

# The potential application of urban design codes in the Maltese planning system

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## INTRODUCTION

The Maltese built environment is experiencing challenging times. This is a legacy of a multitude of circumstances – uncontrolled building activity in the recent decades, the misuse and misinterpretation of vague planning policies and the absence of appropriate design policies or guidance.

Urban design currently plays a limited role on the Maltese planning agenda; numerous urban design policies, principles and elements are absent from site-specific Local Plans and the recent Development Control Policy and Design Guidance 2005 (DC2005) produced by the Malta Environment and Planning Authority (MEPA). The results of this deficiency in the Maltese planning system are reflected in the ever-increasing incompatibility of environments, as the dense urban fabric becomes more complex with increasing projects.

At a time when one of the fundamental aims of urban design – to create buildings and spaces that “combine to form an attractive public realm... which can be seen and enjoyed by the public” (Tibbalds,

p105) – seems to have been lost, a design response is needed to fill this gap and to instigate high quality urban design in the public realm. In this article it will be argued that urban design codes could be the best response to this deficiency. The aim of such codes would be to guarantee a number of urban design objectives and elements outlined for a locality or a Local Plan level.

The article presents the salient issues of a MSc (Town and Country Planning) dissertation carried out by the author at the Bartlett School of Planning, University College London. It highlights the characteristics and benefits of urban design codes, proposes a structure and potential content for Maltese design codes, discussing some urban design elements that these would include, and identifies situations where codes could be used in the short term together with the long-term implications of codes.

## Some initial thoughts

Note that the focus is on ‘urban design codes’. The emphasis is deliberate, to exclude architectural codes while empha-

sising the urban context of various issues. Urban design codes address particular urban elements that together compose the public realm. The discussion of these individual elements continuously refers to the urban dimension without entering into their specific merits. The study is therefore concerned with finding those objective elements that can be coded, as opposed to subjective aesthetic judgments or features. This does not exclude the possibility of addressing basic architectural issues in design codes produced for specific contexts, but this would be unique to such localities.

This concern with ‘townscape’ therefore shifts the attention from individual buildings to the spaces defined by these buildings. It further suggests the need for visionary plans, or three-dimensional spatial plans, which can better treat the relationships between buildings and the spaces that surround them, while giving greater importance to the buildings’ massing composition. Such plans should form an integral component of an urban design framework together with the codes themselves (CABE 2004b, p16).

## THE NEED FOR AN URBAN DESIGN APPROACH

### A rapidly changing character

The rapid urbanisation over the past forty years has had consequential changes in settlement patterns. Families have moved out of their houses in the older, densely populated localities to apartments in lower-density suburbs. The structure of these suburbs is amorphous, lacking identifiable centres and edges or defined public space (MEPA 2004a, p11). Within existing localities (including UCAs), the “cacophony of designs” (MEPA 2004b, p101) of newer infill developments has been detrimental to the traditional Maltese streetscapes, heavily conflicting with the more vernacular building typologies contained therein. In both new and existing settlements, the abundance of garages catering for increased car usage has also had damaging consequences on the design of individual façades and streetscapes (MEPA 2004b, p101).

In recent years there have further been frequent requests to demolish vernacular buildings within UCAs, replacing them

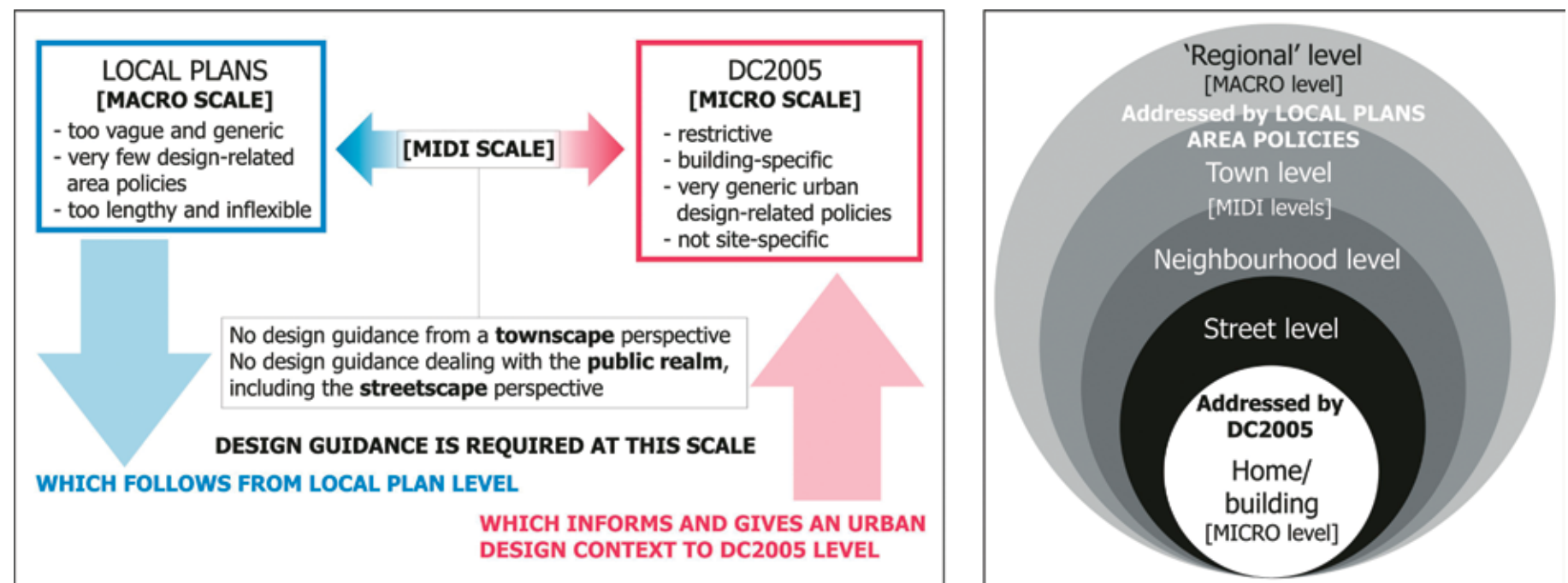


Figure 1: The macro-micro mismatch (left) and missing gaps in local policy-making (right, adapted: Barton et al, p67)

with higher blocks that are insensitive to the existing context (MEPA 2004b, p104). These buildings collectively constitute the historical urban fabric and character of the entire locality. Such demolition evidences the failure of existing regulations, resulting in situations where old houses become flanked by appallingly high party walls, as is the case with Sliema.

### Large developments and compromised skylines

Given Malta's scale, large developments have considerable repercussions on a significant area. Some recent sizeable developments were simply architectural statements transformed into inward-looking gated communities with no positive contribution to the public realm. In addition, the recent approval of a number of tower blocks, facilitated by vague planning criteria, has become another crucial and pressing issue. DC2005 forbids the application of the Floor Area Ratio (FAR) when new heights are not "compatible with... the character of the surrounding areas" (MEPA 2005, p27). Localities not covered by this vague restriction must now consequently house high-rise structures.

### The deficiency of current planning documents

According to the Urban Topic Paper (UTP) (MEPA 2003), Local Plans should "(D) Include urban design/townscape concepts for the area and its surroundings" (MEPA 2003, p29, added emphasis).

A content analysis of these documents was carried out by the author, together with an examination of design policies at a more detailed level through DC2005. The analysis revealed that these documents are an inadequate source of reference for urban design issues, a fact further confirmed by the UTP itself (MEPA 2003, p33): "No Plan really develops urban design or townscape concepts..."

When present, the urban design terms and concepts are generally poorly defined and not aided by illustrations. Statements within the initial part of DC2005, such as "Contribute positively to the local environment" (MEPA 2005, p10); "Be compatible with its context" (MEPA 2005, p10); and "Amenity is not adversely affected" (MEPA 2005,

p13), become so vague as to be virtually meaningless. This phenomenon also renders these documents inadequate for the purpose of subsequent development control procedures.

The UTP further recognises the need for "... a quantitative and qualitative approach to building heights and density, which links with urban design issues in Local Plans ... and provides a policy framework for dealing with these based on the identification of character areas (MEPA 2003, p191, added emphasis) – a point that further confirms the pressing need for an urban design agenda.

The analysis also highlights a missing link between the 'macro' (regional) scale at Local Plan level and the 'micro' (building) scale at DC2005 level. No form of urban design documentation addresses the scales in between, ranging from 'street' to 'town' levels and verging on the 'regional' level itself (Figure 1).

### What is an urban design code?

An urban design code is a detailed and prescriptive form of design guidance (CABE 2004a, p108) establishing fundamental design components, attributes or principles as part of an urban design

framework, development brief or masterplan (Carmona et al 2003, p251). In physical terms, a code is likely to comprise a three-dimensional masterplan of a development area or locality, detailed illustrations that develop the established design principles and written requirements (CABE 2003, p3).

A study of existing codes would reveal a number of variations in their remit of interest (ranging from a group of buildings to an entire area), their level of prescription and their actual form. In a sense, a code is a document as much as it is a process – one could effectively think of a code as a mechanism that implements design guidelines and/or standards in practice (CABE 2004b, p15). It translates a vision for an area into an operational framework that can be built.

Importantly, codes are formulated in support of an urban vision – they specify individual parts and their relation to each other, but the final outcome is undefined. Furthermore, while codes define visions for places and outline important design principles, individual designers are involved in implementing them and providing their own interpretations of them, thus generating variety (Figure 2).

### How can codes be beneficial?

Design codes can offer designers a source of good guidance. The experience of codes in numerous other countries reveals that, by establishing design principles from an early stage and specifying a degree of standards, such codes have had a threefold effect:

1. They have improved and enforced design policies, making them less vague and giving them a more contextual scenario and practical application.
2. They have guaranteed that design outcomes across an entire development are of high quality.
3. They have offered a degree of certainty to developers and officials alike as well as the community at large. A faster (and fairer) decision process has therefore been guaranteed following agreement and compliance with the codes.

In this sense, therefore, an urban design code becomes a binding contract between a developer and

a locality – it gives the developer certain rights and requires in return the fulfilment of certain standards. In this way it guarantees that the wider community would truly obtain the outcome it would be expecting. This results in both greater certainty within the planning process and a greater guarantee of achieving high design standards (Carmona et al 2002, p18).

If insufficient attention is given to their formulation, however, codes could end up simply becoming formulaic rules, stifling design creativity in the process and ending up as modular, standardised designs without due regard to specificity and context. For this reason, their formulation and preparation relies heavily on good design skills (CABE 2004b, p27).

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**Part 2 of this article will be published in the next issue of tA.**

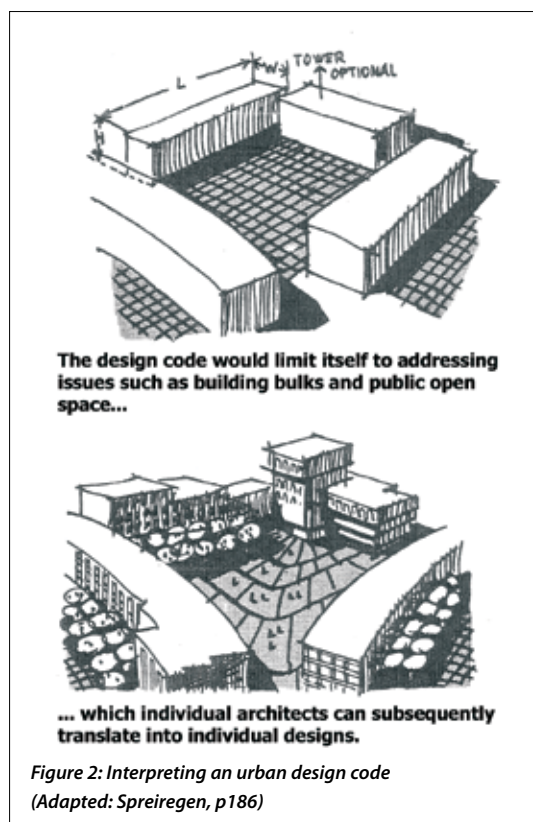


Figure 2: Interpreting an urban design code (Adapted: Spreiregen, p186)