we visit once in a lifetime and leave with a lasting sense of awe and wonder. Our built heritage is also a finite resource, valued by society and therefore requiring constant stewardship to ensure it remains for the well-being of future generations. However, we must not forget that this cultural legacy is not just something to be maintained, like the contents of a spirit jar in a museum. As we look ahead to the next decade, we need to identify what opportunities there are for us to enhance our built heritage as the living, breathing and evolving entity that it is.

There are clearly challenges to overcome if we are to maximise the benefits that enhancing our built heritage can bring. Given the pace of change in the world right now, the next 10 years will contain threats and barriers we cannot yet anticipate. But, amongst those apparent today is a lack of capacity throughout the whole built heritage sector, insufficient funding, and a property development industry that is becoming ever more standardised, modularised and biased towards new build. Adding to this is a legislative framework which can be cumbersome, and the influence climate change will have in how we approach adapting our built heritage in a decarbonising world.

Ensuring that our built heritage is not only conserved but enhanced, within the context of these challenges, will test our creative ability to its limits – but the building blocks are there. Firstly, we recognise that the hearts of villages, towns, and cities across Wales, as elsewhere, need revitalisation in the face of changing patterns of use, consumer behaviour and as a result of the services they offer. Reuse, refurbishment, and reinvention of our built heritage, however, has the potential to play a leading role in this regeneration.

The built heritage of a place is often what most visibly expresses its distinctiveness, cultural

richness, and identity. Enhancing it strengthens that distinctiveness and helps to more fully express aspects that may be unique. This helps each place to rebel against homogeneity and compete colourfully in what can often be a monochrome world. It means that the communities can view places anew; they may rekindle connections and associations which help stimulate and refresh a sense of care, pride, and ownership – all of which contribute to ways in which places can thrive.

John Summers Steelworks in Shotton is a one such example. A characterful building of brick and terracotta occupying a prominent location on the River Dee, 'The Clocktower', as it is known locally, has captured the imagination of the community. Many local people have memories of working at the site and visiting the building; their associations are profoundly meaningful to them as individuals and as a community. Over the years, however, it has fallen into disuse and disrepair. Thanks to a dedicated group of local volunteers, its fortunes are now beginning to turn, with significant funding secured to bring it back into use as a community resource and training facility. Further funding is currently being sought to secure its full refurbishment. This story is repeated across Wales, with each success showing the positive role built heritage can have in building successful communities and places.

The second opportunity comes from Wales' strong cultural institutions which are thoughtfully investing in built heritage. The role of Wales' cultural institutions and organisations over the next 10 years, will not only be to continue to care for heritage on behalf of society and future generations, but to continue to innovate, experiment and explore all aspects of the care, use and reinvention of that heritage. All of Wales' cultural institutions can play a critical role in enhancing and supporting individual and community pride, sense of self and community confidence. These cultural institutions are already aspirational and capable, so ensuring they have the people, skills, and funding to realise their aspirations and the potential of the built heritage in their care is an important strategic imperative. With those resources, they will be able



**In the next 10 years, might we reach a point where access to our built heritage – in all its forms – truly is available to all?**



to better use built heritage to tell the stories of Wales in a manner which is even more compelling, grounding the nation in its cultural roots.

Our built heritage must therefore be available to the widest range of people possible. This transcends simply thinking about physical access, it requires proactively seeking to be relevant for everyone. It requires a re-evaluation and re-telling of stories and histories which goes beyond a sense of the past as we have come to know it.

In the next 10 years, might we reach a point where access to our built heritage – in all its forms – truly is available to all? In practice, this means overcoming a range of issues, recognising the broad range of stakeholders who influence decision making and the frameworks in which they currently operate as well as a seismic shift in how we think about inclusion and heritage side by side. Whose heritage is it anyway?

A recent example can be drawn from our work at Caernarfon Castle which began in 2016 as an aspirational project to improve access and enhance visitor experience to the King's Gate, one of its most historically important elements. The castle stirs mixed emotions, a remaining 'English' bastion in a town where Welsh identity is particularly strong. As a result, it is a building which is uniquely

able to support positive and challenging discourse relating to Welsh identity. Improving physical access has enormous public benefits, allowing the widest possible range of people to explore this World Heritage Site, bringing to life the stories only Caernarfon Castle can tell through its never completed walls. It required tenacity, ingenuity and innovation from our design and construction teams and client alike, to bring about such large-scale interventions in the context of a World Heritage site. Beyond this physical intervention though sits the richness and value of the debate and discourse among stakeholders about relevance and meaning for a far wider and more diverse community of users and audiences which informed and shaped our considerations throughout.

What we learned and continue to learn about audiences and their connections with places and heritage is critical for the 'cultural estate' across Wales to fulfil its potential. As our understanding of audiences becomes ever more nuanced, we can find better ways to tell stories. At Caernarfon, the use of creative art commissions has also allowed genuine participation in the shaping of stories and brought about a thought-provoking approach to historical narrative and storytelling of huge relevance at a moment when we are polarised and more divided as a society than at any time



**Built heritage is a foundation stone of cultural identity. A clear sense of identity permits confidence.**

in recent years. This coming together to question, debate and reconsider has been enabled by what might on one level be viewed as a pile of old stone – but on another by a unique and undeniable icon of Wales' built heritage. It has become a powerful galvaniser for creativity, collaboration, and inclusion between our cultural institutions and those that support them.

Built heritage is a foundation stone of cultural identity. A clear sense of identity permits confidence. We can understand and learn lessons from the past which allow society to face the future with self-belief and optimism. Whether this be about our immediate everyday environments and the built heritage which makes them unique, contributing to cohesive and strong communities or whether it be about those heritage assets which tell internationally important stories and raise questions, inviting curiosity, learning and genuine engagement. Enhancing those assets in a way which ensures they are relevant and accessible to all must be a national strategic objective over the next 10 years. Achieving this is not easy, but the rewards are great, and the endless creativity of Welsh communities shows they are more than a match for the challenge and will undoubtedly make the most of the opportunity.

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 Ambassador on Climate Change 2017  
 Visiting Professor, The Scott Sutherland  
 School of Architecture and Built Environment,  
 Robert Gordon University 2015-2019;  
 Design Commission for Wales  
 Design Review Panellist

Wales has outstanding natural beauty, and rich resources – exploited historically for energy and manufacturing – but Wales is not alone in facing the devastating prospect of irreversible climate change and its impacts on lifestyle choices, hence the urgent need to address the demands of climate resilience. In the 2030s badly performing buildings will be outlawed, and energy and water costs will be punitive – so how can a good life for future generations in Wales be properly integrated in our design and development decisions now in 2022? Whilst water and windpower infrastructure is largely privatised (though there is promising ambition in Wales to change this), the main strategy for dealing with global shortages is energy demand reduction.

Wales' natural attributes can enable a leadership position of which the rest of the UK would be envious. The Design Commission for Wales has long championed the power of design in its broadest sense – innovative thinking, social responsibility, energy consciousness – these represent a potent combination. However, a market-led approach to resource infrastructure



# Climate resilience for homes needs a new typology for carbon, comfort and community.

has resulted in long-term resilience being underestimated in development economics, so historically leadership in the sustainability agenda and regenerative approach to development has been confined to individual cases of leadership and foresight, whilst mainstream developers roll out a budget-defined version of UK house-types. But if new Welsh buildings using scarce resources wisely can show how water saving, sustainable materials and minimising the need for (renewable) energy are the core ingredients of a long-term resilience strategy, then this potentially plays to the strengths of a future Wales economy.

Analysis has shown that fourteen archetypes collectively represent 84% of the Welsh housing stock and whilst this research was triggered by a laudable drive towards an optimised approach to decarbonisation retrofit – it does beg the question about new resilient archetypes for a Net Zero Wales. What should they be, how can they characterise good design whilst supporting sustainable and healthy lifestyles with the landscape and accessibility aspects of placemaking. Strong simple housing forms could be combined with robust public realm and placemaking – recognising that a greened context works for microclimate cooling, carbon sequestration, pleasant walking and cycling routes, reducing building energy and water demand, and regenerative biodiversity. I suggest this has great cultural resonance: acknowledging a dominant distinctive natural setting, and prioritising the community 'capital' of a neighbourhood. What differentiates built environment works for the 2020s is a sophisticated approach to building in energy demand reduction – a specialism of several academic institutions in Wales – recognising the potential for thermal resilience in quality fabric performance, as well as reducing building carbon footprint by deploying local resources such as sustainably grown timber.

This year's cataclysmic rises in energy price and devastating climate change experiences are leading to a turnround in house-buyer priorities. Energy efficiency and low bills are now considered a priority by around three-quarters of owner occupier-buyers and – needless to say – renters. Wales can take the lead in championing a housing form that works for carbon reduction and occupant comfort. The Welsh Government's

**This year's cataclysmic rises in energy price and devastating climate change experiences are leading to a turnround in house-buyer priorities.**



Innovative Housing Programme in Wales has already begun some of this work but much more is needed to realise more than modification of accepted housetypes and capture value of design for place and neighbourhood, articulated by their own Design Commission. Homes built by pioneering UK landlords have shown that proven low-energy standards such as Passivhaus are attracting a buyer premium – increases in sales value up to 10% – so in the context of investment for long-term resilience this presents unarguable value. The question is what does it look like and feel like, how good a place is it for people to live their whole lives, how well does it serve their needs, and that is where Design Commission for Wales' strengths lie, in articulating and advocating a powerful rounded vision.

**Professor Wayne Forster** BSc (Hons) BArch (Distinction) PhD, RIBA

Professor of Architecture & Deputy Head of School,  
Welsh School of Architecture, Cardiff University

*'Every site is an accumulation of local forces over time, and so, any significant design response must in some way interpret, extend, and amplify this potential within its specific context. Averse to universal and stylistic approaches to design, Corner demands inventive originality with regard to specific circumstance.'*

<https://www.archdaily.com/516847/from-the-landscape-imagination-james-corner-s-essay-on-the-high-line>

In this essay the positioning of placemaking at the heart of planning policy and the use of contextual studies to support its creation in practice is welcomed, but the efficacy of these studies in practice is questioned, and through referencing the work of James Corner,<sup>1</sup> more imaginative and 'optimistic' approaches to mapping and representation of site are promoted, so that the results are instrumental in terms of design and placemaking outcomes.

Placemaking now lies at the heart of Wales' national planning policy and has been



enthusiastically subscribed to by over 112 organisations signing up to the Design Commission for Wales' *Placemaking Charter*, commissioned from them by the Welsh Government.<sup>2</sup>

As Norberg Schulz states *'Architecture means to visualise the genius loci, and the task of the architect is to create meaningful places whereby he helps to dwell.'*<sup>3</sup> The aim is the creation of vibrant and distinctive places as opposed to the standardised generic spaces in the built environment that weaken the identity of places to the point where they look and feel alike, and offer the same bland possibilities for lived experience.

In this essay 'place' is the experiential and expressive ways by which places are known,

# Places that enchant: How can contextual understanding be truly instrumental in design outcomes?



imagined, yearned for, held, remembered, voiced, lived, contested and struggled over. The gateway to successful design in terms of planning, is placemaking. Planning Policy Wales states *'Everyone engaged with or operating within the planning system in Wales must embrace the concept of placemaking in both plan making and development management decisions in order to achieve the creation of sustainable places and improve the well-being of communities.'*<sup>4</sup>

Its Technical Advice Note 12 TAN 12: *Design* states that *'Design which is inappropriate in its context, or which fails to grasp opportunities to enhance the character, quality and function of an area, should not be accepted, as these have detrimental effects on existing communities.'*<sup>5</sup>

The foundation stone of good placemaking planning policy, is the use of contextual studies. When a planning application is made, it is important that the material submitted clearly and concisely communicates the site analysis process and how it has informed the design. This is potentially an important step forward. But is placemaking in practice being treated as a 'bolt on' extra? Even where the analysis is carried out it often remains invisible.

DCFW notes that quite a bit is heard of *'...well yes, we're just doing this bit then we'll get to placemaking – or 'we've got a budget for placemaking too'...etc'* Referred to as the 'gap' by DCFW, the challenge seems to be 'how contextual studies and site analysis can positively inform and affect placemaking design outcomes? Thorough contextual studies and site analysis are recommended as a means to good design and placemaking' – *'it will help to create the best value from the site and avoid expensive and abortive work.'*<sup>6</sup> The definition of place given above focuses more on the aspects of human experience or dwelling than site value. Critical of orthodox methods of mapping and analysis James Corner, designer of New York's Highline cautions reliance only on an empirical approach that believes a logical synthesis will follow from a comprehensive and objective fact-structure.

Corner employs mapping as central to creative and imaginative design processes in which the instrumental function of mapping is particularly important - in a world where it is becoming increasingly difficult to both imagine and actually to create anything outside of the normative. Subscribing to Corner's idea's would

mean mapping (site analysis) techniques would include more speculative ways of mapping and representation, intended to produce a more intimate and meaningful relationship with places.

*'It is in this participatory sense that new and speculative techniques of mapping may generate new practices of creativity, practices that are expressed not in the invention of novel form but in the productive reformulation of what is already given. By showing the world in new ways, unexpected solutions and effects may emerge.'*<sup>7</sup>

In summary, are contextual studies instrumental in design outcomes? Can the design team answer the 'so what' question? If so, then rather than the usual abstract diagrams and demographics alone, contextual studies would include (borrowing from some of the principles of deep mapping and the work of other creative disciplines)<sup>8</sup> *the grain and patina of place, through juxtapositions and interpenetrations of the historical and the contemporary, the political and the poetic, the discursive and the sensual; the conflation of oral testimony, anthology, memoir, biography, natural history and everything you might ever want to say about a place...*<sup>9</sup> Critically the contextual work will be a more empathetic reading of site and will be *'a conversation and not a statement.'*<sup>10</sup>

1 James Corner The Agency of Mapping :Speculation, critique and invention in The landscape imagination. Collected essays of James Corner 1900-2010 pps 197-240

2 <http://dcfw.org/the-placemaking-wales-charter/>

3 Christian Norberg Schulz Genius Loci Towards a Phenomenology of Architecture p5

4 Planning Policy Wales Edition 11 | February 2021 p12

5 TAN 12: *Design*, Welsh Government, para 2.6 p7

6 <https://gov.wales/sites/default/files/publications/2018-09/site-context-analysis-guide.pdf>

7 Speculation, Critique, and Invention in The Landscape imagination In Mappings ED Denis Cosgrove p217

8 Map As Art: Contemporary Artists Explore Cartography Paperback – 2010 by Katharine Harmon (Editor)

9 Mike Pearson and Michael Shanks, Theatre/ Archaeology (Routledge 2001) page 64-65

10 The tenth and final principle in Cliff Mc Lucas' 10 things I can say about deep maps. See <https://web.stanford.edu/~mshanks/MichaelShanks/51.html>





# Vision, value and equipping the future

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### Steven Smith BA (Hons) Dip Arch RIBA

Director, Urban Narrative

Design Commission for Wales, Design Review Panellist

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What springs to mind when we think about Wales? For some, it will be the people and the Welsh language. For others it might be the gentle landscapes of mountains, valleys and coastlines. Cities and towns are unlikely to come to the fore – a paradox because the economic reality of Wales, like that of most advanced nations, is based on its urban centres. Wales might perhaps be described as a land of reluctant urbanists – pulled by our work into the economic life of cities and by our imaginations to the delights of nature.

Half of the people in Wales live in its southeast corner, populating towns and villages in the valleys or the coastal plain close to the nation's capital city. The design review, consultation and client support work of the Design Commission for Wales provides a unique overview of development activity in this area. From this privileged viewpoint, common projects themes and patterns of development emerge that may perhaps be less apparent to the individual local authorities or project teams. This paper describes one of these common themes.

Combining insights from DCFW's experience and archive of diverse projects across the country and specifically, for their southeast archive, a picture emerges of a great urban experiment that is currently underway. The experimental ambition is to connect together the many currently separate villages, towns and cities to form a unified regional 'city in a landscape' that combines the urban and nature-loving aspects of the Welsh identity. In typical Welsh style, this is not the result of a centralised, top-down initiative but a collaboration between individuals and authorities – complete with all the pros and cons of open-ended, decentralised governance and ways of working. The objective seems to be the creation of a new kind of regional urbanism that doesn't yet have a name.

It might seem naively ambitious to suggest yet another coordinating theme in an environment already rich in Wales' national and local government visions, policy, plans and proposals. The justification is that this is not a new initiative -

it is the identification of an existing unrecognised theme that is 'hiding in plain sight' within the many initiatives already in play. It is the coordinating overview that can provide new focus to existing initiatives rather than the imposition of a new plan.

Even if the idea is fraught with the challenges of coordination and the legacy of pandemic related hiatus - this new form of regional 'City in a Landscape' warrants examination and definition. It deserves both analysis and synthesis of its characteristics and the ways in which the idea might develop and influence the nation's fortunes over the coming decades.

The concept of regional planning dates back to the origins of modern-day planning. In the late 1800s, Patrick Geddes (1834–1932) proposed the idea of planning based on regions defined by 'natural' topography and watershed as opposed to the 'artificial' division of land by political or administrative boundaries. What Geddes understood is that all human social and economic activity changes the landscape in some way. He also understood that managing these changes over time is key to discovering less destructive ways for humankind to make cities and dwell in the world. From this viewpoint, planning becomes more a branch of landscape architecture than a by-product of politics, law and regulation.

### The landscape

Between the Brecon Beacons and the Severn Estuary, four great Welsh landscapes are shaped by nine river systems. The source of these rivers is to be found high up in the moorlands of the Brecon Beacons National Park. Over millennia, rivers flowing down from high ground, carved the South Wales Valleys. At the foot of the valleys the rivers meander across coastal plains before opening into broad mudflats that buttress the land against the ebb and flow of great tidal surges in this section of the estuary.

It is a landscape that has been shaped by people since prehistoric times. During the 19th and 20th centuries the valleys were ravaged to supply the coal, iron and steel that powered the industrial

revolution. During this period, coastal mudflats were transformed to create port cities – gateways for shipping Wales' industrial riches to the rest of the world. Today, the region is home to 1.5 million people living in networks of villages, towns and cities embedded in this post-industrial landscape. The challenges of the 21st century demand that we transform this landscape once again but in innovative ways that forge a more harmonious contract between humanity and the earth's living mantle.

#### Defining the city in a landscape

The limits of this Welsh urban experiment are not neatly defined by existing political and administrative boundaries. Instead they are defined, in accordance with Geddes' conception, by a response to natural landscape. The area is currently governed and managed by a ten local authorities and additionally includes initiatives and controls by regional bodies and Welsh Government each with overlapping jurisdictions, different policy priorities and visions for the future. The roles of some of the key bodies that might contribute in the creation of this 'City in a Landscape' are discussed below.

**Brecon Beacons National Park Authority** – The Brecon Beacons National Park extends over an area of 1,340 km<sup>2</sup> of mountains and moorland. The land was designated as a National Park in 1957 to become the third great Welsh National Park. The Brecon Beacons defines the northern extent of the 'City in a Landscape' and is the source of the river systems that flow through the valleys below creating the distinctive landscape form and defining the location and form of human settlements over time. Managing the river systems from mountain to sea as they flow through the City in a Landscape

**The limits of this Welsh urban experiment are not neatly defined by existing political and administrative boundaries.**

is key to the city's future ecological health, water management and flooding resilience, and should be a unifying initiative for the entire city.

**The Valleys Regional Park** – The Valleys Regional Park concept promotes distinctive former mining, industrial and heritage landscapes between the Brecon Beacons National Park area and the mixed urban and farming landscape of the coastal plain. Here the focus is on developing economic and social value. Approximately two thirds of the park area lies within the Cardiff Capital Region boundary with the remaining third covering the valleys to the west. The Valleys Regional Park could form the central part of the City in a Landscape.

**Cardiff Capital Region** – The Cardiff Capital Region (CCR) is a collaborative initiative between ten local authorities. The shared ambition is to boost economic productivity and the prosperity of the 1.5 million citizens in the region through coordinating policy and strategic investment of public grants, loans and private finance. The CCR initiative has an unambiguous economic focus on the development of industries and jobs. The focus of the CCR initiative broadly covers the historic heartland of mining and steel production, now being transformed to new purposes. The analysis and strategies of the CCR could extend to provide the economic logic and drive for the City in a Landscape idea.

**South Wales Metro** – The South Wales metro project being developed by Transport for Wales aims to provide integrated, high-quality, public transport network of heavy and light rail, trams and buses and active travel routes across the City in a Landscape. The Metro is already a central feature of local authority planning strategies across the entire area. The Metro project underpins the CCR economic strategy by creating an efficient, consolidated market for labour and services for the entire City in a Landscape area within a one-hour commuting distance. Today, the individual city centres, towns and villages feel separate and remote from one another despite their common past and former connection. The aim of the Metro is to link places together once more in a way that opens up new ways of living and working across the entire region.

What would be the defining characteristics of this new type of City in a Landscape?

#### 1. A new type of city

A new type of city designed and managed to enrich the ecological diversity and resilience of its setting; a model for 21st century resilient urbanism in a restored natural landscape; 'the world's greenest city'.

#### 2. Four landscapes

A city of four landscapes – mountain, valleys, coastal plain and shoreline each with distinctive ecologies and urban forms.

#### 3. Nine rivers systems

Nine river systems managed from source to shore to promote ecological diversity, resilience to flood and the cultural and social life of the towns and villages through which they flow.

#### 4. Network

A thriving network of linked villages, towns and cities providing diverse economic, social, environmental and cultural opportunities for all.

#### 5. Connected

A fully integrated regional urban transport network providing convenient quick access to all parts of the regional city for the benefit of all.

#### 6. A resilient growing economy

A place of green economic growth across the city designed to reinforce existing settlement patterns and conserve natural settings.

#### 7. A place to live close to nature

Creating a place to live and work in harmony with the natural setting with easy access great open spaces and landscapes.

#### 8. A culturally rich landscape

A city in a landscape that celebrates the unique history of, people, landscape and place

#### Advantages

If we were to adopt the 'City in a Landscape' approach that begins with the unifying idea of natural landscape, what might be the advantages? It would provide a shared vision and identity for the region providing the great advantage of scale to the economic development of the area. Integrated transport connectivity will enable people to conveniently work and live across the entire



city region giving economic reality to the regional identity. This idea brings current initiatives together providing a unifying identity that has impact at scale, and has the potential to become the guiding theme and common purpose for future development of this special and unique region of Wales.

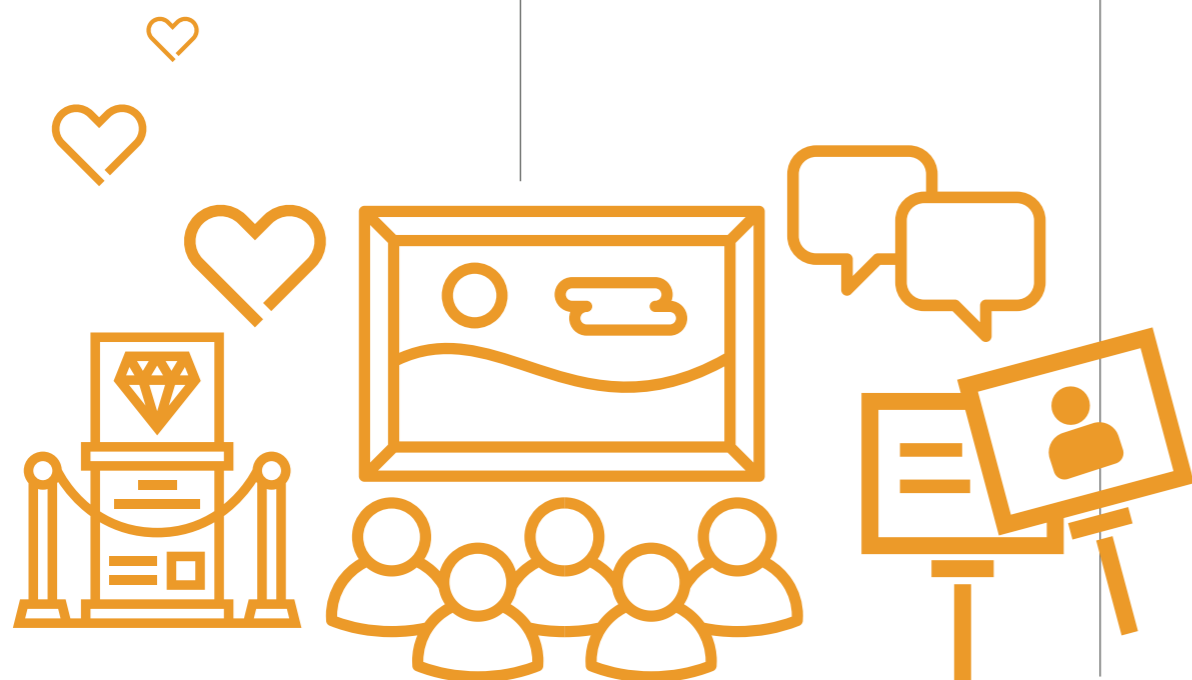
It would change perceptions and understandings about the landscape setting, seeing it as a primary asset to be carefully managed and conserved both for the health of the natural ecology and as a primary attraction of living and working in the city. Large green spaces could be understood as a primary natural asset of equal value to that offered by the green spaces of National Parks.

It would encourage thinking and action for a different kind of stewardship, managing the landscape at a larger scale than is possible within the boundaries of existing jurisdictions. The integrated cultural, economic and environmental management of rivers from source to shore might be an example of such large-scale management. Managing the landscape for regenerative agriculture, energy production, ecological diversity or even 're-wilding' might be other examples.

The City in a Landscape would be a place where rivers are managed for resilience from source to the sea and where landscapes are nurtured for ecological diversity, with areas of salt-marsh wetlands, forest, regenerative farming, re-wilding and open moor as the setting for urban growth. It would be a distinctively Welsh, drawing inspiration from the history and culture of people in this landscape over millennia. It would be a place where economic prosperity is generated without critically undermining the earth's natural capital. Where healthy lives are enjoyed close to nature – where urbanisation and architecture are put to work to enhance landscape settings. Imagine living in a city set in a landscape of the quality of a national park. Imagine the future in a Wales underpinned by a new type of city in an outstanding landscape setting rich with natural capital – an alternative, grand-scale unifying concept and a bold legacy for future generations.



# Culture, community, capability – transformation within reach



## David Anderson

Director General, Amgueddfa Cymru

As Wales sets out to 'rebuild' after the impact of the Coronavirus Covid-19 pandemic, there are clear parallels with the reconstructions that followed both the First and Second World Wars. In 1919, the report on Adult Education laid the foundations for new, free or subsidised educational opportunities for adults who had an unfulfilled potential and passion for self-education – an initiative which had its flowering half a century later with the creation of the Open University. After World War Two, the pre-War experiments in universal healthcare in Wales inspired Nye Bevan to create the National Health Service, one of the many achievements of the Welfare State.

Once again, 70 years on, Wales needs the vision, social innovation, and commitment to social justice that created these transformations. As part of this, we need a radical rethink of the role of culture in society, this time as a core service within a revitalised Welfare State and a foundation for good lives.

In 1948, William Beveridge followed his earlier seminal work with a third equally visionary report, *Voluntary Action: A Report on Methods of Social Advance*. He defined voluntary action as "action not under the directions of any authority wielding the power of the State". In this he proposed that – as well as the Welfare State – Government needed to support the role of communities and voluntary organisations in social change. He added that "the independence of voluntary action does not mean lack of cooperation between it and public action".

Three quarters of a century on there is a need to realise this vision of social innovation and commitment to social justice. A key element of this must be a radical rethink of the role and transformative influence of culture and creative practice as a means to build individual capability and community capacity and as a core service within a renewed Welfare State, underpinned by a new social contract between the citizen and society, and between culture and state – directly addressing the Well-being of Future Generations Act and its call for a more equal Wales of cultural richness and cohesive communities.

It has been said that if a country's GDP increases year on year but remains aligned with the same increase in factors of unjustifiable inequalities and deprivation – access to education, healthcare, life opportunity – then its notion of progress and assertions that quality of life is improving, is questionable.<sup>1</sup> The Welsh Government has created both policy and legislation which recognises the importance of fairness, addressing inequalities, life opportunities and promoting well-being. Building human capability, agency and capacity within communities through inclusive and participatory practice is now essential, if the promise of world leading policy is to be realised.

Cultural rights – the right of all citizens to participate in the cultural life of their communities – are integral to human rights. Yet, since 1945, arts and culture – including design – have had only a marginal official role in the process of civic renewal and change. Little has been expected and, duly, little has been delivered. Elitism, nurtured in part by the global arts market, has shown a resilience that equality can only envy.

This must change. Wales has an opportunity to democratise culture, so that it becomes an essential component of a renewed participatory democracy. The nation has a long tradition of communitarianism and democratic social action and there are strong foundations on which to build. Wales also has distinctive traditions of thought which have powerfully shaped its history, and society today. These are expressed through the Welsh language and every creative medium, including traditional tales and beliefs; philosophy and religion; science and technology; art, design and photography; food; social structures and practices; health and healing; warfare; and education, skills and economy. Welsh thought matters, within the nation's borders, and internationally.

Cultural organisations can, for example, draw on writings of Raymond Williams, which are read widely across the world. One of his most influential propositions, from *Culture and Society* (1958), is that, "All people have culture and culture is not elitist . . . Culture is ordinary: that is the first fact . . . We use the word culture in two senses: to

mean a whole way of life – the common meaning; to mean the arts and learning – the special process of discovery and creative effort ... Culture is ordinary, in every society and every mind".

Culture, in this sense, is not a set of activities tied to specific disciplines that are controlled by specialists within institutions such as museums, but a vital resource of shared human capabilities and practices for social development that connect people and communities. As such, it must be central to public policy, and central to the purpose of 'cultural' institutions.

If we accept the democratic principles that underpin Williams' words, then it is essential that the cultural and creative sectors commit to a model of cultural practice that is rooted in social justice and community agency. Communities in Wales need their cultural organisations to be centres for social hope, inclusion and involvement in positive change. The role of design and the creative problem solving processes it involves have a huge part in this along with the wider sector, not least if we are to engage fully with our communities toward inclusive, participatory and distinctive placemaking.

From 2012, when Amgueddfa Cymru – Museum Wales began designing the redevelopment of St Fagans: National Museum of History – philosophically, educationally, curatorially and physically – the active engagement of approximately 200 community organisations and street level charities, located all over Wales, underpinned almost every significant decision of the project. This approach was wholeheartedly supported by the Design Commission for Wales with whom we worked closely and continuously.

In July 2019, following completion of the redevelopment, St Fagans was selected as the Art

Fund UK Museum of the Year. Dr Stephen Deuchar, then Director of the Art Fund, said, "St Fagans lives, breathes and embodies the culture of Wales. A monument to modern museum democracy ... this magical place was made by the people of Wales for people everywhere."

In a prescient article in the September 2019 edition of the *Art Quarterly* (4), only a few months before COVID-19 became a force in our lives, Dr Deuchar went further: "Is society itself prepared to reassert its practical commitment to the full range of democratic principles it once held so dear? ... Is it reasonable to expect that culture, through its institutions or directly through its participants, can contribute significantly to what we regard as a social emergency of international reach?"

The present social emergency is far more acute than anyone could have foreseen three years ago. In response to the pandemic, with their buildings closed, many museums retreated behind a digital wall of flat online content. Others, including Amgueddfa Cymru, instead expanded their work outside their buildings, deepening their partnerships with community organisations across Wales.

The pandemic taught Amgueddfa Cymru that it can still be truly a Museum – and find new ways to enhance and improve key services, through sustained partnerships in communities – outwith its buildings and galleries, when these are closed. For some participants who had previously found the Museum difficult to access at its sites, it even became a better museum, rooted in place.

A museum and any other cultural institution may exist at least in part within physical buildings but – if it is to live and breathe – it must also exist outside its walls, deeply rooted in place and in the society of which it is part.

**In response to the pandemic, with their buildings closed, many museums retreated behind a digital wall of flat online content.**



Visual and performing arts centres, libraries, and museums are then not simply buildings, but manifestations of different philosophies of living culture in time and space. They are in essence ways of thinking and acting that can happen anywhere, in any community, at any time. They are macro-utopias and -dystopias, and their histories can be reframed as ones of controlled social experiments, often of varying effectiveness.

Place is central to this debate. The dominant model has been to define the cultural building as privileged place, often in a town or city centre, to the near total exclusion of all other places of cultural practice in their societies. There are wonderful, memorable and challenging cultural experiences that can only be achieved in a theatre or a gallery space. But they can restrict the options for cultural participation to the preferences, and sometimes the prejudices, of cultural professionals; these are only a small part of the powerful, even life-changing, cultural practices that might otherwise be possible.

The alternative is to reverse the telescope, and make local communities – as social place, in all their complexity and specificity – the primary focus for achieving cultural change. All places, in their communities, have the potential to be a theatre, a museum or gallery, a library and a music venue. At a community level, distinctions between these institutional manifestations of culture may then dissolve, with the achievement of participatory cultural democracy as the purpose of all future investment.

This model of culture, community and place, is where culture and cultural democracy lies. Buildings are centres for community action – for collecting and sharing resources. Their focus in this model is activist, to achieve social change through cultural participation. Research is mobile, collaborative and participant-led. Most useful expertise lies "out there" in society. Collections and other cultural resources exist for open (responsible) public use.

Spaces are multi-purpose and flexible. Exhibits are co-curated, responsive and temporary (in place for months or a few years, not decades). "Excellence" is defined by the excellence of public experience, and excellence of participant process, as well as perceived excellence of product. Staff of this kind of organisation are multi-disciplinary cultural workers, with a foundation of primary expertise in cultural participation and the human sciences, and a breadth of secondary skills and expertise across

**This model of culture, community and place, is where culture and cultural democracy lies.**

disciplines in the arts, design and sciences.

What might be described as a new 'National Culture Service for Wales', closely integrated with other partners in Health, Social Care and Education, and working in partnership with the voluntary sector, will be essential to achieve equality of cultural opportunities at a local, regional and national level.

Designing such a service will be challenging. As with health before the Second World War, there is a mosaic of cultural provision, spread across the public, voluntary and private sectors in Wales. It's not necessary or desirable to 'nationalise' these organisations. Rather the role of state actors would be: to set standards of practice for delivery of cultural democracy, embedded within separate codes of conduct for cultural institutions and voluntary organisations, and their staff; to ensure that staff training and development in democratic cultural practice is available locally to both cultural and voluntary organisations in every community across Wales; and to target public funding only to support achievement of these purposes. Wales is a world leader in thinking and practice on cultural democracy. We can now build on this, by enshrining it as the birthright of every child and adult.

<sup>1</sup> Nussbaum, Martha *Creating Capabilities: The human development approach*, Belknap Press Harvard University Press 2011

# Assessing the intangible: parallel challenges in evaluating culture and nature



## David Clubb

Chair, National Infrastructure Commission for Wales

**Culture has a uniquely defined place within Wales' statute, being defined as one of the Well-being Goals within the Well-being of Future Generations Act<sup>1</sup>:**

*A Wales of Vibrant Culture and Thriving Welsh Language: A society that promotes and protects culture, heritage and the Welsh language, and which encourages people to participate in the arts, and sports and recreation<sup>2</sup>*

Nature is also embedded within the same legislation, although somewhat more nuanced. I read the two goals of a Resilient Wales and a Globally Responsible Wales as having significant weight for the protection and enhancement of our natural environment. Both culture and nature are interconnected with every other Future Generations Goal. Enhancing both improves the ability of Wales to achieve the ultimate goal of well-being for all our citizens.

In this 20th year of the Design Commission for Wales, I should pay tribute to the valuable contribution to well-being that is made by expectations of good design and placemaking. Indeed, all users of the DCFW advisory review services are asked to: *Explain how the scheme commits to the Well-being of Future Generations Act's seven Goals and five Ways of Working<sup>3</sup>*. This relates specifically to early strategic decisions and specific development proposals for the built environment, and links directly to the duty placed upon public bodies and to their own decision making.

Organisations like DCFW, that provide challenge and support in equal measure, are important and influential bodies in a public sphere that is still struggling to get to grips with both the Well-being Act, and the implications for 'future generations' of one hundred years or more in the future.

So far, so positive. However, the difficulty with legislation and policy is in implementation. Although the duty arising from the Well-being Act means that public sector bodies are obliged to report on their progress against sustainable development and the Well-being Objectives<sup>3</sup> there are doubtless numerous challenges in undertaking

this assessment, not least because some things, such as the value of culture and nature, are so hard to quantify.

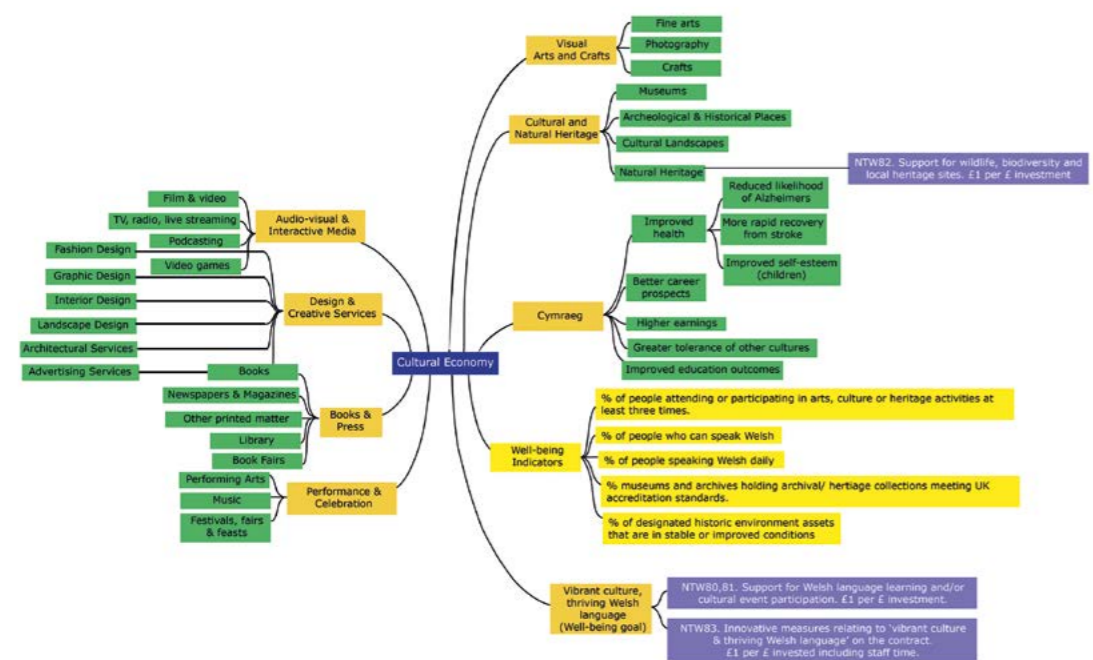
The Well-being of Future Generations Act guidance also carries a potential 'loophole' for those public bodies that are unable to - say - achieve significant progress in promoting culture and nature, because the requirement to take 'all reasonable steps' to deliver progress is a fairly subjective approach. An entirely legitimate strategy to deliver against public sector obligations could therefore include strong progress against 'hard' goals or objectives such as 'prosperity', 'equality' or 'health', all of which can be measured to a reasonably objective standard and report less progress against more challenging goals such as culture.

I make this point for purely illustrative purposes. I have no reason to believe that any public sector body in Wales takes a cynical approach to their obligations. However I think the illustration is useful because it highlights that the 'measurability' of objectives or goals is also a lever with which progress can be mandated. Galileo Galilei's aphorism of five hundred years ago is still relevant today:

*"Measure what is measurable; make measurable what is not so."<sup>4</sup>*

Culture is hard to define and considerably harder to measure. Building on the thoughts of others, and in particular on UNESCO definitions<sup>5</sup>, I have created a mind map that attempts to contain cultural sectors that could - in principle - be valued to help us understand impact. It may also be possible to further develop such a concept towards more tangible 'economies' where impacts can be made more tangible and progress more accurately and easily assessed. Having placed a duty on public bodies to report against the Act, surely there is a mirroring 'duty' to develop more meaningful frameworks against which to define and track progress or remedy the absence of it?





The Cultural economy as defined by Afallen – a single economic sector among a 'five economies' model under development which includes: a Just economy, a Foundational economy, a Planetary Health economy, a Cultural economy and a Well-being economy. The well-being indicators<sup>6</sup> are highlighted in yellow; the Welsh TOMs (Themes, Outcomes, Measures)<sup>7</sup> components in purple.

Even with the work of reputable organisations that try to support the assessment of the value of socially beneficial contributions, such as the National Social Value Framework for Wales<sup>7</sup>, very few of the cultural components within our cultural economy map have a monetary value associated with them.

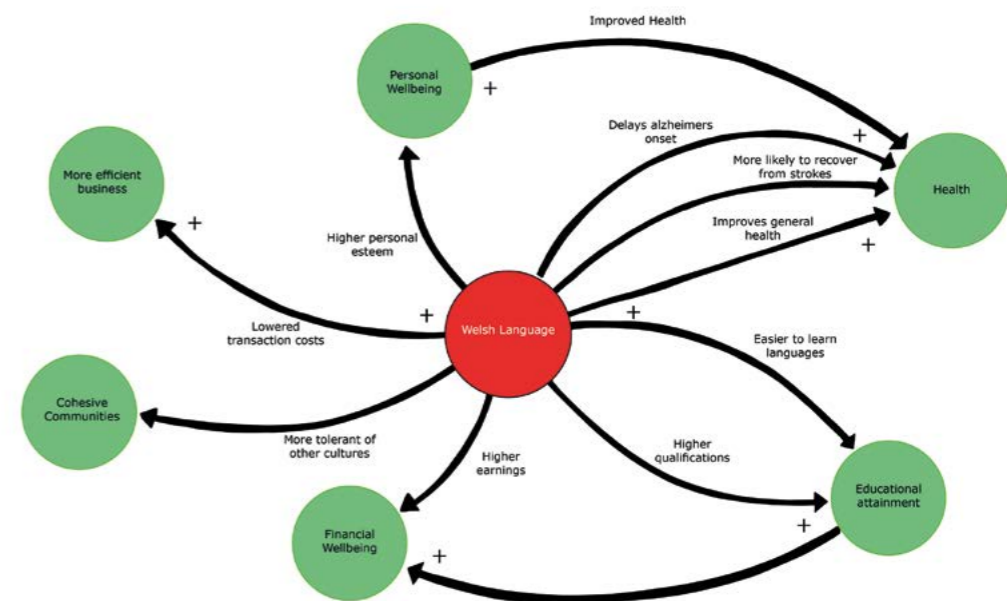
This is despite the fact that, as with nature, culture provides extraordinary benefits to health and well-being that far exceed the investment needed to allow culture to flourish. Indeed, our recent experience as a Welsh society dealing with a pandemic demonstrated that culture, in its many forms, should be recognised as a powerful force for social coherence, resilience and growth.

An example particularly pertinent to Wales is the value of the Welsh language. Derided for centuries as an irrelevance or worse by some, the Welsh language is now being rightly cherished as a wonderful community and social asset in its own right. Furthermore there is now a mountain of peer-reviewed evidence demonstrating that bilingualism offers a whole host of benefits to health, educational attainment and well-being.

If it's true that bilingualism offers so many benefits, how can we evidence this in a way that increases the perceived value of the Welsh language to public and private sector organisations in Wales. And the bigger question – if some of these benefits also arise for other cultural dimensions, how can the cultural sector as a whole improve the

**If it's true that bilingualism offers so many benefits, how can we evidence this in a way that increases the perceived value of the Welsh language to public and private sector organisations in Wales.**

evidence base for outcomes that benefit every one of us? How can we 'reward' culture and society for playing a crucial role in mitigating the loneliness and isolation that occurred during the pandemic lockdowns? How do we value the interventions that reduce the future burden of mental health on our health services and on society more generally?



A systems map demonstrating some of the benefits of the Welsh language to a range of socio-economic and well-being outcomes<sup>8</sup>

I don't pretend to have the answers, but I do have some ideas about things that may help inform a conversation I'd like to continue so as to refine possibilities:

1. Carry out a project to collate the peer-reviewed evidence on the benefits of bilingualism, and to try to develop a metric for assessing the value of different interventions to support or facilitate the use of Welsh language. This could be done in partnership with established 'social value' organisations, or as a stand-alone
2. Take the latest evidence from international bodies such as the G20<sup>9</sup>, UNESCO<sup>10</sup> and the OECD<sup>11</sup> that carry out work to examine the accounting of cultural value, and use the best international practices in cultural accounting to supplement existing frameworks in Wales
3. Incorporate the outcomes of the above two projects into the Future Generations guidance to support public sector bodies in understanding and appropriately valuing their contributions to culture, and therefore wider society, economy and well-being



**But the value of a tree, a woodland, a river, an ant colony; these things have intrinsic worth, and the myriad of inter-relationships between them and the rest of the ecosystem (and hence to human society) are truly impossible to calculate.**

We know that experiencing nature, even in the most ephemeral ways, improves physical and mental well-being<sup>13 14</sup>, so there must be an 'in principle' metric that enables us to value the reduced need for medical intervention, that would enable us to argue more effectively for increased green space.

My contention is that, due to an inefficient understanding or methodological approach, we will always be playing 'catch up' on the valuation of our natural resources. This raises the risk of 'playing the game' of an accounting system that systematically undervalues nature, so that decisions continue to be made that jeopardise Wales' ability to provide and accelerate the well-being opportunity for its citizens.

I think the same argument can be made about attempts to assess the economic value of culture. In doing so, we run the risk of reducing the argument for a strong and thriving cultural sector to a game of numbers, where winners and losers are apportioned according to their ability to navigate different accounting systems.

And yet, decisions are made within frameworks that use accounting to apportion effort, impact and resource. If we resile from making arguments within those institutions and frameworks, we might obtain outcomes that are not conducive to creating the conditions that allow a flourishing of both culture and nature.

I can see the inherent contradictions in wanting to value the intangibles such as wonder, companionship, and fulfilment that arise from participation in culture or nature, but for now I can see no way out of the conundrum.

Perhaps by travelling a little further down the road of seeking to assess and account for these things, we can develop our understanding and make new connections between groups, communities and concepts that will strengthen society's appreciation and value of culture and nature.

Nature provides every single one of our most basic human needs; food, shelter, water and air. It provides incalculable joy and wonder. Culture elevates us as thinking, caring beings of community, providing cohesion and enabling us to communicate and coordinate in mind-bogglingly sophisticated ways. In our quest to ascribe value, we must never lose sight of the intangible.

In a previous life, I worked at the European Environment Agency, an organisation which helped translate science into policy. I was part of a fierce internal debate about the merits of trying to assign a value to nature and ecosystem services, and at the time I was convinced that we needed to engage with the world of 'accounting' (in its most general sense) in order to make the case for valuing nature more highly.

Notwithstanding that myself and a colleague were able to demonstrate the staggeringly powerful impacts of the Montreal Protocol on greenhouse gas emissions, as well as showing the terrible price paid for the use of lead in petrol<sup>12</sup>, I now believe that I was wrong. Attempting to value nature, and ecosystem services, feels as though it is a trap laid by an extractive system that attempts to create a framework of worth against which everything can be bought and sold.

But the value of a tree, a woodland, a river, an ant colony; these things have intrinsic worth, and the myriad of inter-relationships between them and the rest of the ecosystem (and hence to human society) are truly impossible to calculate.



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**Professor Juliet P. Davis** MA DipArch (Cantab) PhD (LSE) RIBA  
Head of School, Welsh School of Architecture, Cardiff University

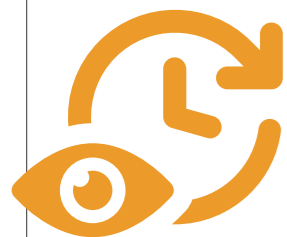
The WSA has long had sustainability and the well-being of both present and future generations at the heart of its mission. This also encompasses a strong commitment to deliver benefits, through research and teaching, to people and places in Wales.

At the end of the hot summer of 2022, with its extreme heatwave and record temperatures, and as energy prices soar, it has never been more important to reiterate this mission. In the year of the School's own centenary, with a hundred years of experience in architectural teaching and research behind us, we look forward to continuing to make a significant contribution to sustainability and well-being in the built environment over the next 100 years and beyond.

Our research is high-quality, the School coming fourth among architecture schools in the UK-wide Research Excellence Framework 2021.



# Facing the future: research and teaching at the Welsh School of Architecture



It is varied, reflecting the interdisciplinarity of architectural studies. Much of it is collaborative, involving public, private and/or third-sector partners as well as researchers from other academic schools and institutions. Allied to this is our close working relationship with the Design Commission for Wales through our external advisory group which has drawn together professionals from Wales and elsewhere in the UK, from a range of design practice and disciplines, to create a dynamic space within which to pursue a common purpose to equip the designers of the future for the environments they will play a vital role in shaping.

Over many years, we have been engaged in research that addresses Wales' need to reduce its carbon footprint and its aspiration to reach net zero by 2050 in response to the impending impacts of climate change. Retrofit projects and new-build prototypes have provided models of low-carbon design for the building industry while also demonstrating how systemic challenges such as energy costs and fuel poverty, deprivation, health and well-being can be tackled together. We explore and test the sustainability credentials of diverse technologies including innovative digital fabrication, circular economy approaches, and construction using Welsh-grown timber. We are also focussed on issues of environmental comfort and health at building and urban scales, modelling heat and air quality for example, for villages, towns and cities.

While much of our work has a strong future-orientation connected to needs for change, the future of the historic built environment in Wales is also of concern for us, situated as we are amid a rich array of landscapes connected to histories of industrial (and post-industrial), maritime and rural economy. This is reflected in diverse practices of historical research, heritage assessment, placemaking and strategies for conservation and/or adaptation in line with wider sustainability goals.

We are also engaged in multiple ways in addressing the challenge of developing inclusive visions for better built environment futures. Current research reflecting this broad goal considers inclusive forms of governance in housing and community spaces, participatory design, accessibility and inclusion in public space, design for quality of life, theories of generosity and care, the design dimensions of elder care, and the housing needs of LGBTQ+ communities and the

deep challenges faced by many who may be less privileged in our society.

We aim to develop the tools, resources and opportunities to enable our students, who come from all over the world, to excel by learning to recognise and respond to issues of sustainability and well-being. We seek to equip students with knowledge and practical skills in their chosen subject areas of course, but we also view as critical the provision of transferable skills to enable them to embrace and lead change, be adaptable and meet future, as yet unknowable, challenges. These include capacities to recognise the ethical implications of practice in architectural and urban design, to undertake rigorous research, to be critical, able to creatively envision and reflect on their experience.

We have a track record of working in and with local communities and industry to develop creative architectural projects which are 'grounded' in the context of emergent local issues. Our teaching studios promote engagement with wide-ranging aspects of sustainability through design – from socially inclusive design to decarbonisation, ageing, regeneration, affordable housing, biodiversity, water, and many other themes – encouraging students to take a stand. Study on our postgraduate programmes, including postgraduate research, exposes students to our cutting-edge research including opportunities to learn from experts in architectural science, computation, machine learning and robotic fabrication in architecture, design research, sustainable building conservation, design practice/ administration and urban design. All our programmes are designed to promote lively debate and encourage exploration of global issues in a local context and we have a thriving post-graduate community.

We see our civic mission as part and parcel of our global outlook and contribution to the broad search for solutions to local and global challenges of the twenty-first century and our commitment to students is one that determines to equip them for the practice and industries within which they will forge careers and effect real-world impact. In this we value our collaborative relationship with the Design Commission which reflects both common goals and a shared vision of the crucial role architecture and design play in our society and its importance in the face of unprecedented challenge.



# Good design must be part of our salvation



## Geraint Talfan Davies

Chair, The Cyfarthfa Foundation

Scarcely can two peacetime decades have been more dissimilar than the first two of the 21st century. The first opened in an intensely celebratory mode, with all the optimism of a new millennium aided and abetted by a fresh government at Westminster raring to reverse the fortunes of its jaded and fractious predecessor – and democratic devolution in heady prospect. In contrast, the second decade saw us labour through prolonged financial austerity, a pandemic with its suspension of so much collective activity, and finally the shadow of war.

In Wales, a referendum in 1997, albeit narrowly won, had offered the prospect of a fundamental break with the centralist past through the creation of a National Assembly. By the summer of 1999 that Assembly was in being, housed in a drably functional building that five years previously had been scheduled to accommodate the Welsh Health Common Services Authority – a quango that John Redwood had swiftly abolished. No matter. For some of us, especially those with painful memories of the 1979 devolution referendum, “Bliss was it in that dawn to be alive”.

More practically, as Wordsworth observed in the days before disillusionment with the French revolution set in,

*“...the meek and lofty  
Did both find, helpers to their heart's desire,  
And stuff at hand, plastic as they could wish;  
Were called upon to exercise their skill,  
Not in Utopia, subterranean fields,  
Or some secreted island, Heaven knows Where!  
But in the very world, which is the world  
Of all of us.....”*

As we approached the new millennium everything seemed possible. The scent of the architectural cause was heavy in the air, aided, it must be said, by waves of national lottery capital monies, and a resultant steady flow of new public buildings across Wales, especially in the cultural sphere.

The atmosphere had been partially soured by much-publicised jostling between the

respective proponents of the Millennium Stadium and proposals for a new opera house in Cardiff. It provoked substantial debate and not a little animosity. The Millennium Commission, while burying the Zaha Hadid opera house scheme on financial grounds, backed the stadium, and the first Rugby World Cup was played there in the autumn of 1999 only a few months after that summer's opening of the National Assembly. By that stage the preparatory work for what became the Wales Millennium Centre (the replacement for the Hadid scheme) was also well under way. Thus did Cardiff become the only city in the UK, outside London, to get two big Millennium projects.

A roll call of architecturally fine new cultural buildings had been in gestation in the latter half of 1990s and came to fruition in the first decade of the new millennium: the National Botanic Garden's Great Glasshouse (Foster & Partners, 2000); the National Waterfront Museum at Swansea (Wilkinson Eyre, 2005); Galeri at Caernarfon (Richard Murphy Architects, 2005); Ruthin Craft Centre (Sergison Bates, 2008); Oriel Mostyn Gallery refurbishment (Ellis Williams, 2010). These were only the most notable among nearly 20 significant cultural projects across Wales. Although some of them predated the formation of the Design Commission, the debate surrounding them provided a substantial fillip to the cause of good design.

However, they also masked a much less happy picture in other parts of the public realm. This fact was particularly apparent to Jonathan Adams, the architect of WMC, who, in the first months of the National Assembly's existence, persuaded the Institute of Welsh Affairs to establish a working group to make the case for a ‘Welsh Commission for Architecture and Design’. He did so in the certain knowledge that it would be given a sympathetic hearing by Sue Essex, at the time the Welsh Government's first Minister for Planning, Environment and Transport.

The IWA convened a working group that included Jonathan himself, Professor John Punter from Cardiff University's School of City and Regional Planning (now the School of Geography) Patrick Hannay, the feisty editor of the architectural



magazine *Touchstone* then at UWIC's School of Art and Design, Bob Croydon, a property professional, and Carole-Anne Davies, then Director of Cardiff Bay Arts Trust, but who would go on in 2003 to become the inaugural Chief Executive of what became the Design Commission for Wales. I chaired the group.

The group's report, *Designing Success*, exhibited all the optimism of that early period: a belief that in "the area of arts and culture we have, perhaps, the greatest capacity for self-determination and the greatest capacity for effecting beneficial change without unrealistic calls for hugely greater resources"; also, a belief that "raising the standard of design and architecture is an essential component of our future competitiveness and our social and economic success as a society." We thought that "it should be a matter of self-respect for this generation, and of our regard for future generations, to wish to see the best protected or enhanced, the worst swept away or improved and tolerance of the mediocre put aside."

The group was also conscious of the fragility of the built environment in Wales, given the preponderance of the small scale. The mediocre standard of new building and environmental design, especially in the poorer parts of the UK, was universally acknowledged, as was the dominance of short-term profit over longer-term interests. Unfamiliarity with higher design standards, it said, was diluting the critical vocabulary "so that the bad becomes acceptable, the average is thought very good, and that which is only slightly better than average is deemed excellent."

The report's practical proposals were more important than the sermonising, however justified the sermon may have been. It urged the creation of a full-time design commission to develop national policy, to advise on best practice and to promote that best practice to the full range of public and private interests. The report also played into the new Assembly's emerging arts and cultural policy, then under review by its Post-16 Education and Training Committee. This wider cultural context was an added fillip, and Sue Essex quickly gave the IWA's proposal her ministerial imprimatur. By 2002 the Design Commission for Wales (DCFW LTD) company was in being.

*Designing Success* had resisted the temptation to suggest that the Commission in Wales become a subset of the Commission on Architecture and the Built Environment (CABE) that had been established by the UK Government

in 1999 in place of the Royal Fine Arts Commission. This was just as well, as in 2010 CABE was dissolved, and a small core of its staff team subsumed into the Design Council as an economy measure. Independent or not, CABE could never have achieved the granularity of approach that the usual small Welsh scale demands and that its own Design Commission has achieved.

Clichéd though it may sound, one cannot avoid that ubiquitous question, has it made a difference? In the sense that we would have been far worse off without the Commission, the answer to that question is, in my mind, undoubtedly yes. That should not be mistaken for faint praise, for such qualifications as are necessary are more to do with the context in which the Commission works than with the way in which it delivers its remit – which has been meticulously professional.

After all, the quality of our built environment is determined by a very wide array of interests and forces: private developers, housebuilders, commercial imperatives (not to be confused with commercial priorities), public authorities (embracing both political will and professional capacity), legal and regulatory frameworks, public appetite and tastes, and cultural trends. It would be unrealistic to expect a single organisation – operating with a remarkable economy – to solve all the planning and design inadequacies that have marked our society for many, many generations, as if with a magic wand. Neither can any design commission, of itself, change the economic climate in which architects, developers and local authorities operate. That climate has, to say the least, been mightily unhelpful for threequarters of Commission's lifetime, not least since 2007-8.

Given this prolonged hostile economic climate, the Commission's first achievement has

**Wales is a country conscious of its identity. Its history has left us with a built environment that spans many generations and centuries.**

been survival – and that is no mean achievement. The Commission has been both a very necessary proclaimer of best practice and a sharp and effective prod to improvement. Secondly, it has also stimulated the voluntary engagement of design professionals in design review and client advisory services, encouraging a process of constructive dialogue and professional self-examination and dissemination, rather than setting itself up in a constantly adversarial pose. That may have been necessary in a small country like Wales, with limited resources upon which to draw – as well as fitting with our collaborative culture – but it has also ensured wider professional support for the Commission's aims.

Design review is the unsung jewel in the Commission's processes. It represents the regular behind-the-scenes grind of assessing the quality of proposals for both private and public buildings and other proposals for the public realm, for rural and urban regeneration, and for infrastructure. It is not a magic show. It cannot transform every sow's ear into a silk purse, but it is a place where improvements can be negotiated without public embarrassment. It is true that some have questioned whether that entirely voluntary process should be replaced with an element of compulsion – a little more stick and less carrot. When one comes face to face with the very worst outcomes in our towns and cities the more directive approach is a temptation, but it would not be without risk – the risk of generating a level of friction that could bring the whole system down. Better to increase the Commission's capacities and enable it to apply the voluntary approach across a wider front.

The relationship with local government has always been key – and tricky. Although the Commission has performed an important developmental and educational role with successive

elected councillors and local government officers – through its training, conferences and seminars – it is unrealistic to expect regular exposure to best practice, however expert and valuable, to offset entirely the effects of a too common emasculation of sound and creative planning by a combination of commercial pressures and a depletion of public sector resources and skills justified by legislative retreat. The effects of the blurring of local authority regeneration, economic development and planning functions and their outputs, has varied and will continue to vary from authority to authority. Engagement is required from more than one side.

As suggested above, in recent decades Wales has seen a steadily growing flow of new buildings, both public and private, but Design Commission staff would be the first to point out that their function is not only to celebrate isolated jewels, but also, more importantly, the broader task of nudging our public authorities and commercial developers – not least, the housebuilders – to create better places, to better serve the needs of residents and to create a public realm that not only works in a functional sense, but that aspires to beauty and can engender quiet pleasure that may be sensed, even when not expressed.

Wales is a country conscious of its identity. Its history has left us with a built environment that spans many generations and centuries. Villages and towns are, inevitably, the result of slow accretions. The legacy of the past contains both good and bad, but we do have much legislation and process to protect the best that past has given us, as well as to enhance future provision. That said, as a society we have been less good than we should have been at ensuring a more widespread quality in what we lay down for future generations.

The Commission is part of a wider and growing policy infrastructure in Wales that includes the Well-being of Future Generations Act, a Future Generations Commissioner and a Welsh Government department designed to encourage holistic approaches to our environment. Regulation and exhortation both have their part to play in a context where the responses of the commercial sector have been so variable. Missionary agencies such as the Design Commission will have an even more important role to play in the years ahead in the face of the existential pressures of climate change. This is not about cosmetics. Good design can and must be part of our salvation.

# Acknowledgments

Comisiwn Dylunio Cymru Design Commission for Wales promotes good design across all sectors, pursuing its vision for a Wales that is a better place.

We provide bespoke Client Support, Training and strategic Design Review Services alongside events, seminars and publications – many of which highlight key issues for achieving design quality and public value in the built environment and support national design and planning policy and guidance in Wales.

This book marks the 20th anniversary of the Design Commission for Wales. It reflects a range of perspectives from members of the staff team and colleagues who have worked to positively influence and advocate for design quality and better development practice in Wales since 2002. It is informed by their direct experience of the realities of regeneration and development practice in Wales.

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