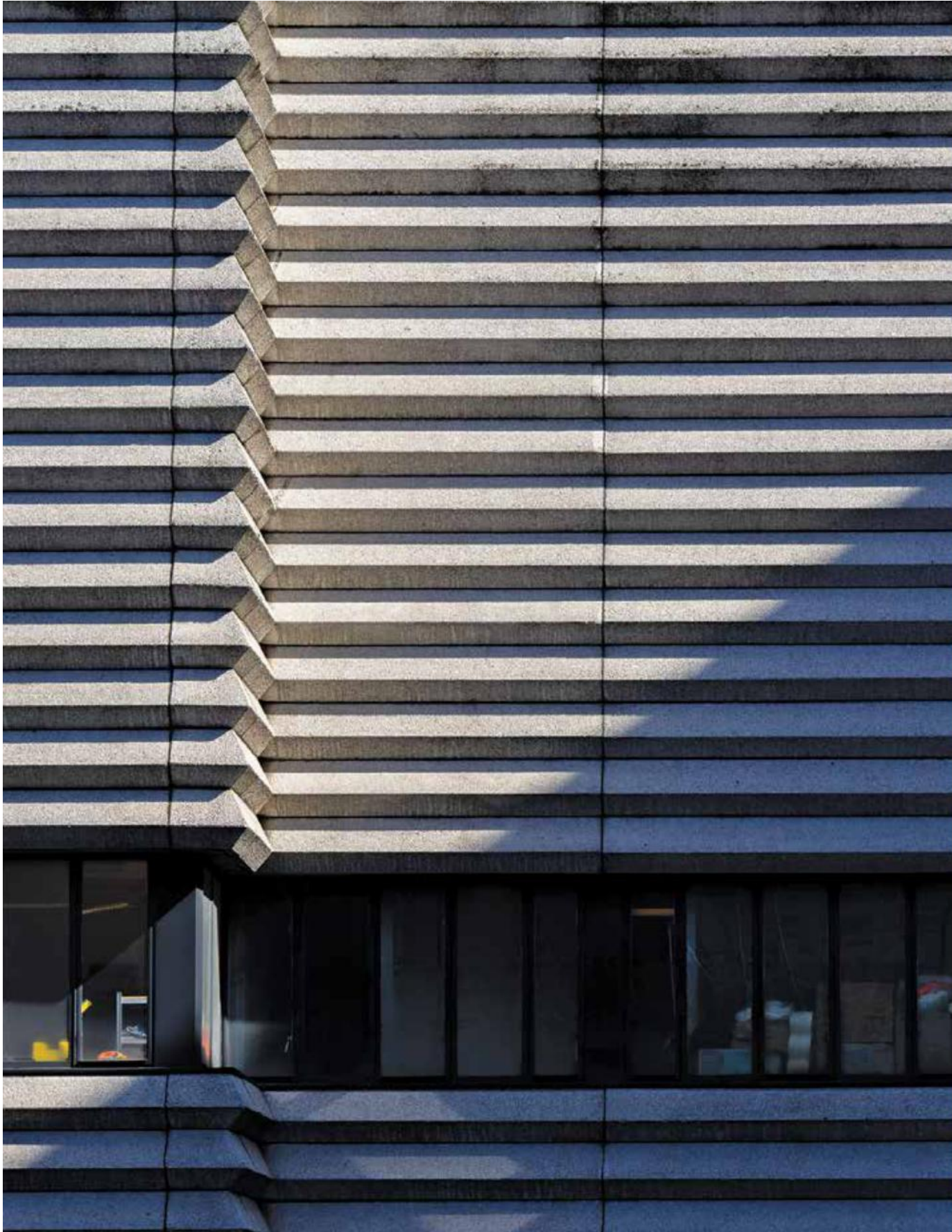




Birmingham Design Guide

The Birmingham ID City Manual

September 2022



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1 Understanding character

CITY NOTE ID-1

Elements of a Character Assessment

1.1 As detailed by Design Principle 2, designers must demonstrate an understanding and acknowledgement of their site's surrounding context, via a character assessment that evaluates the key characteristics of the surrounding area. A design response must then be created that acknowledges and enhances its surroundings.

NEIGHBOURHOODS

1.2 The majority of new development is located within or adjacent to existing development. As such new proposals must seek to enhance and integrate with these existing communities, through considered designs that respond to the positive elements of the surrounding neighbourhood structure:

Densities

1.3 Whilst related to the amount of development or floorspace achieved on a site, the resulting extent of built form (buildings) across a site or area contributes significantly to the character of an area. There will often be a correlation between density and some of the other character elements outlined below, which in assessing, should collectively inform the designer of the broad densities within the area and what may be feasible.

1.4 From a residential perspective, differences in densities can be seen when comparing high density apartment blocks or Victorian terraced properties, to the medium and low densities of the city's early and mid-century mature suburbs, where family homes are set within generous plots.

1.5 As detailed in Design Principle 11, densities of development should generally align with those in the surrounding context, unless the proposed increase does not result in a negative impact on character, particularly in relation to visual size of the building and plot proportions.

Things to assess and respond to

1.6 Is there a well-defined local density that has been established by existing development, contributing to surrounding character? What are the densities within the surrounding area? Would the introduction of a different density impact on, or enhance the character of the area?

Streets, roads and routes

1.7 Existing street environments and hierarchies are important character elements that assessments must gain a clear understanding of and respond to in their designs.

1.8 The existing street patterns, widths of roads, footpaths and public realm, building lines and setbacks, enclosure and how buildings use and engage with the street and space, must all be acknowledged and influence a design.

Things to assess and respond to

1.9 Is there a clear hierarchy of streets, routes and spaces? What are the widths of the surrounding streets? Are there clear street patterns? Do the streets and surrounding area have defined building lines? Does development tightly enclose streets or is it setback? What role do the streets serve? Do streets contain footways, verges, trees and/or on-street parking? Do non-vehicular routes form part of the surrounding streetscape? Do buildings successfully overlook and interact with existing routes and spaces?





Plot and building proportions and urban grain

1.10 Often related to the surrounding street pattern, the plot proportions of individual buildings and their collective blocks have an important influence on the character of the public (street) and private environments, and how it feels as a user. This urban grain is a result of the relationship between the buildings, their external spaces, and the street. Development must understand and respond appropriately to this, with plot and block proportions complementing their surroundings.

1.11 Different urban grains can be seen across different uses, and unless there is an opportunity to repair or introduce an improved urban grain (or example in open business parks or out-of-centre retail), alignment with an established arrangement will be required.

Things to assess and respond to

1.12 What is the nature of surrounding urban grain? Is the surrounding area dominated by large detached residential plots, with generous gardens and wide frontage, or is it predominantly terraced houses in well defined, gridded urban blocks? Is there a consistency to the spaces between buildings? Is there a clear definition between public and private spaces? Is there a defined relationship between the buildings and their rear gardens, where there's consistency between the depth of buildings and their gardens? Do large buildings dominate the area, creating an open form with limited definition? Is there scope to reinstate an urban grain that has become eroded?

Land uses

1.13 How a development relates to and integrates with surrounding land uses must be a considered element of a design. When seeking to introduce an alternative use within the surrounding area, any potential conflicts or harm must be recognised and effectively mitigated by a design.

Things to assess and respond to

1.14 Is the surrounding area dominated by a particular use or group of uses? How do these uses impact on the wider character of the area? Should these uses be a consideration or influential in guiding future development and uses in the area? Are there land/use designations that need to be given specific consideration (specific use, historic assets or nature conservation)? Are there noise or nuisance conflicts that need to be mitigated?

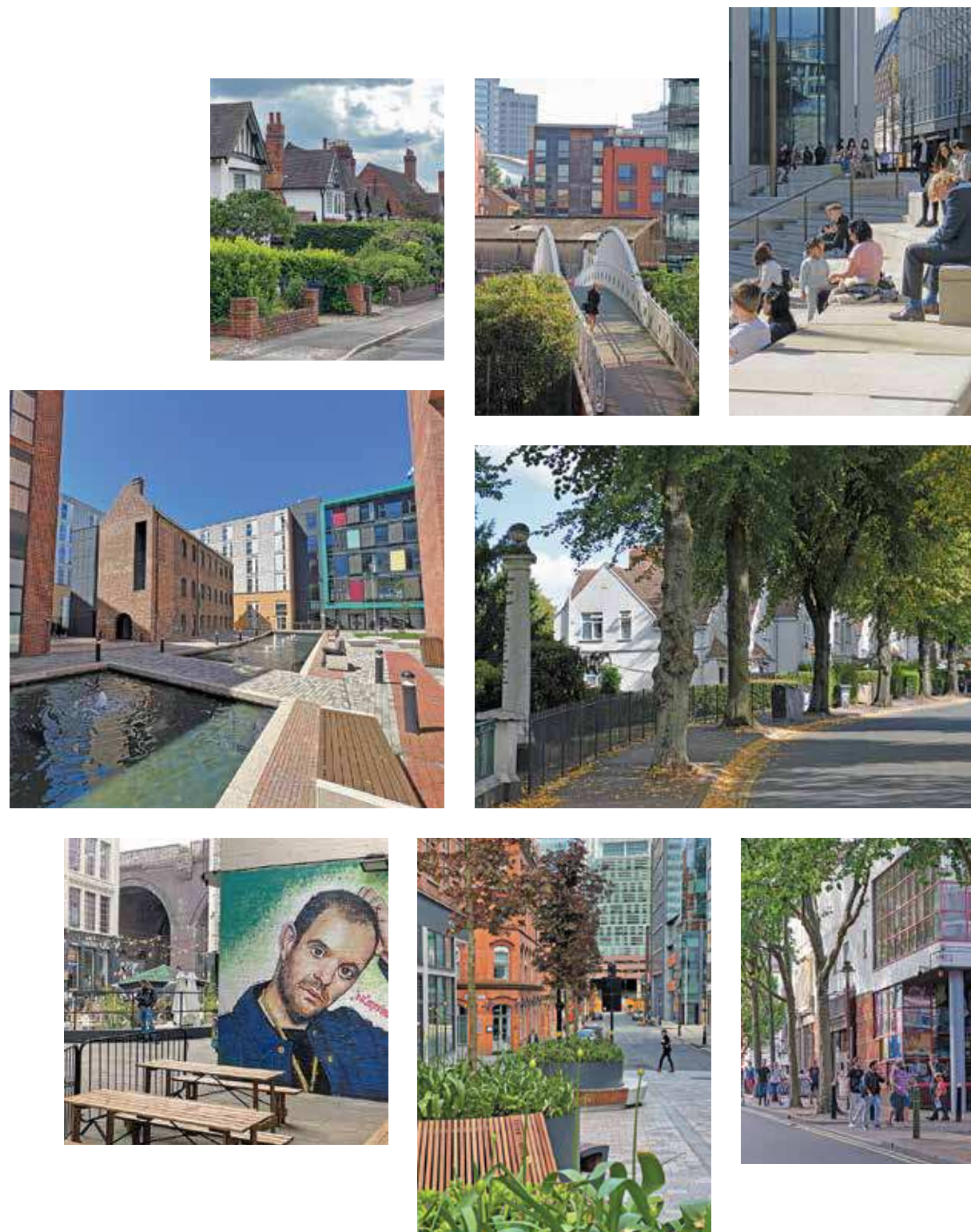
Topography/views/focal points/skyline

1.15 The street pattern and urban grain of an area will create views and focal points amongst the environment created, often with feature building or landscape elements (such as art, trees, or spaces) used to mark corners, junctions or conclude a view. As unique features of a place, these elements contribute significantly to character, and must be acknowledged and reflected by proposals. Applicants must understand the role their site plays (or could play) within this existing 'structure' and respond appropriately to it.

1.16 Topography can be a challenging, yet positive character feature that designs must effectively use and manage, informed by how existing development responds and utilises it.

Things to assess and respond to

1.17 How does existing development lie within the landscape and utilise it? Has the existing built form created focal points and landmarks? How are these features enclosed and framed? Does the existing built form create and frame views of buildings, public art or landscape? Has a distinct skyline been created by feature buildings and/or the nature of the landscape? Do new developments have the potential to interrupt or impact such features? How are any level changes used and managed by existing development?



Public realm/art/landscape

1.18 Hard and soft components of public and private spaces are one of the most defining elements of a street environment, with features such as street trees, verges, private gardens, boundary treatments and paving materials all contributing to the ‘feel and look’ of a street or space. An understanding must also be gained of the contribution rear gardens play in defining character. Across the city’s mature suburbs and Victorian blocks with deep Burgage style plots, rear gardens are important character elements, individually and collectively.

1.19 The loss of existing features as a result of development or failure to align with an established landscape is unlikely to be supported.

Things to assess and respond to

1.20 What role does public realm, art and/or landscape play in characterising the surrounding area? Are there mature landscape features that add to character? Is there a defined materials and/or materials palette? Is the public realm dominated by hard or soft landscape? Are streets framed by hedgerows or trees? Does the site and surrounding fall within a distinct or important landscape character?¹

¹ It may be appropriate to undertake a wider Landscape Character Assessment of an area, to understand the quality and potential impact of development.

Cultural and social mapping

1.21 Beyond the existing physical characteristics of an area, consideration must be given to the community the development is seeking join and how a proposal may bring benefits to the wider area (subject to the size and nature of development).

Things to assess and respond to

1.22 What are the cultural and social demographics of the surrounding area? Are there community needs/desires that could be helped or supported by development? Could the existing community be actively engaged in the development journey of the site? Are there wellbeing, health, cultural or leisure benefits that development could provide? What resources exist in the community that development could utilise?

BUILDINGS AND THEIR USES

1.23 Beyond the neighbourhood structure of an existing area, proposals must respond to and acknowledge the characteristics of the buildings and their plots located within the surrounding neighbourhood and adjacent to a site:

Role of buildings

1.24 In response to views, topography and the street pattern, there may be existing buildings which have specific prominence which may need to be acknowledged by a design. This could include a church, pub, a focal building at the end of a view or junction, or a landmark tall building. But the influence and relationship of such building(s) on its surroundings and the site must be understood. Equally if the development site has prominence or a defined role, ensure this is reflected in the design.

Things to assess and respond to

1.25 Is there a hierarchy of buildings with clear roles within their surroundings? Are there landmark buildings and focal points that need to be considered? Are there heritage assets that require specific consideration and design response? What role does the site (or existing building) have within its wider context? Is it located at a prominent location that warrants a specific response?

Architectural styles and detailing

1.26 Across a character area there are likely to be common architectural periods and styles, and/or a dominant historic building, which contain detailing and features that designers should identify and use as a design reference, where appropriate. Features may include the size and design of windows and doors, ornate detailing across the façade, bay windows, porches or canopies, rainwater goods, historic signage and/or shop fronts, etc.

1.27 Whilst direct replication may not be required, there should be a clear relationship between the design and positive elements of the surrounding architecture, unless there is an innovative or contemporary design rationale for diverting from these.

Things to assess and respond to

1.28 Is there a defining architectural style or period within the surrounding area? Are there architectural details and features associated with these buildings? Do they contribute to the proportions and rhythm of the building and façade? How are facades articulated? How are rain water goods managed and detailed? Are there projections or recesses within the façade that provide interest? Are there features from historic uses that add to the character of specific buildings?

Façade emphasis

1.29 Assessments should understand and identify the façade emphasis of adjacent buildings, with proposed designs responding to them. This is primarily driven by the arrangement, size and proportion of doors and windows (the fenestration) in a façade, which can result in the façade appearing to have a defined vertical or horizontal emphasis.

Things to assess and respond to

1.30 Do adjacent buildings have a clear vertical or horizontal emphasis? What role do window proportions, recesses, designs and sizes play in this? Are there generous floor to ceiling heights that development needs to replicate?





Materials

1.31 The primary materials of adjacent buildings and/or those common across the surrounding area must be understood and inform the materials selected by a development. This may not require a direct replication of materials or tones, but in most cases a clear reference is likely to be required.

Things to assess and respond to

1.32 Is there a dominant palette of materials within the surrounding area? Are there specific colours, styles and finishes associated with these materials?

Form, scale and massing

1.33 Established character areas will often contain buildings that share a dominant form, scale and mass, which if disrupted can have a negative impact on the surrounding context. In evaluating these character elements, designers must gather a clear understanding of the primary form and translate this effectively into their design.

Things to assess and respond to

1.34 What are the scale and mass of the surrounding buildings? Is there a well-defined local vernacular or a mix of scales and sizes? Have architectural features or steps in heights been used to help reduce the mass of buildings? Is there a consistent storey height to buildings? Is there a dominant form to the buildings which needs to be acknowledged?

Roofscape

1.35 The style, size, materiality and detailing of a roofscape often contribute significantly to the character of individual buildings and the surrounding context. It is therefore important development effectively acknowledge and respond to these existing styles and designs in creating a proposal. Unless the existing character contains a clear mix of roof styles, it is unlikely an alien roof design will be supported, such as a flat roof where pitched roofs dominate.

Things to assess and respond to

1.36 Is there a particular roof style or design dominant within the surrounding area? Are there consistent ridgelines and/or eave heights? Do chimneys form part of the roofscape? Do eaves project or overhang? Are dormers or rooflights a common feature? Are parapets used to mask the roof or infrastructure on the roof?

Outdoor space and curtilage

1.37 As identified by an assessment of the surrounding urban grain and plots, the role of a building’s curtilage in defining character must be understood. Buildings will often be one element of the plot, with the surrounding curtilage also contributing to character.

1.38 This curtilage or outdoor space may comprise gardens, ancillary buildings, service areas, car parks or incidental pieces of landscape. But where appropriate, particularly in residential areas, designs should align and not result in the removal of existing curtilage, where they positively contribute to the character area.

Things to assess and respond to

1.39 Do buildings have outdoor amenity space? Where is this located and how does it relate to the building? Do these spaces contribute to the wider character of the area? Are the spaces publicly accessible?

Boundary treatments

1.40 The presence of boundary treatments or open frontage with no defined boundaries often help characterise an existing street environment; and where these make a positive contribution to character, development should replicate them. There may also be environments where existing boundary treatments negatively impact on their surroundings, providing scope for enhancement by development.

Things to assess and respond to

1.41 What materials are used to delineate boundaries? Is there a clear style, typology or design applied to these? Are there hedgerow and trees within boundaries? Is there scope to introduce a boundary treatment that will enhance the street environment?



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