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RESHAPING OUR URBAN ENVIRONMENTS THROUGH STREET-BASED DESIGN POLICIES – THE MALTESE EXPERIENCE

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Urban development in Malta has undergone an exponential growth in the past decades, borne within a narrow-minded approach that prioritised construction as a primary means of fuelling the economy. Most of this development imposed itself indiscriminately within long-established and tightly knit streets, destroying their social and physical character and impacting heavily on existing residential communities. Within this scenario, planning was, at best, largely ineffective; at worst, it instigated such development through a number of policies that were insensitive to basic street principles.

In an attempt to improve the design quality of streets in a tangible manner, the Malta Environment and Planning Authority embarked on a review of a key policy document, Development Control Policy and Design Guidance 2007 – a major tool used by architectural practitioners, planning assessors and decision makers alike. What started out as a document refinement has become a major policy overhaul, marking the departure from planning- and architecture-focused policy-making to a new urban design approach, a first for this small island state. Its basic premise is that better urban environments must start from better streets – a simple principle with deeply rooted implications regarding the way design should be approached and assessed.

As I am the leading author of this forthcoming document, this paper is a first-hand account of the salient urban design principles and debates that have characterised this interesting trajectory. It traces the struggles of challenging blinkered and insular attitudes towards design and construction, not least due to the influence of political undercurrents. It also narrates the attempts to close the ‘theory--practice gap’, by formulating a document that develops from established academic principles and is equally grounded in practice. Finally, it outlines the document’s important change in philosophy – from one containing inflexible and restrictive quantitative policies to providing a more enabling role through qualitative performance criteria that encourage good street design.

Keywords: Malta, street design, street-centred policy-making, urban design quality, urban design performance criteria

1. INTRODUCTION

A cursory look at both regulatory and discretionary planning systems indicates the increasing role played by urban design on planning agendas and the establishment of good street design as a main planning objective in the pursuit of design better places. In particular, authors (Lang, 1996 cited in Punter, 1999b; Punter and Carmona, 1997; Punter, 1999a, among others) argue that the use of design policy to support the assessment of development applications, negotiations and decision-making has become a critical aspect of the planning process. In regulatory systems, the traditional deemed inadequacy of the zoning plan from a design viewpoint has generated the need for alternative 'discretionary'-oriented design tools in the Netherlands, design policies separate or alternative to the main plan in France and flexible zoning mechanisms and design (form-based) codes in the US. Understood in these terms, there appears to be an important relationship between the role of plans and policies and the attainment of urban design quality, specifically in terms of designing better streets. This has also been reflected in the academic literature published in recent decades, which has shifted its attention from architecture to broader urban design considerations, emphasising the need for contextual design solutions in the built environment.

In spite of the above, results 'on the ground' have fallen short of expectations – a large number of 'urban developments' in the past decades have been geared more towards the 'development' aspect than the wider regard to the 'urban' street context.

The Maltese experience is a story of a once-proud urban fabric left for many decades to the mercy of the speculator, a story of a largely reactive planning system, which has done little to prevent or pre-empt such developments from taking place. The recent planning reform, which commenced in 2010, has established a stronger plan-led approach to the traditionally discretionary planning system, evidenced by the greater regard given to plans and policies throughout the development management process. This has greater implications for this discussion when one considers that the majority of policies produced to date are deficient in urban design terms, dominated instead by issues related to land-use and construction – a deficiency that has been detrimental to the street context (Zammit, 2013).

One key policy document in this respect is *Development Control Policy and Design Guidance 2007* (DC 07), a document produced by the Malta Environment and Planning Authority (MEPA) that constitutes a central role in design, assessment and decision-making processes (MEPA, 2007). Its elevated status due to the above-mentioned planning reform, coupled with a number of critical phenomena that have occurred within the Maltese urban environment in the recent

past, have prompted the MEPA to question the document's nature and adequacy, causing it to embark on its revision towards the end of 2013.

This paper discusses the salient urban design issues that have occurred within Maltese streets and the lacuna in local policy-making in terms of the street dimension that has exacerbated this damage. It subsequently outlines the vision, scope and structure of the upcoming *Development Control Design Policy, Guidance and Standards 2014* (DC 14), highlighting the newfound approach centred on the development of a new, street-based planning document that aims to design, and deliver, better streets (MEPA, forthcoming).

2. MALTA

With a total land area of around 316 square kilometres, and an estimated population by the end of 2011 of 416,110, translating into a density of 1,317 persons per sqkm (NSO, 2012), this small island state has the highest population density of all the EU Member States and is primarily an urbanised society, with 94% of the population living in urban areas in 2007 (MEPA and NSO, 2010).

The European Spatial Planning Observation Network (ESPON) project has defined Malta's planning style as being predominantly concerned with land-use planning and following the 'urbanism' planning tradition, similar to other Southern European countries (Farinós Dasi *et al.*, 2006). Indeed, Maltese planning has to date focused on architectural and building control, rather than urban design matters, and has not formally recognised planning as a distinct profession. This, too, has significantly influenced the phenomena in the built environment discussed below.

Malta's planning system is largely modelled on the British Town and Country Planning Act, although today it displays clear signs of a plan-led approach (Cassar, 2009). Its policy structure is composed of the Structure Plan (SP), subsidiary (Local) plans (LP) and supplementary planning guidance that includes documents such as DC 07.

Planning in Malta reached an important crossroads in 1992, with the advent of a Development Planning Act (DPA) and the establishment of a central autonomous Planning Authority (PA), which became the MEPA in 2001. In spite of this autonomy, however, central government still plays a key role within the planning process. The Minister responsible for planning ultimately endorses all policy documents and he may decide to add, remove or change policies even follow-

ing public consultation. Furthermore, central government initiates most major policy revisions and issues an initial set of objectives that could dictate the entire policy-making process.

In spite of the turnaround that the 1992 DPA brought about, a significant amount of speculation continued unabated. Indeed, more residential permits were granted throughout the past 20 years (MEPA, 2004), peaking in 2004 (pre-EU accession) and 2008 (pre-Euro adoption) and resulting in a thriving market dominated by developers. The latter were not incentivised to build high-quality developments and this eventually resulted in an over-supply of (largely) low-quality residential stock that to date remains largely unsold and that comprises internal and gated developments having a very poor outlook onto the street.

The 2006 LPs further allowed for the relaxation of building heights and the indiscriminate allowance of '3-floors-plus-penthouse' developments (occasionally including semi-basements) replacing two-storey terraced developments (KTP, 2007). Private homeowners therefore became potential developers in their own right, further resulting in the proliferation of the apartment block residential typology that created a "physically and visually intrusive" (KTP 2008, p3) mass and destroyed important streetscapes in the process.

This is the current state of Maltese streets, often characterized by a low-quality building fabric composed of bland, repetitive blocks that are discordant with the older components of the street; a fabric typified by dead frontages, blank walls and exposed services that scar the street's composition; a fabric that does not consider the visual, social and environmental impact it might have on the surrounding streets.

The above has been compounded by a low (or lack of) awareness in urban design matters, particularly among investors and politicians, and aiming for minimum standards that the market appeared to accept, at least until 2008. The Maltese planning system has been reactive to economic and market conditions, and consecutive governments have been generally inclined

towards further stimulating the construction industry. Furthermore, none of the policies produced by the MEPA have been urban design-oriented (KTP, 2008) – indeed, although the planning system has been overloaded with a plethora of policies, the latter have failed to consider the most important urban scale (given the size and urban configuration of Maltese settlements), that is the street.

A textual analysis of local policy documents carried out by the author in 2013 (Zammit, 2013) clearly revealed this missing scale in policy-making; the majority of policies oscillate between

'macro' planning and 'micro' architectural considerations, rather than the 'meso' streetscape scale. In addition, the policies are largely quantitative, lack a three dimensional outlook and tend to be either vaguely defined (in the case of 'macro' policies) or prescriptive and restrictive in nature (in the case of 'micro' policies).

3. DC 07

Lying at the bottom of the policy hierarchy, DC 07 has primarily a design guidance role. This is clearly set out in its *Preamble*, which emphasises the need to consider its provisions “within the context provided by other policies, particularly those set out in the Structure Plan; in adopted Local Plans; and in other adopted policy documents” (MEPA 2007, pp. 2 – 3), which therefore take precedence over DC 07.

Its main objective is “to promote the creation of high quality development, which is visually attractive and appropriate to its surroundings” (MEPA 2007, p1). The document does start out positively, focusing on urban design issues, highlighting important aspects that should be taken into consideration in both design and assessment, and directly referring to and following on from the Structure Plan. However it progressively becomes negative and often restrictive, particularly as a result of the fact that a number of positive qualitative considerations within the policy explanations subsequently disappear from the policies *per se*, thus tending towards a negative, quantitative focus. Although the Introduction to the document discusses the importance of achieving “both the qualitative guidance and criteria and the quantitative standards” (MEPA 2007, p3), the two parts are not given equal weight. Indeed, the local Chamber of Architects and Civil Engineers, the *Kamra tal-Periti* (KTP), have stated that documents such as DC 07 “shackle rather than promote creativity, innovation, and quality” through the prescriptive and restrictive nature of the policies (KTP 2008, p2).

Rather than translating into individual policies in the document's subsequent sections, the urban design concepts remain generic 'motherhood' principles in isolation. This contrasts sharply with the quantitative standards that are unequivocally expressed and prescriptively formulated within the policies. Indeed, this could justify why MEPA's officers and decision-makers tend to give greater regard to quantitative aspects in assessment and decision-making (Zammit 2013), mirroring similar observations in the UK by Carmona (1999) that “criteria perceived as easily measurable and therefore more objective” (*ibid.*, p23) are generally preferred.

A content analysis of the design-related terms within DC 07 carried out by Zammit (2013) revealed that the majority of terms were architectural-related. Furthermore, 'standard/s' was the highest ranked design term, expressed in terms of performance standards, space standards, quantitative minimum/maximum standards and limitations.

4. DC 14

DC 14 is the result of a year-long collaborative process led by the MEPA and involving academia, practising architects, decision-makers and experts in the fields of sanitary law, transport and conservation, who in turn have constituted its Working Group. Its formulation has been equally informed by urban design and architectural theory, 'on the ground' practice and the wealth of experience gained along the years in policy-making and decision taking.

The process began with the formulation of nine objectives set by central government¹ (**Table 1**), which were discussed and refined by the Working Group and which underwent a process of public consultation prior to their adoption by the MEPA.

Among other objectives, it was established that the new document, essentially envisioned as a revised and trimmed-down version of DC 07, would be divided into mandatory policies, guidelines and technical details for increased clarity and simplification. While the public consultation process for these objectives was underway, the Working Group was also discussing how best to implement them, setting out four important targets (**Table 2**).

1 The Parliamentary Secretary for Planning and Administrative Simplification (within the Office of the Prime Minister) and his core team of advisors including MEPA's Chief Executive Officer.

	Objective
1	<p>The document shall be divided into three parts:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - General policies which give a clear direction. These shall be mandatory. - Guidelines which are meant as an aid to encourage creativity, innovation, and suggest alternative solutions. Emphasis will be on aesthetics and the relationship with the contextual environment. - Technical details which consist of a list of mandatory standards to ensure high quality development.
2	Document to conform to all strategic documents and policies published by the Authority.
3	Document should conform to laws dealing with sanitary, civil and accessibility issues together with other provisions and regulations.
4	Document to address any existing inconsistencies, ambiguities and repetitions in MEPA policies and regulations and also make good any omissions.
5	Current provisions which undermine the quality of our urban environment and quality of life to be eliminated.
6	To revise the policy and design guidance for the Urban Conservation Area and Scheduled Buildings and to encourage good intervention practice.
7	Good practice guidelines on energy conservation, the use of renewable energy, and the sustainable use of natural resources to form part of this document.
8	Final document is to be comprehensive, clear and user friendly. Visual aids – illustrations, photos or sketches to encourage a high level of design and urban planning.
9	This document should be forward looking and encourage innovative design, materials and emerging technologies.

Table 1: Central Government objectives for DC 14. Source: Parliamentary Secretary for Planning and Administrative Simplification, Office of the Prime Minister

Target	How?
Emphasise policies' qualitative spirit over quantitative considerations	Preference for performance criteria rather than standards, although some critical standards are inevitable and must be retained
Parameters/qualities that respect and enrich the existing context and work with the existing streetscapes	Define urban design parameters that subsequently allow for diverse, creative architectural responses to occur within well-defined, harmonised and complementing urban forms
Language-clarity is the bridge between certainty and flexibility	Not vague (motherhood) policy descriptions but clear, achievable qualitative targets/performance criteria
A positive document, which must be geared towards the delivery of quality urban environments	Through document's language and illustrations – the latter, not only technical (as a tool in providing clarity) but also quality-related, to emphasise the qualitative spirit of these guidelines

Table 2: DC 14 Working Group targets Source: Author

These targets mirror similar observations made by numerous authors (among others, Blaesser, 1994; Delafons, 1994; Plater-Zyberk, 1994; Carmona, 1996, 1998 and 2005; Punter and Carmona, 1997; Punter, 1999b; DETR and CABE, 2000; Carmona *et al.*, 2002; Carmona *et al.*, 2003; Dawson and Higgins, 2009; Imrie and Street, 2009) with regard to the nature of effective urban design guidance; these authors concur that guidance should be:

- A positive tool, which promotes urban design and encourages innovative design responses, not a negative and restrictive document. It should also allow “for the exceptional scheme that breaks the rules” (Carmona 1998, p193).
- Clear in its terminology and “written with the means of implementation in mind” (Carmona 2005, p30), not using generic ‘motherhood’ type policies that contain vague terms.

- Easy to use and to be interpreted, with the use of illustrations to increase its appeal and attractiveness and aid in its comprehension.
- A guiding and flexible tool, wherein general urban design principles are established, not overly detailed or overly prescriptive ones that formulaically dictate design outcome or solutions.

4.1 DOCUMENT VISION

The above targets set the scene for the vision that has been adopted within DC 14 – an urban design approach that (1) acknowledges the inter-relationship of the different spatial scales comprising the urban environment (**Figure 1**), reduces the emphasis on individual architectural elements, and (3) conversely reinforces the attention given to urban form as the primary contributor to the formation of successful streets.

The document places a particular emphasis on enriching the character of the existing context – more specifically the immediate streetscape – not by producing more of the same but by generating creative design responses that build on, and also seek to interpret, existing street qualities. These design responses range from basic street considerations in relation to urban form, such as street enclosure and building/street proportions to individual architectural elements that contribute to the richness, local distinctiveness and legibility of place (MEPA, forthcoming).

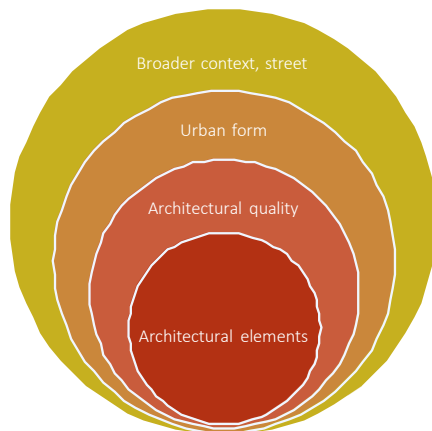


Figure 1. The inter-relationship of spatial scales.
Source: Author

4.2 DOCUMENT SCOPE – THREE OBJECTIVES FOR GOOD STREET DESIGN

The document vision translates into three key objectives that in turn underpin the document's structure:

Objective 1 – A contextual and street-based approach to design as the starting point of any architectural and urban design intervention, expressed as:

THE DEFINITION OF BROAD PARAMETERS AND QUALITIES, WHICH ARISE OUT OF A STREETScape ANALYSIS AND THAT PROVIDE THE BASIC FRAMEWORK FOR THE INITIAL DESIGN CONCEPT, WHICH IS THEN INDIVIDUALLY ENRICHED AND ADAPTED TO OTHER ASPECTS IN RELATION TO THE DESIGN BRIEF. (MEPA, FORTHCOMING)

DC 14 defines different parameters, applicable according to the specific nature of different contexts and including: façade proportion, aperture/fenestration composition and rhythm, height variations, solid-to-void ratios, interfaces between private and public spaces, material and colour palette variations. The document advocates designs that seek to respect and relate to the street context and that, furthermore, aspire to enrich and improve such context, by providing contemporary, innovative, rich solutions that follow on from the basic street parameters and subsequently seek to reinforce certain predominant streetscape qualities through creative design elements. This also means, however, that “weak, nondescript street contexts should be allowed to have more radical design interventions that depart entirely from established, negative streetscape qualities and inject a new life into the street with the design of new architectural elements” (MEPA, forthcoming). This Objective is addressed within the second Part of the document (*Contextual design*).

Objective 2 – Respecting the street as an important spatial scale, not only as transitional spaces but as important social places, makes vital contributions to the success of the overall workings of an urban settlement. Designing with the street in mind implies an acknowledgement that “every architectural façade is not only an architectural project in isolation – it is also an urban design intervention with a public interface” (MEPA, forthcoming). Specifically, the document establishes the manner in which successful streets may be created; primarily by giving due regard to this public interface, in terms of the degree of active frontages that may be created, the relationship of urban form with the human scale, the treatment of semi-public and semi-private spaces such as front gardens, as well as the avoidance of semi-basements along the street frontage. This objective is addressed within the third Part of the document (*Urban form*).

Objective 3 – Integrally designed, energy-conscious, quality architecture, in the acknowledgement that while broad considerations of urban form define the street, architectural elements further help to enrich it. Building on this maxim, the document unequivocally states that “successful streets are therefore those that allow for diverse, creative architectural responses to occur within well-defined, harmonised and complementing urban forms” (MEPA, forthcoming). This objective is addressed within the fourth Part (*Architectural quality*) and fifth Part of the document (*Architectural elements*).

4.3 DOCUMENT STRUCTURE

Building on the vision explained in Section 4.1, therefore, the document moves progressively from the broader contextual considerations to focus on issues of urban form, leading to issues in relation to architectural quality and finally zooming into more specific architectural elements (**Table 3**). This logic is based on the recognition that all the considerations discussed in DC 14 contribute to the creation of a quality urban environment, but it is equally based on the understanding that some aspects are more critical than others and therefore need a more forceful stand within the document.

In turn, this is reflected in the type of approach the document adopts – following on from central government’s objectives, the document distinguishes among:

- **mandatory regulation/policy** that might have to be taken literally and where every effort should be made to focus on objective criteria and not subjective ones;
- **good-practice guidance** that generally provides the intent and establishes the principle but that may then have diverse solutions to achieve such a principle, particularly given the subjectivity of some of these aspects; and
- **technical standards**, which supplement the above in terms of specific quantitative targets and are non-controversial, objective, universally agreed numeric considerations.

However, rather than dividing the document in terms of these three types of provisions (as originally intended by the government’s objectives), the policies, guidance and standards are present to different degrees within the individual parts of DC 14 (**Figure 2**). This has probably been the most important strategic decision with regard to the document’s structure.

Table 3. Part I, DC 14 Framework parameters and individual provisions Source: Author (adapted, Zammit 2013).

DC 14 Structure	Framework Parameters	Individual Provisions
<p>Urban Form</p>	<p>Points of departure, regard to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - existing urban grain - existing roofline - existing topography, site levels <p>human scale – field of vision, building height: street width ratios, existing levels/heights</p> <p>Building heights</p> <p>Additional built elements</p> <p>Façade proportions</p> <p>Relationship to topography</p> <p>Building line</p>	<p>Mitigation of blank walls Ground floor height Active front-ages Roofline/roofscape</p> <p>Vertical additions Horizontal extensions</p> <p>Infill development Perimeter block re/development</p> <p>Site levels Sloping streets/sites</p> <p>Plot setbacks/curtilages</p>

Architectural Quality	External appearance	Arch. expression, visual interest Façade rhythm Other façades e.g. side façades (detached/semi-detached dwellings); rear façades (if visually prominent) Projections and set-backs Roof structures (service rooms, washrooms, stairwells, lift wells)
	Neighbourhood amenity	Treatment of spatial interfaces, ground floor treatment Safety, opportunity for natural surveillance Spatial interfaces – public, semi-public, semi-private, private Privacy treatment, standards
	Sustainable quality	Wells/cisterns/reservoirs Integrative design of sustainable materials and systems Waste management Energy conservation measures – renewable energy, energy efficiency, exploiting built fabric thermal mass Energy generation measures – passive solar, wind energy Microclimatic considerations
	Corner buildings Special/public buildings	

Table 3. Part II, DC 14 Framework parameters and individual provisions Source: Author (adapted, Zammit 2013).

DC 14 Structure	Framework Parameters	Individual Provisions
Architectural Elements	Services	Screening of services at roof level (avoid visual intrusion/clutter) Integration in design
	Apertures	Aperture rhythm/composition Solid to void ratios, aperture sizing (incl. amenity, environmental aspects) Aperture orientation (vertical or horizontal) Aperture positioning, organisation (vertical or horizontal bands)
	Materials and details	Appropriateness to location Fitness for purpose (visual, functional, environmental qualities) Serviceability of materials Change in materials on façades
	Secondary elements (e.g. porches)	
	Interpretation of architectural features	
	Colour	

Table 3. Part III, DC 14 Framework parameters and individual provisions Source: Author (adapted, Zammit 2013).



Figure 2. The proportion of Mandatory regulation/policy, Good-practice guidance and Technical standards within Parts 2, 3, 4 and 5 of DC 14. Source: Author.

Urban form (Part 3 of the document) is mainly characterised by mandatory policies in the acknowledgement that this part contains critical aspects that have most bearing on the street and that can make or break a streetscape – they are “the main shapers of the street” (MEPA, forthcoming). This is therefore the part that needs to be controlled most, not to produce standardised buildings but so as to guarantee certain fundamental street principles. *Architectural quality* (Part 4 of the document) contains a balanced mix of mandatory policy, good-practice guidance and technical standards, with a reduced number of mandatory policies (and conversely a predominance of good-practice guidance) compared to Part 3. *Architectural elements* (Part 5 of the document) is in turn primarily characterised by good-practice guidance that could have different architectural solutions and does not contain any technical standards. A greater element of deviation is therefore possible within this section, particularly given the inevitable subjective nature of many considerations contained therein.

The injection of more guidance than policy in Parts 4 and 5, and even more so in the latter part, is done in the recognition that it is primarily through aspects of architectural quality and elements that architectural individuality, creativity and innovation may be achieved, allowing for architectural diversity within a consistent streetscape in terms of composition and cohesive quality. Indeed, through this approach, while the fundamental elements that make the building block and street are fixed, the overall outcome is not prescribed through a freer hand in architectural development and elemental design.

The approach adopted in DC 14 differs significantly from DC 07, which was largely characterised by policies containing a (qualitative) policy description that was often ignored within the (often quantitative) provisions of the policy *per se*. The mandatory policies in DC 14 are not simply quantitative in nature – indeed, a policy’s qualitative spirit is as prominent as the quantitative component, in order to ensure that both quantitative and qualitative objectives are given equal weight in design, assessment and decision-making. In turn, the relaxation of a number of provisions in connection with *Architectural quality* and *Architectural elements* is intended to give architects more freedom in design, which in turn may be considered more openly by planning officers and decision-makers.

Where possible, the individual mandatory policies, good-practice guidance and technical specifications are supplemented by illustrated figures in order to increase the document’s clarity and avoid any issues of doubt. Furthermore, the document now includes real-life examples that illustrate different aspects of the implementation of the document’s provisions using both local and foreign examples. Some of these examples also illustrate, in practical ways, the manner in which

a number of principles that are being promoted within the document may be achieved through innovative, creative responses that are nonetheless sensitive to their streets. In this manner, DC 14 doubles up as a showcase of good design principles, not solely as a policy document stating what is allowable or otherwise.

Many authors (among others, Tewdwr-Jones, 1995; Carmona, 2003) have contended that a key prerequisite in order to bridge the gap between certainty and flexibility in a planning system is clarity of policies and criteria that are set in advance. In DC 14, the quest for clarity has necessitated the presence of a clear and comprehensive glossary, to which important urban design terms have been added, such as 'active frontage', 'architectural quality', 'amenity', 'character', 'context', 'height to width ratio', 'human scale', 'microclimate', 'rhythm', 'semi-private space', 'semi-public space', 'solid to void ratio', 'urban grain' and 'urban space'. A significant effort has also been made to correct any vague or unclear definitions, statements and policies present within DC 07, not least through the experience gained from the document's implementation in practice over the past seven years. Specifically, a clear distinction has been made between 'street' and 'road' and the important definitions of 'streetscape' and 'townscape' have been refined – DC 07 previously freely interchanged 'street' and 'road' as well as 'townscape' and 'streetscape', the definition of which was in turn limited to 'street scene'.

4.4 NEW SUBMISSION REQUIREMENTS

In order to facilitate, and ensure, that due regard is given to the three objectives for good street design, discussed in Section 4.2 above, new submission requirements have been identified. Architects will now be required to submit a streetscape analysis, a street photographic analysis and a design statement with their design proposal, which in turn is to be submitted in the street context and include photomontages and/or rendered elevations illustrating materials and colours.

The scope of the streetscape analysis is "to study the existing street context that is present around a proposed development, helping one first to identify any strong features that are present within the street and, second, draw on such specific elements as a basis for further design development, not in terms of slavishly copying such elements but in terms of their interpretation in a critical and contemporary manner" (MEPA, forthcoming). The extent of detail to be analysed through the streetscape analysis will necessarily vary according to the scale of the project, but would typically include a street assessment, a building assess-

ment and a landscape assessment. The panoramic photographs taken as part of the street photographic analysis are intended to clearly illustrate both sides of the street that constitute the perimeter block in which the proposed development is located, enabling a more informed assessment of the design proposal.

The design statement is a concise but comprehensive write-up developed by the project architect, supplemented by visual aids such as existing photos, explanatory diagrams and/or sketches, proposed visuals and photomontages. It “departs from the streetscape analysis and clearly provides the design rationale in relation to the proposed development in question” (MEPA, forthcoming) and frames the design proposal within the specificities of the street context.

These new submission requirements are not being introduced in order to make the development management process more onerous on architects. Rather, the aims and objectives of the new submission requirements are:

1. To enable architects to explain their design concept.
2. To facilitate the Planning Directorate’s (PD) understanding of the development planning application in terms of what has been taken into account from the surrounding street context and frame the development proposal within broader contextual considerations.
3. To establish fixed parameters which are clearly agreed upon by all parties involved while also possibly identifying those aspects that have not been adhered to, especially in terms of mandatory policies.
4. To allow architects to explain any deviations from the document’s provisions and justify these in terms of the design concept, which will enable both the PD and the decision -makers to be able to give weight to their acceptance of the deviations, as they exercise their discretion in accordance with the provisions of the new Planning Act.

Needless to say, this does not imply that any deviation is permissible. As explained earlier, the way the document is structured enables one to distinguish between a mandatory policy, recommended guidance, or technical standard, each of which plays a different role in the development management process and also carries a distinct weight with regard to its adherence, or deviation from this.

5. CONCLUDING REMARKS

DC 14 represents a collective commitment towards good street design in the built environment. It is a positive document, based on the recognition that there are some important, basic parameters that must be clearly defined in order to guarantee the formation of successful streets. It therefore establishes 'context' as the leading principle in design, assessment and decision-making of any development proposal. At the same time, it acknowledges that contexts differ and that 'one-size-fits-all' solutions are not always applicable, or indeed desirable. The document's role is also to enable innovative and creative urban and architectural designs that are framed within the important urban design parameters.

What began as a refinement and update of DC 07 has become a major policy overhaul, constituting a new direction in terms of urban and architectural design policy. Within the document there is a clear departure from a single typology of policy provision to a new framework composed of mandatory policy, good-practice guidance and technical specifications based on a new urban design approach. This, in turn, hinges onto an important change in philosophy – from one containing inflexible and restrictive quantitative policies to providing a more enabling role through qualitative performance criteria that encourage good street design.

DC 14 has been formulated with an understanding among stakeholders that the onus of design quality should be shifted onto practising architects and their clients. Through this document, architects are being reminded that, for the most part, architectural projects are also urban design interventions, which provide a significant public contribution due to their interface with public streets. In the words of the Architects' Council of Europe, this therefore elevates their responsibility in delivering high-quality designs and "[...] providing better urban environments. And better urban environments start from better streets" (Zammit, forthcoming).

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