

Place analysis

V1. 08/02/2019

To determine a case for change in the built environment, and the likely impacts of future development on a locality, all social, environmental, and economic factors of a place need to be understood.

Input is required from the people that live and use a particular place, and from numerous experts, to build a common understanding of place. This then informs how a place can be shaped through integrating design, planning, and development.

A supplement for other documents

This advisory note supplements related documents to support the creation of better places through integrated design and planning – including other Government Architect NSW (GANSW) and Department of Planning and Environment (DPE) publications and NSW Government policies:

- Better Placed
- Greener Places
- Movement and Place
- Local Character and Place
- Good Urban Design
- Urban Design for Regional NSW.

Scale of application

This document provides an open framework for place analysis that can be applied to projects of all scales. Relevant factors may be considered and analysed with increasing levels of detail as a project develops, but also as a process of ongoing place evaluation. Brief questions are provided as prompts to help establish a balanced understanding of a place to help shape its future through development projects and other interventions.

Who can undertake place analysis?

The design, development, and ongoing management of places is carried out by many people, including those in government, built environment professionals, developers, and the people that live and use places. Aspects of place analysis can be undertaken by different people for different reasons.

Place analysis should be overseen or coordinated by a lead project consultant/team – typically a coordinating urban designer, urban planner, architect, landscape architect, or similar built environment practitioner – to overlay and translate multiple sources of information into a spatial framework.

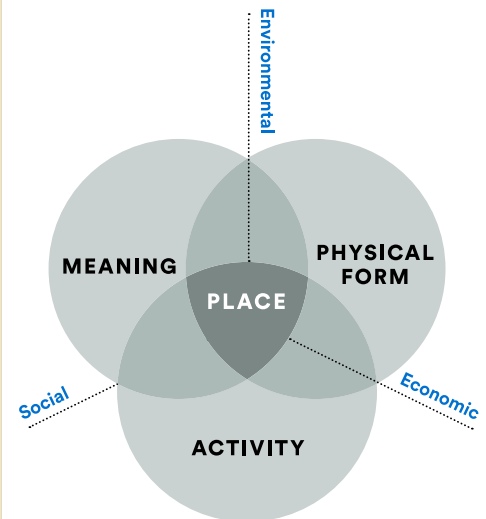
The lead consultant may draw on the input of other experts, specialists, consultants, and the community to provide specific information on different factors where required, depending on the project stage.

What is place?

Places have a clear and strong identity and character. Places are multi-layered and diverse environments.

‘Place’ can’t be comprehensively defined, but individual places can be described or understood by people in different ways and at different scales. This is because they are made up of many interrelated layers and elements which are generally understood through the following:

- physical form: physical conditions of a place
- activity: use, vitality and diversity
- meaning: how a place is perceived.



Adapted from Canter 1977; Punter 1991; cited in Montgomery 1998.

It is important to undertake a comprehensive place analysis to not only determine a case for change, but to build a coalition for what the change is and how it should occur with neighbours, local communities, and stakeholders.

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Understanding Place

A rounded understanding of place begins with identifying the core site information and by analysing the pre-existing factors that generate a place (understanding the context). This forms the basis for implementing urban design and planning. Factors for analysis are:

1. social factors
2. environmental factors
 - natural environment
 - built environment
3. economic factors.

Detailed analysis of the environmental factors can be undertaken with reference to the urban design elements and their typical design variables (see Figure 1).

Design process

Place analysis is an important aspect of the discovery phase of the design process. Implementing a good design process will support effective synthesis of skills and knowledge, enabling better decisions.

Some key questions in the design process are:

Discover

- How will your site or locality be defined, analysed, and understood?
- How will research and analysis inform your actions?
- What tools, processes, and methods will you employ to objectively evaluate existing conditions?

Create

- How will the various inputs and approaches be integrated?
- How will you further develop, refine, and optimise your analysis?

Deliver

- How will your solutions and proposals be explored and tested, prior to implementation?

Other considerations are: project definition, brief formation, further analysis/synthesis, engagement, scenario testing, and comparative precedent study. Many of these questions and considerations are outlined in **Implementing Good Design** (GANSW 2018).

Determining actions

The diagram below and following tables set out the key factors you can use to start analysing and understanding a place. This analysis

can help determine actions required including whether to:

- change
- enhance
- maintain; or
- conserve.

Depending on the project and place, changes over time, development staging, flexible and adaptable approaches are important to explore.

Refer to Local Character and Place Guideline (DPE) for more detailed information.

UNDERSTANDING THE CONTEXT

SOCIAL

Population and people
Culture and community
History and heritage
Politics and governance
Place sentiment

ENVIRONMENTAL

Climate
Landform and landscape
Ecology and wildlife
Hydrology and waterbodies
Human impacts
Built environment

ECONOMIC

Employment and income
Industry and business
Resources and value
Investment and tenure

⋮

URBAN DESIGN ELEMENTS

LAYOUT

The spatial arrangement of public space, services and connective infrastructure including:
Movement networks
Open space networks (green corridors, waterways, landforms)
Utilities and services

DIVISION

The subdivision of land and designation of its use including:
Land parcels
Ownership
Land-use zoning (density, building height, site coverage)

BUILT FORM

Building types, structures, and their uses including:
Street profiles
Building envelopes
Orientation
Function
Interfaces
Landscaped area

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DESIGN VARIABLES

QUALITY	QUANTITY	SCALE	DISTRIBUTION	DIVERSITY	ACCESS + CONNECTION	MATERIALS + DETAILS
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Figure 1: Factors influencing an understanding of place. Refer to **Good Urban Design** (draft, GANSW 2018) for more detail.

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Understanding the context

Understanding the context requires an analysis of the pre-existing social, environmental, and economic factors that generate and influence a place. These are a connected system and must be considered as interrelated. They are the inputs to a development project, strategy or plan.

Fill in these tables with relevant information for your place.

Place analysis: core site information

Name What is it called?	Place name. Could be a suburb or locality name, etc.
Location Where is the place?	Site address
Scale What is the scale of the place?	e.g. local, neighbourhood, precinct (walkable/cyclable), district, city, region
Context What is the surrounding area?	e.g. rural, urban, suburban, industrial, national park, coastal
Boundary Is there an identifiable boundary? Is there any direct adjacency issue?	Yes/no. What is the zone of influence?
Area What is the measurable area? Does the developable area include/exclude natural conservation areas?	Square km, hectares, square metres
Ownership status What is the land/property ownership status?	Mixed (public/private/multiple owners), public (single/multiple owners), private (single/multiple owners), charity/non-profit
Proponent/management Who is the catalyst for change on the area/land/property?	Land owners, tenants, external proponents, organisations, government, steering committees, etc.
Authorities What are the relevant government and planning authorities?	Federal, state, local government authorities
Stakeholders Who has a stake in the place?	Major landowners, institutions, industries, community groups, cultural groups, etc.
Occupancy Who occupies or uses the place?	Residential population, visiting population, both

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1. Social Factors

Demographics
Population and people
 Who lives there and how?

Population (current, historic, future)
People (age, background, household structure)
Health, wellbeing and lifestyle, travel patterns, education

Culture and community
 How do people associate there?

Cultures, communities and networks, social groups, social institutions, place names, attractions, festivals, events

History and heritage
 The key themes, events,
 and traces of the place's history

Social and cultural histories, places of historic and heritage value, Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal

Politics and governance
 Which people make decisions
 for the place, and its context,
 where and how?

Government boundaries, electoral boundaries, governance structures, professional associations, industry groups, community groups, lobby groups and other stakeholders

Place sentiment
 What do people think about
 the place?

Satisfaction
Strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, constraints
Needs, aspirations, and desires
Priorities

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2. Economic Factors

Employment

What do people do for jobs?
Where do they work?
How much do they earn?

*Local jobs
Where people work outside the area
Income levels*

Industries and businesses

What industries, goods and services are produced and/or available in the area? And how?

Primary and secondary industries, businesses, retail GDP, productivity.

Resources

What is being used/extracted for value and trade in the area?

*Natural resources, land-use value – minerals, energy, water, soil, vegetation, habitat
Agricultural, industrial, residential
Knowledge resources – research, education
Technology*

Investments, ownership, and tenure

Who is investing, owning and using the area for economic purposes? What value is it?

*Public, private, non-profit, and other stakeholders
Major landowners, business or charitable ventures, public infrastructure investments*

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3. Environmental Factors**Climate**

What is the climate of the area, context and/or site?

*Weather patterns, temperature, prevailing winds, rainfall, humidity, orientation, air quality
Macro/micro*

Landscape

What kind of landscapes are in and around the place?

Alpine, desert, plains, riverine, coastal, bushlands, wetlands, etc.

Landform

What is the form and make-up of the land?

Topography, topology (valleys, hills, ridges), geomorphology, geology (rocks, soils, above and below ground)

Ecology and wildlife

What living things inhabit the area? What do they depend on and what do they provide?

*Plants and animals, native and non-native, pests
Biodiversity, habitat, and ecosystems*

Hydrology and waterbodies

Where is there water and where does it flow, and connect to and from?

*Catchments, oceans, rivers, estuaries, lakes, swamps, creeks, drainage lines, groundwater
Flooding and flood mitigation, overland low paths
Drainage infrastructure and patterns
Water storages, irrigation*

Human impacts

Describe any ongoing impacts of human activity on the environment

Pollution, contamination, noise, overused/disused areas, erosion, mining, undermining, subsidence, water table changes, urban run-off, erosion, bushfire risk and history (frequency and intensity)

Built environment

How have people built up the area?

*Consider in terms of 'Urban design elements' – expanded on the following page:
The Layout, Division and Built form must each respond to the context of a place. The categories of Layout, Division, and Built form are also interrelated, they should be analysed together and considered interactively in design stages. While it is best for an urban designer, urban planner, architect, landscape architect or similar built environment practitioner to undertake this analysis, the following structure helps to outline the series of environmental conditions, and disciplines involved in analysing place to set the conditions for change.*

Urban design elements
Urban design actions happen in the interaction with and between the layout, division, and built form.

The urban designer is best suited to analysing or designing within the constraints of layout, division, and built form categories. Urban designers can provide insights, expertise and spatial thinking to develop a rounded understanding of the categories, specific to the project. This requires a synthesis of information, engagement, communication through drawing (maps, sketches, visualisation), iterative and comparative method description, and design thinking.

Scale

Cities, suburbs, towns and villages each have to consider the layout, division, and built form in tandem. Their distribution and interrelationships grow in complexity in response to the size of the project.

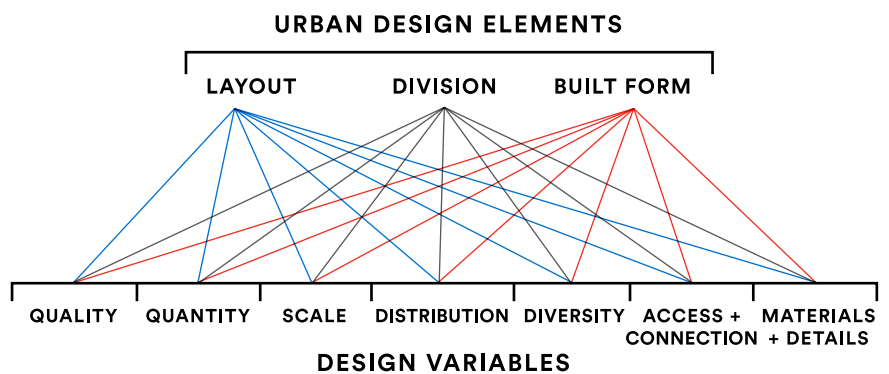
Time

It is important to acknowledge how development happens over time. Layout is the most permanent, long-term aspect. Division allows for flexibility and variety of building types that may change over time. Built form changes over more readily and over shorter time periods through replacement.

Relationships within and between the elements

The layout, division and built form must each respond to the context of a place. The categories of layout, division, and built form are also interrelated, they should be

Figure 2: Urban design elements are interrelated and should be analysed and understood together



analysed together and considered interactively in design stages.

Layout – is the spatial arrangement of public space, services and connective infrastructure including movement networks, open space networks (green corridors, waterways, landforms), and utilities and services.

The layout:

- responds directly to the physical geography [slope, solar azimuth, flooding etc.]
- provides the permeability required for movement of people to, from and through a place.
- forms blocks that through division produce lots – private land titles.
- provides access, light and air to the built form that, in turn, define the public space of the layout.
- includes public space. This is defined in GANSW documents as the combination of public land and any publicly accessible building. They are often located at important points within the layout and provide orientation or focus to the layout.

Public space is the combination of public land, streets, and parks and any publicly accessible building.

Public spaces are:

- open environments (streets, pavements, squares, landscapes, parks)
- sheltered spaces (public libraries, museums, religious institutions, public facilities)
- public critical infrastructure (“green”, “blue”, and “grey” infrastructure, and infrastructure related to transport, energy, and utilities).

Division – is the subdivision of land and designation of its use including land parcels, ownership, land use zoning (density, building height, site coverage).

The division:

- Tends to be generic to allow for a variety of building types that may change over time.
- Should be flexible allowing for future subdivision and amalgamation.

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Built form – comprises building types, structures and their uses including street profiles, building envelopes, orientation, relationship to topography, function, interfaces (facade) and landscaped area.

The built form:

- Makes up the majority of the built environment.
- Is the generic subject, such as the envelope or setbacks, made specific by architectural design. Their design is architecture not urban design.
- Division and Built form generate density of a place. Generally, more density requires more Layout area and more public space.

Design variables

The urban designer ensures projects appropriately account for the design variables, particular to a project or strategy. Each of the design variables should be considered as interrelated and effecting or impacting the other. It is important to consider the layout, division, and built form alongside the design variables. The relationships between and across each variable and category should be always in focus for a designer.

Quality – The conditions of the elements - physical (or other) state, appearance, working order, amenity.

Quantity – The number of and extent of elements in relation to each other.

Scale – the size, extent, height and proportion of elements to each other and their context.

Distribution – the geographic and spatial distribution and orientation of elements, and their relationships.

Diversity – range of amenities and the activities they support, encourage, and generate.

Access and connection – where and how elements are accessed and connected.

Materials and details – where materials are sourced, what materials the elements are made of, and how they are put together.

References:

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Montgomery, J. 1998, Making a city: Urbanity, vitality and urban design, **Journal of Urban Design**, 3:1, 93-116.

Urban Design Advisory Service 1998, **Urban Form: An approach for understanding the urban form of regional centres**, Department of Urban Affairs and Planning, NSW.

UN Habitat, **Global Public Space Toolkit: From Global Principles to Local Policies and Practice**, February 2016.

Further information

For more information see Better Placed: An integrated design policy for the built environment of NSW (GANSW 2017) available on the GANSW website: ga.nsw.gov.au

Government Architect NSW

GANSW provides design leadership in architecture, urban design and landscape architecture. In this role, GANSW works across government, the private sector and the community to establish policy and practice guides for achieving good design. GANSW provides strategic advice across design, planning and development to support good policy, programs, projects and places.

Contact GANSW

GANSW makes every effort to keep its advice up to date. From time to time we will release new versions of these advisory notes. For further advice, or if you think there is information missing, please contact GANSW.

Ben Hewett
Deputy Government Architect

Marissa Looby
Principal Design & Research

02 9860 1464

government.architect@planning.nsw.gov.au

Department of Planning
and Environment
320 Pitt St Sydney NSW 2000