Stop by Request
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Introduction

This presentation sets out to evaluate the role street furniture plays in the contemporary city. Our questioning is drawn from a focus on two historically distinct Scottish cities: Edinburgh and Glasgow. Over the previous century both cities have undergone large-scale modernisation which has to an extent led to the growing sense of homogenisation associated with such locales across the globe and has helped to feed the conviction that all places are the same. Such emotions have been a motivating factor in civic authorities' attempts to pacify businesses of such concerns through the commissioning of designers, artists and architects to create a visually distinct flavour and thus interrupt the repeating patterns, the fractal geometry, common to the postmodern city. Edinburgh and Glasgow are geographically close (approximately 40 miles divides them) yet each place has been branded, according to the needs of postmodern consumption, and given a contemporary identity in order to differentiate itself. Is there then a useful role that street furniture can play on this branded urban stage?

We are keen to debate the role of everyday design, such as street furniture, in terms of the affect it has on the experience of people who work, live and play in these urban spaces. To what extent has the design of, for example, bus shelters and litter bins moved away from the basic requirements of form and function in favour of the accruement of a cultural and economic capital complete with its own lexicon of symbolic meaning? Finally, what should the designer's response be to this situation?

The starting point for this collaborative research began with a questioning of the role of street furniture. Can a bus stop add to a sense of local identity. Does it sit well in terms of form and context with the surrounding space? What is to be gained by the large-scale expense of the stake-holders; the company shareholders and the everyday commuters? Should street furniture design move towards the Modernist aesthetic qualities of function and fitness for

purpose or are the rewards greater (communally speaking) if commissioning bodies continue to engage with what might be termed postmodern kitsch and bricolage? Designers are often asked to develop a common visual language for a product but we question this rational as it will ultimately be placed in a streetscape where the patina of successive initiatives, trends and commercial enterprises are all too evident.

This presentation constitutes the exploratory stage of our research. However, it is hoped that this initial enquiry will provoke a move towards more stimulating and alternative design being thought about and ultimately put out on to the city streets.

What is the role of street furniture, in terms of the affect it has on the experience of people who work, live and play in urban spaces?
Bus stops offer an interesting case to consider in terms of the way we experience a contemporary urban space, they are familiar, yet often unthought about, objects that can drive our daily routines; they dictate which streets we walk along and the shops we most frequently see. Without bus stops, there would be chaos on the route with people wanting to board and alight at any point. The importance of the role of the designer in such quotidian scenes has been clearly observed by Sharon Zukin who comments:

> We owe the clearest cultural map of structural change not to novelists or literary critics, but to architects and designers. Their products, their social roles as cultural producers, and the organisation of consumption in which they intervene create shifting landscapes in the most material sense. As both objects of desire and structural forms, their work directly mediates economic power by both conforming to and structuring norms of market-drive investment, production and consumption. [1]

Yet, despite this key role in our everyday urban life street furniture tends to lack visual clarity. In Glasgow an attempt is made to create a direct sense of locality and relationship with the city through the combination of street furniture and the emblems of bird, tree and fish taken from the city's coat of arms. As can be seen in the lamppost and bus shelters, Figs, 1 and 2 there is

little attempt to co-ordinate the style and use of the symbols and so the attempt at unity is shattered and the impetus lost. This fragmentation could arguably be located within the realm of postmodernity, yet it is largely due to the commissioning system which sees local authorities continually putting out requests for tender and usually opting for the design which is most appealing financially rather than aesthetically. Additionally once the design is agreed and commissioned there is little coordination to regulate subsequent changes or initiatives.

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Fig 1 Lamppost, Cathedral Street, Glasgow

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Fig 2 Detail of logo on Glasgow Bus shelter

Is there a clear argument for developing a strong relationship between locality and design for our street furniture? Does the fit of the design really make a difference to the user?

It can be argued that as contemporary lives become more hectic and stressful so the importance of creating a harmonious environment as a backdrop also increases. The cityscape offers a continuous framework of permanence and change, within this space there are certain elements such as architecture which function as stable signifiers of a city, the owners might change, the interiors evolve but the essential elements of the facade remain. Street furniture should strive to have a similar sense of permanence, the idea of belonging being sourced from a well planned design true to itself rather than to the taste of the commissioning bodies who happen to be in power at the time. The sense of locality is further diminished when a design that is essentially a bad fit within the city is then moved to the suburbs and expected to function in a similar manner as a signpost to the city's branded persona, see Fig 5.

Roger Scruton picks up on this point in his article on Quinlan Terry's development at Richmond Riverside, near London:

> When people refer to the trashy nature of modern street furniture, this is what they really have in mind. [...] the disposable benches, phone booths, lavatories, and bus shelters do not belong to the permanent background of the city but only to the transitory foreground of human bargaining. As a result, our perceptions are confused. For the transitory foreground is occupied by people, not by the city. [...] It floats in a kind of no-man's-land between private foreground and public background, unowned and uncared for, without meaning or authority, adrift in the city like a piece of debris. [2]

Edinburgh and Glasgow are good cases to demonstrate this point, both renewed their franchises post millennium and attracted a number of bids from international street furniture companies. In Edinburgh Clear Channel Adshel won the bid, and in Glasgow J C Decaux were successful. The Edinburgh bus shelter design (Fig 3) was co-created with Architects RMJM and the result was arguably modernist in style, the form being largely dictated by the function.

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Fig 3 Edinburgh city centre bus shelter by Clear Channel Adshell and co-created with Architects RMJM

This neutral style sits well with the Georgian style of Edinburgh's main streets although it works less well in the outlying areas because its scale is too bold for the smaller suburban districts. In contrast J C Decaux's Glasgow design was more playful in its form and no-less excellent in its build quality and detail, but the shelters here often contain elements which parody Glasgow's nineteenth century Gothic and Neo-classical architectural backdrop. On occasion this works extremely well but many of the other shelters are left to jostle for visual attention rather than creating a harmonious backdrop (Fig 4) , and again, in the suburbs this problem is multiplied (Fig 5). In contemporary society the importance of an object's functional and/or technical performance is often lost because such objects have now become a message or a concept, not devoid of meaning but rather overburdened with meanings.

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Fig 4 Glasgow city centre, bus shelter by J C Decaux

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Fig 5 Glasgow suburb, bus shelter by J C Decaux

If bus stops are such a transitory part of our urban visual culture, then one must ask why designers are commissioned to spend creative energy and time on them?

The simple answer to this is that with regard to the UK, bus shelters are generally commissioned by local authorities whose values are not centred on issues of good design practice and who do not consider the overall flow of design throughout the space. Baudrillard touches on a similar idea in his discussion of Interior Design when he comments that: 'it is the whole world of *Stimmung* that has disappeared, the world of 'natural' harmony between movements of the emotions and the presence of things: an internalised atmosphere as opposed to the externalised atmosphere of modern 'interiors'. [3] He goes on to argue that the notion of value has been changed and that society today is not interested in intimacy but rather in being given information and messages to inform us of such value. 'Today, value resides neither in appropriation nor in intimacy but in information, in inventiveness, in control, in a continual openness to objective messages' [4] What we are looking at is essentially the notion of design as a basis for financial gain, yet frequently its importance is simultaenously relegated. As Sharon Zukin comments "Cities are often criticized because they represent the basest instincts of human society. They are built versions of Leviathan and Mammon, mapping the power of the bureaucratic machine or the social pressures of money. " [5]

What is the role of street furniture – bus stops, litter bins and lamp posts?

If we accept the argument that street furniture is often over-burdened with attempts at meaning would it not be better to concentrate on the grace and elegance that comes with a more focussed design aesthetic, thus creating a unified system to be used in cities without the stress of questioning its ability to perform at any other level? As Alexander pointed out in 1964:

''Every design problem begins with an effort to achieve fitness between two entities: the form in question and its conext. The form is the solution to the problem; the context defines the problem. The form is a part of the problem over which we have control. The context is that part of the problem which puts demands on the form. Fitness is a relation of the mutual acceptability between these two.' [6]

There needs to be a greater recognition that designers are not just shapers and stylers of value, but that their skills lie in the ability to innovate and create and that they can do much to inform how we engage with the world around us.

An interesting example of the improvement a co-ordinated approach to design has to offer to an urban environment can be found in the work of the Grand Central Partnership (GCP) which was founded in 1985 in Manhattan, New York, and which comprises a mix of city officials, local business people and property owners and tenants who share the aim of revitalising the area (Fig 6).

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Fig 6 Grand Central Partnership, Manhattan

The GCP website comments that this rejuvenation was: 'centered around streetscape improvement, public safety, sanitation, and visitor services, that eventually restored vigor and diversity to the area'.[7] GCP has focused on a long term comprehensive, co-ordinated improvement project and has been responsible for dramatically altering the area, decluttering the streets and creating a strong sense of local engagement:

> 'Over the past decade, GCP has literally changed the face and the look of Midtown Manhattan by implementing a comprehensive capital improvement program that creates an aesthetically pleasing and welcoming community atmosphere in the Grand Central neighborhood. GCP's capital improvement program has been responsible for the design and installation of street furniture, new state-of-the-art streetlights that dramatically brighten the sidewalks and streets of the Grand Central neighborhood, easy-to-read street signs, and decorative sign display frames and poles, as well as the construction and maintenance of more

than 100 accessible granite street corners.' [8]

Edinburgh could well benefit from such a cohesive project, in November 2007 the Architecture and Design Scotland's published its review of the current Edinburgh tram network project and comments on concerns that the project lacks design vision and that: 'the design approach appeared to have been dictated by technical engineering requirements, and that the procurement route seemed to be led by financial, and not design, considerations, [...] The project lacks joined up thinking, and a lack of management is evident in the approach to funding, the integration with retail, streetscape or other initiatives'. [9]

Conclusion

The aim of this research process is to identify a useful strategy for street furniture design. Having begun to address these key questions there is a case to be made for finding a middle ground. The monolithic universality of Modernism is clearly not the answer, but nor is the fragmentation and visual hubbub created by the postmodern city. What we should be striving for is Street furniture which is creative yet functional, not semantically overwhelming, yet capable of suggesting to the user that it has a tradition that it is proud of and speaks of a locality which they too should be happy to acknowledge and belong.

References

[1] Sharon Zukin, *Landscapes of Power: from Detroit to Disney World*, 1991, p39

[2] Roger Scruton 'Why Lampposts and Phone Booths Matter' *City Journal Summer* 1996, at http://www.city-journal.org/html/6_3_a1.html

[3] Jean Baudrillard, *The System of Objects*, Verso, 1996, p23

[4] Jean Baudrillard, *The System of Objects*, Verso, 1996, p23

[5] S Zukin *The culture of cities,* 1995, p1

[6] Alexander, C *From Notes on the synthesis of form,* Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press,1964, pp15-16

[7] http://www.grandcentralpartnership.org/who_we_are/history_now.asp

[8] http://www.grandcentralpartnership.org/what_we_do/build.asp

[9] http://www.ads.org.uk/what_we_do/design_review/reports/230_edinburgh-tram-network

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