Designing Streets for People

Barry Sellers

Senior Planner, Wandsworth Borough Council,
London, UK.

Abstract

This paper is based on an article prepared for a forthcoming book entitled 'Creating Sustainable Transport'. It represents a summary of a report entitled 'Designing Streets for People[1]' produced by the Urban Design Alliance, a multi-professional working group. The report inquires into why many public spaces, particularly streets, are failing to meet the needs of people. Evidence was submitted to the working group from academics, transport operators, professionals and campaign organisations about a range of issues concerning the design, management and maintenance of the public realm. The evidence revealed that the management processes that impact upon the street are not properly co-ordinated. What has been lacking is a holistic vision. In order to realise this vision the report suggests using the Street Excellence Model (SEM). In essence this is a management tool to enable public organisations to rigorously challenge their existing policies, processes and delivery systems as they affect the public realm. A key policy vehicle of the SEM is the Public Realm Strategy. Its preparation requires public administrations to co-ordinate their policies across service, budgetary and professional boundaries in focusing on how people use public spaces. Empowering people by involving them in the process can improve public acceptability and accountability. The report identifies the Quality Street Partnership as a product of this process. It is quite simply an agreement between the users of a public space and the public administration managing and maintaining it. This agreement may contain design and management codes that would apply in the use and transformation of public space. The report recognises that further research is required in taking the SEM forward and looks to a number of professional, academic and government organisations to take on board its recommendations.

Introduction

The report 'Designing Streets for People'[1] was published as a basis for consultation in June 2000 by the Urban Design Alliance in association with the Institution of Civil Engineers. A small inter-professional working group convened in 1999 to review the role of streets within the urban environment and how, with recognition of their changing role, they can be designed to be more responsive to peoples' needs.

The review also needed to address several strands of emerging issues emanating from the Urban White Paper 'Our towns and cities: the future'[2], the work of the Urban Task Force, 'Towards an Urban Renaissance'[3], 'Planning for the Communities of the Future'[4], 'A Better Quality of Life'[5], the 'National Strategy for Neighbourhood Renewal'[6] (launched by the Government in January 2001) and the framework for modernising local government. Cognisance was also taken of parallel work undertaken by English Heritage's 'Streets for All'[7] and the former Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions' 'By Design'[8] and 'Encouraging Walking'[9].

Evidence and Key Findings

The initial work drew upon evidence of issues raised by local authorities, followed by the presentation of evidence to the group from practitioners, academics and representatives from a number of organisations. The presentation of evidence was in the form of written, visual and oral submissions. These focussed on the changing role of the street and highlighted a spectrum of problems and issues that were emerging with respect to the processes of management, design and maintenance of streets.

Over the last few decades the debate about the role, use and design of our streets has shifted from rigid adherence to standards and criteria favouring the motor vehicle to one where there is an increasing recognition that urban streets need to be more responsive to the needs of people. Once people can begin to claim space they attract more people. The emergence of the cafŒ society

at the end of the twentieth century witnessed the transformation of many of our urban spaces for *al fresco* eating and drinking *a la* continental Europe.

Evidence was presented about the lack of co-ordination of the various processes that govern the management, design and maintenance of the public realm. This has led to a proliferation of visual clutter, particularly signing due to poorly thought out schemes, inadequate standards of maintenance exacerbated by the frequency of openings by utility contractors, and generally a lack of consideration for the pedestrian. The evidence revealed entrenched attitudes by some professionals and fragmentation of responsibilities with regard to managing the public realm. The group also looked at methods of how businesses manage complex processes.

Vision for the Street

The report recognised that if we are to achieve the urban renaissance of the public realm then we must consider a vision for the street that acknowledges the needs and involvement of people. Management processes need to be reviewed and refreshed to ensure that activities affecting the street undertaken by different agencies are properly co-ordinated. Strategic policy guidance should not be narrowly focussed but co-ordinate action across agency and professional boundaries. Legislation needs to be reformed and updated. Management, professional and technical skills need to be re-examined. This vision needs to bring about excellence in the quality of the public realm.

Street Excellence Model

The Business Excellence Model[10] developed by the European Foundation for Quality Management (EFQM®) formed the basis of the 'Street Excellence Model' (SEM). The Business Excellence Model is a practical framework that helps organisations, both public and private; apply fundamental principles of good management. At its heart is a set of universally applied criteria that have been developed following analysis of world-class

organisations. The Model is a non-prescriptive framework concerned with the pursuit of excellence, and is based on nine criteria (see fig. 1).

The SEM represents the application of the EFQM® to the management processes that impact upon our streets. The Model potentially provides a rigorous management tool for evaluating the performance of an organisation in delivering its responsibilities in respect of the management and co-ordination of activities affecting the public realm. It can be linked to Best Value, Investors in People and Benchmarking, as its emphasis is on continuous self-assessment through performance review. It has the potential, through the identification of meaningful and robust performance measures and outcomes, to take on board the processes identified in the 'Designing Streets for People'[1] report, in achieving the 'vision' for streets in the future. Amongst others this would include processes for co-ordinating and integrating management, design and maintenance of streets, for collaborative and inter-disciplinary working and for involving the community. The SEM has the benefit of challenging the historic mind-set underlying current practice. The report recognises that the application of the Model does however need to be developed.

Urban Management and Governance

All too often the management processes that impact upon the street are not co-ordinated. There are a considerable number of organisations (e.g. telecommunications operators) whose activities involve installing apparatus in streets. They pursue their activity from a single-focus perspective. What is missing is a holistic vision for the street. Better co-ordination could lead to sharing of infrastructure for services below ground and improved visual integration within the street scene.

Public authorities in good faith commission a variety of different strategies, on walking, cycling, parking, signing, traffic-calming and so on but often fail to adequately make the necessary connections between them, and indeed in some instances there may even be elements of conflict. Public authorities need to respond to the challenge of joined up thinking on planning and transportation issues. The task of co-ordinating decisions on policy, budgeting and resource allocation is inevitably made more difficult if different departments and committees deal with planning and transportation matters.

One of the elements identified as part of the SEM is the **Public Realm Strategy.** It represents one of the potential tools enabling local authorities to establish a clear framework for co-ordinating and integrating various policies and strategies for all aspects of the public realm (see fig. 2). Their preparation featured in the Urban Task Force's report[3]. It says 'a Public Realm Strategy which requires local authorities to plan comprehensively for all aspects of the public realm, should either form part of the Local Plan or should have a clear relationship with it, possibly in the form of Supplementary Planning Guidance'. The Task Force's recommendation in this area was to 'require local authorities to prepare a single strategy for their public realm and open space, dealing with provision, design, management, funding and maintenance'.
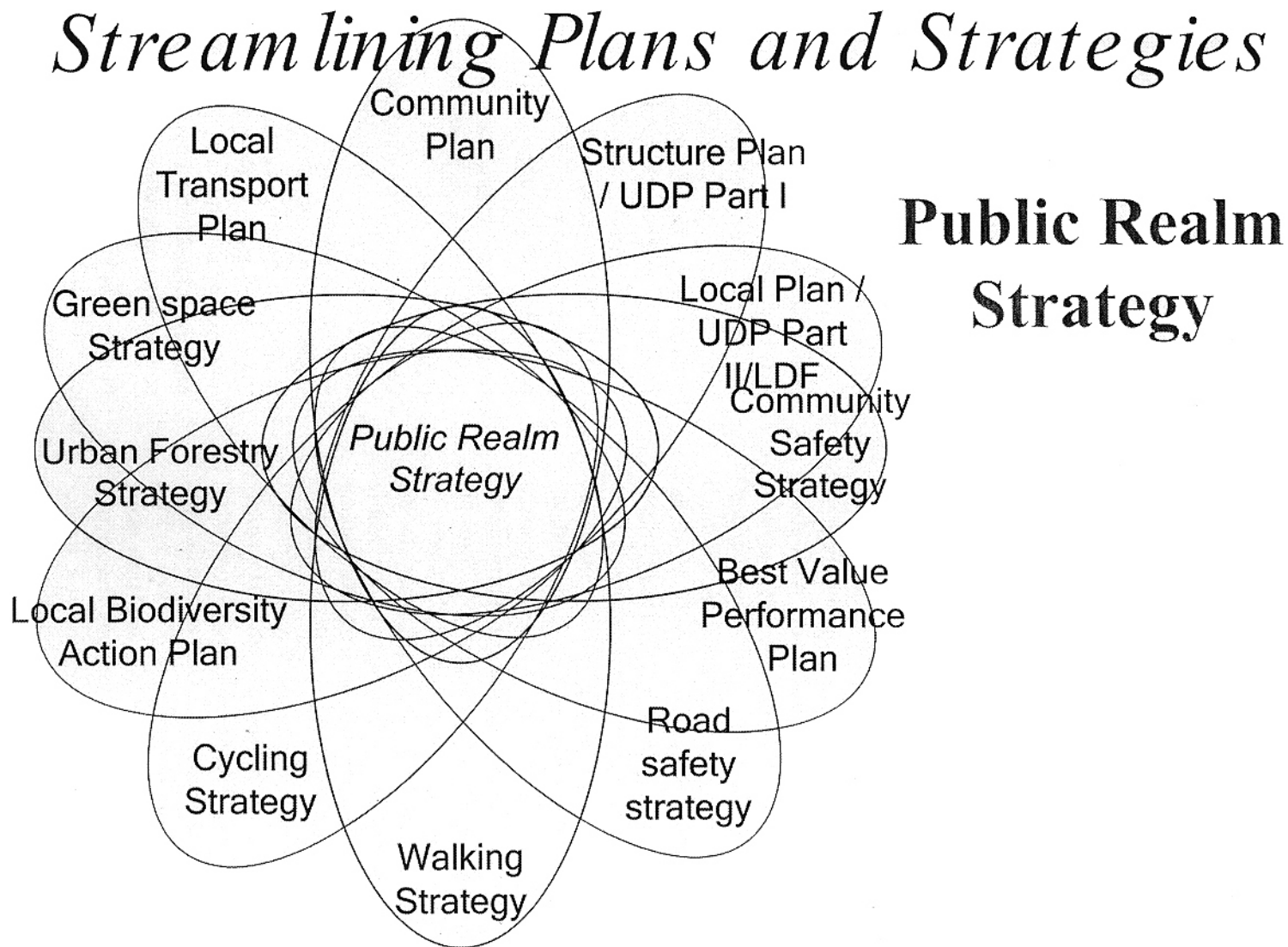
Public Realm Strategies may be prepared as part of an Urban Design Framework or Community Strategy for town centres, town extensions and neighbourhood renewal. They should focus on the complex and multi-layered nature of the issues that impact on the public realm, which are not the responsibility of any single profession but demand an approach that is inter-disciplinary and collaborative. Involving the business and resident community in their preparation is critical to engender a sense of ownership of the process.

The Government's Comprehensive Spending Review in 2001 targeted the improvement of public spaces. Improving public spaces is one of seven cross cutting reviews that will shape the Government's spending commitments for the next decade. Sir Stuart Lipton, Chairman of the Commission for Architecture and the Built Environment (CABE) has said in response, 'Improving the quality of the public realm is a central issue for Government and shows their thinking about the importance.

figure 1 : Sreet Excellence Model

Leadership	People	Processes	People Results	Key Performance Results
	• Approriate staff skills&awareness	Establishment of processes to:	Effective management processes	
	• Integrated officer action across relevant agencies	• Co-ordinate action	Well trained & motivated staff	• Achievment of capital & revenue targets
Clarity of	• Innovation	• Monitor	Integrated action	• Good
• leadership at	• Recognition of	activities &	Understanding of the	comparison with
Member &	effective action	effectiveness	street & sense of	other authorities
officer level		in achieving	empowerment	• Has met
• Agreed vision		vision		performance targets
& mission	**Policy & Strategy**	• Engage	**Customer Results**	on all aspects of
statement	• Up to date Public	stakeholders	• Community	maintenace
• Co-ordinated	Realm Strategy	& community	satisfaction with	• Increase level of
management	• Quality Street	& get their	street management	local satisfacation
• Ownership of	Improvement Plan	views	• Feeling of safety &	with quality of street
vision by	• Integration into other	• Undertake	well-being in street	scene
stakeholders	policy / strategies	evaluation	• Ease of access to	• Effective
	• Clear performance	• Communicate	key responsible staff	stakeholder
	indicators	to partners &	• Street fulfills function	engagement
		stakeholders		• Confidence,
				viability & vitality
	Partnership & Resources		**Impact on Society**	• Public & private
				investment
	• Quality Street Partnerships		• Contribution to the image of the area	
	• Integrated bidding for funding		• Ability to attract investment	
	• Neighbourhood Action Partnerships		• Empowered community	
	• Street Audits		• Closer community	
	• Street Management Codes&Agreement		• Attractive street	
			• More sustainable	

Streamlining Plans and Strategies

figure 2 : Public Realm Strategy

Public Realm Strategy

Community Plan

Local Transport Plan

Structure Plan / UDP Part I

Green space Strategy

Local Plan / UDP Part II/LDF

Urban Forestry Strategy

Public Realm Strategy

Community Safety Strategy

Local Biodiversity Action Plan

Best Value Performance Plan

Cycling Strategy

Road safety strategy

Walking Strategy

of public spaces'. Public space will now be a key issue for Government Departments, who will have to demonstrate what they are doing to make better public spaces. Therefore local authorities bidding for funding are likely to be better placed if they have a public realm strategy in place. What should a public realm strategy include, and who should prepare it? All too often public realm spending has been focussed on dealing with single issues and has frequently failed to demonstrate joined up thinking.

A Public Realm Strategy needs to focus on people; their activities, how they use public spaces and how those public spaces interface with their homes, workplaces and places of entertainment. A key component that connects these is walking. In the past city administrations have produced a proliferation of data about the problems of vehicular traffic, but what about pedestrian needs? How often do they record the numbers, flow and behaviour of pedestrians? Whilst walking is a mode of transport, it is much more than this. Streets may be likened to the corridors of a building. To design the corridors alone would be to ignore the connections to the rooms and the relationship of the rooms to one another and the activities that go on in them. Walking is a recreational as well as a social activity. Walking is not just about improving the quality of the floorscape and access for people with disabilities, important as they are. To concentrate on pavements and highways for the activity of walking is to ignore the whole complex nature of the activity itself. For walking is a link between activities and the connections between those activities is a fundamental consideration in the design of cities. How many times do we see developments approved whereby the pedestrian is required to walk around the back in order to enter buildings, rather than a direct connection with the street frontage? How many new developments include tortuous street layouts that involve pedestrians walking longer distances, or indeed inducing them to use the car, even for short journeys. If we design streets for people we engender a different sense of place compared to designing streets according to traffic criteria.

Various studies have looked at optimum walking distances. These have shown that a distance of around one kilometre is considered reasonable for people to walk to a railway station or bus stop. This equates to around ten minutes walking time. The pattern of streets that maximises peoples' choice in moving around a city and minimises distance travelled is a fine grid network. The finest grained grid realistically attainable gives a block size of around 50 metres by 100 metres. Contrast this with many recent layouts designed according to traffic criteria that restrict access on to certain parts of the network, and are often arranged around groups of culs-de-sac. These layouts limit peoples' choice in moving around cities.

- Designing streets in accordance with criteria that assesses the needs of pedestrians gives a more human dimension to places, often overlooked during the past few decades. For even in the established urban areas we see that the pedestrian has been given insufficient consideration in the past. The evidence for this is a focus on dealing with traffic congestion as part of traffic management measures, but pedestrians also suffer from crowded pavements and queuing.

- Roads have been widened and fashioned in ways that result from rigidly adhering to traffic criteria.
- Pedestrians are often forced into cramped areas 'protected' from fast moving vehicles, and are required to cross busy junctions in stages in staggered formation rather than in a straight line in a single phase.
- The street scene is characterised by a plethora of signing and way-marking primarily aimed at facilitating motorists to navigate and park more easily.

Putting people's needs at the heart of any Public Realm Strategy will bring into play many other issues. It is important to bring out the connections between them. These issues include:

- Public safety and security.
- Walking and sitting.

- Access to public transport.
- Lighting.
- Public Art.
- Traffic speed.
- Parking.
- Cycle provisions.
- Loading and unloading.
- Signing.
- *Al fresco* eating and drinking.
- Location and design of building entrances.
- Cultural events.
- Access for people with disabilities.
- Pollution and air quality.
- Children's play.
- Trees and soft landscape.
- Furnishing public spaces.
- Quality of maintenance of public spaces.

Several local authorities are in the forefront of considering the needs of people in designing streets. These include York, with its successful 'Footstreets' project aimed at making the shopping environment more attractive; and Birmingham where two new civic squares have been created, breaking through the barrier of the ring road to create pedestrian crossings and improving the canal sides. Wandsworth Borough Council has prepared a walking strategy[11] and Oxford City Council has published a public realm strategy[12]. Elsewhere Lancashire County Council and Edinburgh City Council are producing policy documents aimed at improving the needs of pedestrians.

A Public Realm Strategy should involve the local community in its preparation and be subject to public scrutiny as part of any Development Plan Inquiry process. At present matters which are the responsibility of the Highway Authority cannot be legally challenged as part of this process as the Inspectors are only able to deal with land use matters. It is suggested that the Public Realm Strategy should feature as part of the Community Strategy that will be the over-arching local authority policy vehicle with which both the proposed Local Development Frameworks (announced in the Planning Green Paper 'Planning: Delivering a Fundamental Change'[13]) and Local Transport Plans must conform.

The need to empower the community is taken further in the report as part of Modernising Community Governance. It highlights the complexity of dealing with the interaction of the various activities that are permitted, or require permission to use streets, as well as the installation of street furniture. Local authority attitudes and responsibilities towards the public realm have received media criticism. This is as a result of the clutter of signs, frequency of utility openings and quality of reinstatement, insufficient allocation of space for pedestrians and cyclists, poor quality of maintenance, lack of civic pride, street crime and dealing with the placement of tables and chairs on pavements outside restaurants.

The report advocates adopting in particular areas a more proactive approach. There is a perception by the community that a single point of contact for services affecting the street is desirable. Some local authorities such as Wandsworth Borough Council have introduced a 'One-stop' counter to help co-ordinate information and advice to the community.

The report suggests that Street Management and Design Codes could be prepared for individual streets. The Codes could prescribe certain activities that could take place within streets replacing the need for the owners of individual premises to apply for planning permission or a licence. This method would require a change in legislation but is aimed at simplifying procedures whilst making the process more accountable by involving the stakeholders. This partnership with the stakeholders of the street is referred to in the report as a Quality Street Partnership. This is quite simply an agreement between the users and the local authority, which would set down the conditions applying in respect of specified activities. Encouraging the involvement of the stakeholders in the improvement of streets can have positive benefits. They are more likely to volunteer their own time, effort and resources if they can see the benefits of that investment. They may participate in a systematic assessment of their street, with professional consultants as part of a street audit or 'Placecheck' initiative.

Following successful pilot projects the latter went nationwide with the first National Placecheck Day in September 2001.

Exploring creative ways of funding improvements to the public realm is central to the process. The SEM model has the potential to enable local authorities to critically examine whether budgets are being used economically, efficiently, effectively, equitably and consistent with good environmental management. Partnership funding arrangements in association with the setting up of Business Improvement Districts (BID's), neighbourhood renewal, 'Home Zones' and Single Regeneration Budget initiatives, involving businesses, the local community, local authorities and other agencies should be pursued.

The report advocates revising legislation. Highway legislation has evolved over the last century primarily to cater for the needs of the motor vehicle. Today we recognise that far greater priority needs to be given to pedestrians, cyclists and the community who are directly affected by street activities. There needs to be a shift in emphasis to reflect emerging attitudes so that, for example, a duty of care is imposed on motorists for the safety of pedestrians and cyclists. Licensing of activities and controlling utility company operations are other areas where reform of legislation is needed. New regulations often require more signing. To avoid this additive process we need to think differently about our streets and critically examine the need for signing and lining. There are exemplar schemes at home and abroad that seek to 'break the mould' and overcome the 'clamps' to good urban design. Rochester High Street (fig. 3) shows an example of what can be achieved.

Finally the report identifies deficiencies in training, at a professional level where skills are required to cut across traditional disciplines as well as training for those implementing schemes. In response to the first a cross-disciplinary management qualification (MBA in Urban Street Management) is advocated to focus on urban management and governance, design and development. It should include the Street Excellence Model, Best Value, cross-service

delivery and budgeting as well as skills in leadership, community involvement and empowerment. A deficiency in urban design skills was identified particularly within local authorities. There were also shortcomings in the teaching of urban design skills within professional courses dealing with the environment. A further aspect concerned the quality of workmanship on street works. The report advocated the need to train people in street craft, notably traditional masonry and paviour skills, which could form part of the NVQ system. This skills deficiency has been endorsed by the findings in CABE's report on 'Urban Design Skills'[14].

The report recognises that the application of the Street Excellence Model (SEM) requires further development in order to test more fully its potential in the area of urban street management. In this respect it suggests a broadly based working partnership be set up

figure 3 : Rochester High Street

involving UDAL, DETR, local government, businesses, academics, the British Quality Foundation and community representation. The Model recognises the need for local government to pursue excellence in the delivery of services to the community. The setting up of 'one-stop' services providing a single point of contact to

enable the public to interface directly with the local authority on matters relating to the street is advocated. More work is needed on the mechanisms for involving people to enable them to participate more fully in ways to 'refresh' the areas in which they live through quality street partnerships. The findings of the Inquiry recognised that some of our legislation needs modernising so that it is more responsive to the needs of pedestrians, cyclists and people with mobility impairment. Professionals need to equip themselves with new skills, and graduate courses in the environmental professions need to embrace urban design as part of their core curricula. They must also recognise the need to think differently by collaborating across professional boundaries and to view the built environment in a holistic way, be more pro-active rather than reactive. The opening up of spaces such as Somerset House (fig. 4) represents a step in the right direction. There is also a need to foster innovation and test ideas through demonstration projects in order to help bring about a step-change in thinking.

Evidence of the House of Commons Select Committee

The UDAL working group, along with the Institution of Civil Engineers, were invited to submit evidence to the House of Commons Environment, Transport and Regional Affairs Committee. The evidence was presented to Members of the Committee in June 2001 as part of the proceedings on 'Walking in Towns and Cities'[15]. The Committee made a number of recommendations, three of which were in direct response to the evidence presented from the 'Designing Streets for People' Inquiry.
- That each local authority establishes a small team of experts in street design working with engineers and planners on projects affecting streets and new development.
- That guidance should be issued promoting the co-ordination of all work affecting the function and appearance of streets and public spaces and sets out best practice mechanisms for implementation and monitoring.

- That the quality of engineering work be raised by the introduction of, and subsequent requirement for, qualifications. Contracting supervision and quality assurance procedures should be tightened.

The Government's Response

In November 2001 the Government responded to the Environment, Transport and Regional Affairs Committee's Report. They welcomed the detailed considerations that the Committee had given to the subject of walking in towns and cities. The Government made a number of recommendations in its response[16]. These included:

- 'A philosophy of danger reduction should replace the prevailing orthodoxy of accident reduction. It can be more effective in reducing pedestrian casualties, leads to a better urban design and is more convenient for pedestrians. As part of this shift, guard railings and staggered crossings, which are barely used on the Continent, should be scrapped where traffic speeds can be reduced'.
- 'Street management is uncoordinated and suffers from the involvement of a plethora of professionals. We endorse those recommendations of the Designing Streets Inquiry, which apply to the establishment of street management strategies, street management codes and design codes'.

figure 4 : Somerset House

- 'We recommend that each local authority establish a small team of experts in street design who could work with highway engineers on all projects affecting streets and with planners on new developments'.
- 'We recommend that consolidated guidance be issued, which promotes the coordination of all work affecting the function and appearance of streets and public spaces and sets out best practice and mechanisms for implementation and monitoring'.

The Government also mentioned in its response that it had commissioned the Commission for Architecture and the Built Environment (CABE) to carry out a research project to consider and define the primary influences on the achievement of quality in the streetscape, what the barriers to achieving them are, and what mechanisms there are for exerting influence to improve standards. CABE commissioned consultants Alan Baxter Associates and EDAW to prepare this report, 'Paving the Way'[17], which was published in 2002. Since the publication of the report CABE have recognised that their remit was drawn rather tightly and have established CABE Space, a division of their organisation specifically tasked towards improving the quality of public spaces in cities. They will be seeking partnerships with local authorities and other organisations in order to stimulate a renaissance of the public realm.

Conclusion

The Designing Streets for People Inquiry has been successful in leading the way in challenging the organisational arrangements of public authorities to achieve better co-ordination in the design, management and maintenance of streets. It suggests the key to this is through the use of the Street Excellence Model that provides a coherent framework for measuring the performance of an organisation. It is hoped that this Model will be developed further and that public authorities will pilot this as part of their Best Value reviews. Certainly it has already prompted some organisations to reappraise their attitudes and question their organisational arrangements in dealing with matters affecting the street.

The Audit Commission in their report entitled 'Street Scene'[18] has recently endorsed the recommendations of the 'Designing Streets for People Inquiry'.

Given their influence on the Best Value process it is hoped that many local authorities will heed the recommendations of the Designing Streets for People Inquiry and Government's response, and orchestrate a step-change in their corporate thinking. The ultimate goal is achieving excellence in the quality of the public realm.

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