

Focus on the South East

Are your parks symbols of past glories? Southampton city council has encouraged fresh thinking on its public areas, writes **Cllr Liz Mizon**

Can we make more of our urban public spaces? The tendency is to let the status quo continue until the community identifies a problem. It might be antisocial behaviour, litter, or worse which causes concern, but even then there is probably only a limited response.

There should be a more fundamental questioning of how the community places value on a space. Today, I suspect, there is more interest in personal space so, for example, people might buy a trampoline for the garden rather than take children to the playground.

Is there a danger that parks may become outdated symbols of past glories? Certainly, we still spend plenty on our public realm but we tend to stick to traditional designs and layouts perhaps more relevant to past lifestyles. Parks, however, can be beautiful and are enjoyed by many.

So, how should we think about the future? Over the past year or so, I've been part of the South East England development agency's 'Places from spaces' project led by the Solent Centre for Architecture and Design. Its purpose has been to encourage new thinking about our public realm, to demonstrate how urban design can add value and to bring on board university academics and students.

Design debates

The first phase was a series of seminars and workshops where councillors, officers and academics discussed design and saw how it could work in public spaces. From the debates, I could see the advantage of flexible spaces, much more adaptable to community needs: a space might house a market one day and a children's area the next.

The next stage saw local authority officers from the three cities involved – Southampton, Portsmouth and Brighton – work with councillors

and academics to identify a space in each city which would be due for regeneration in the near to medium term. We then set a brief for the students to work up solutions in the form of temporary transformations to experiment with ideas which could feed into later redevelopment.

In Southampton, we chose Queens Park which is still a traditional space but nowadays used more as a commuter thoroughfare than for leisure. It is an area we intend to regenerate anyway but the initial thinking from within the council on how this might be done was fairly conventional and might not have resulted in any major change.

Our students however, decided to explore how you might add facilities to the park which would encourage the public to use it more. They did this by creating a 'soundscape' where the sounds of, for example, a water feature, a playground or café could be heard.

Visitors to the park were encouraged to take a chair to the place in the park where they found the sound that made them want to sit and enjoy

the space. It was a very interesting exercise which enriched the park in an unusual way. A report will be sent to our planners to feed into their future thinking for Queens Park.

Overall it has been a fascinating exercise with very positive outcomes. What interested me is the potential for this kind of exploration in the city.

Here in Southampton we have since been able to secure a councillor inquiry into the future use of land along one of the major riversides. Hopefully this will allow ample and good use of public space.

I also learned of the difficulty councils can experience from the public when trying to develop imaginative non-traditional uses for them. I couldn't help thinking that by adopting temporary transformation they could have tested radical ideas and probably gained far more acceptance for them.

● Cllr Mizon (Lib Dem) is the mayor of Southampton and chair of the council

