

Athlone Visual Amenity Study

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Athlone Visual Amenity Study

1.0 Introduction

This report has been prepared for John Walsh of Athlone Town Council. The Consultancy work involved the analysis, identification of problems and preparation of recommendations for the enhancement of:

- A. The Upgrading of the Facades of the town from St. Mary's Square to Custume Place.**
- B. The Environmental Improvement and upgrading of the network of streets within this area.**

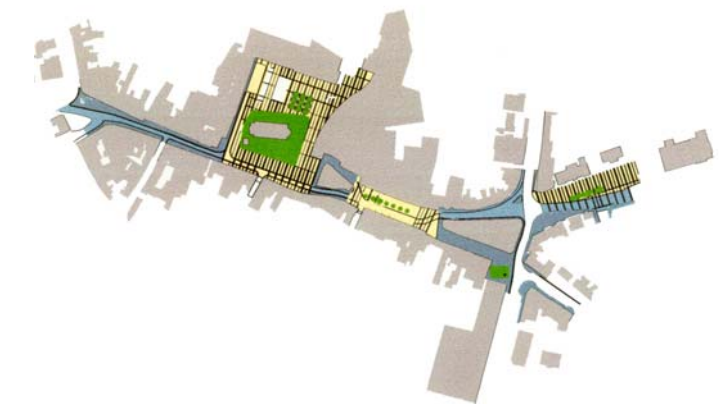
This report seeks to propose recommendations for the visual enhancement of Athlone Town Centre. It is important that both elements of the proposal, both the Upgrading of Facades and the Environmental Improvement of the streets are carried out in parallel, as each serves to complement the other.

2.0 Design Approach.

The street network between Custume Place and St. Mary's Square is the busy town shopping area of Athlone. However, the high proportion of vehicular traffic flowing through these narrow streets creates a conflict between the pedestrian and the car user. As a result, there is a reduction in environmental quality and the shopper is discouraged to linger, as the streets are overburdened with the conflicting interests of pedestrian and vehicular movement.

The primary recommendation is to eliminate two way traffic from this network of streets, and to create a one way route flowing from East to West. As a result, the level of traffic in the centre would be significantly reduced, thus maximising pedestrian circulation and creating new opportunities for areas of public open space.

The upgrading and maintenance of the facades of the streets will play an important part in the Visual Enhancement Proposal, as the buildings form the boundaries of and backdrop to the new open spaces.



3.0 Proposal for Visual Enhancement of the Street Facades

The first element of the proposal regards the implementation of recommendations for the upgrading of facades to the streets of Custume Place, Church Street, Mardyke Street, and St. Mary's Square.

For the main part, the facades running through the centre of Athlone are well maintained and are visually attractive. The proposal identifies buildings which would benefit from upgrading to create a varied streetscape of visually attractive properties.

3.1 **Recommendations:**

The A3 drawings attached to this Report in Appendix 2 outline the General recommendations for proposed changes to be made, which may be summarised as follows:

Shopfronts:

The shopfronts of Athlone bring a richness and character to the streetscape.

The height and depth of the fascia should especially respect the proportions of adjacent buildings, as a well designed shopfront will always compliment adjacent properties.

The current trend in overly large shopfront fascias and pilasters distorts the scale of the façade and creates a 'bottom-heavy' elevation to the street.

Care should be taken to ensure that the signage is in proportion to the scale of the shopfront.

Signage:

Future installation of unobtrusive and visually appropriate signage to all areas will be essential to maintenance of good urban design. Excessive signage detracts from the visual amenity of a space and clutters the streetscape. Signage should be consistent and well co-ordinated throughout the Town Centre.

Shop signage / Advertising

Care should be taken to ensure that the signage simply and clearly displays a service. Simple, well designed hanging signs perpendicular to the building can become a part of the character of the town and may present a design opportunity to display a distinctive 'branding' for the particular shop or service. It is a common perception that a multiplication of signage for one service is good advertising. However, the reverse has been held to be true, as overprovision generally results in confusion and clutter, where clearer and simpler signage provides legible, effective advertisement.

Street Signs

Pedestrian signage should be located at central nodes within the Town Centre.

Traffic signage should be designed to be clear and directive.



Paintwork:

Maintenance and upgrading of paintwork to the elevations is essential to the visual amenity of the Athlone streetscape. Colours should be carefully selected to appropriately reflect the character of the town centre. Garish colours conflict with adjoining properties and draw attention to themselves, establishing prominence on the street, thereby eroding the overall visual cohesion.

Lighting:

New lighting should be provided in line with the Hardworks Masterplan of this Report. In conjunction with the implementation of the new lighting, all electrical cabling should be removed or reduced on existing facades.

Protection and Security:

Roller Shutters:

It is recommended that Roller shutters should be placed inside the shopfront windows, to reduce: Overhead bulk at signage level. The unsightly image of a street lined with exposed roller shutter facades.

Alarm Panels:

It is recommended that alarm panels are discreetly positioned on external walls. Care should be taken to ensure that the wiring for these panels should not be visible on building façades.

Fences and Gates

These elements should be designed to minimise negative impact on the adjacent properties. Aggressively industrial fences and railings immediately detract from adjacent properties, as they project an image of the area as unsafe and fortress like. A simple well considered design for a security screen can reduce the visual impact of the security measure. In some cases, security screens can be designed as features of the overall development.

Redevelopment:

Where single storey or derelict properties form infill sites between higher density shopfronts it is recommended that two-storey or three-storey buildings be erected in their place should a development opportunity present itself.



B13-B14 RECOMMENDATIONS FOR UPGRADING OF FACADES
ATHLONE VISUAL AMENITY STUDY
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4.0 Proposal for the Environmental Improvement of the network of streets.

At present vehicular traffic predominates in the town centre, with limited provision for pedestrian movement. As outlined above, our primary recommendation is to eliminate two way traffic from this network of streets, and to create a one way route flowing from East to West. The drawing entitled 'circulation pattern' in Appendix 1 illustrates the proposed traffic pattern.

Mitchell + Associates have taken into consideration the Traffic Management Plan for Athlone Town Centre prepared by Michael Punch and Partners, and the Westmeath Retail Strategy prepared by John Spain Associates in the preparation of this report. In line with the recommendations of both of these plans, Sean Costello Street will be fully pedestrianised.

The promotion of pedestrian circulation over vehicular traffic in the town centre will enhance the creation of a place which will be more pleasant to spend time in. Recent studies have shown that, in tandem with the creation of a more pleasant experience for pedestrians, increased pedestrian traffic generally leads to an increase in retail turnover.

The reduction of circulation of traffic and the dominance of the car within the town centre can be achieved in a number of ways:

1. The creation of purpose built car parking facilities which would reduce the level of surface car parking in the town centre, and clearly defined access routes to these new services.
2. The creation of a time limit for loading and offloading, which would significantly reduce the presence of road haulage vehicles within the town at set periods.
3. The rail connection is a valuable service, which should be used to its maximum capability.

With a reduced amount of traffic flowing through Athlone Town Centre, the circulation spine of narrow streets occasionally broadens to become key focal points.

These focal points are identified as:

**Custume Place
Church Plaza
Mardyke Place
St Mary's Square.**

It is proposed that these key focal points will be treated in carefully selected palette of materials and elements to present a definitive and cohesive urban form to Athlone Town Centre. It is proposed that the link areas between these spaces will be treated in contrasting yet harmonious materials. The streets of Athlone Town Centre will be visually 'branded' and will present an immediate positive image of the Town Centre.

4.1 Design approach – Public Spaces

Custume Place.

This area at the Western end of the proposal is situated in a key location adjacent to the bridge over the river Shannon. It is proposed that a sculptural element will be installed in the new triangular place to mark the entrance to the network of semi-pedestrrianised shopping streets.

Church Plaza

This new plaza is proposed as a central meeting square and public open space, set back from the shopping street, with the benefit of the park type environment of the church grounds to its rear.

Mardyke Place

This new tree lined square is another newly created public open space. Much more linear in nature by comparison to Church plaza, this open space will create a relief from the narrow streets leading in to the centre from the East. As a linking Place, this space would be an ideal location for pavement cafés, etc in the warmer months.

St. Mary's Square

This elevated Square is at present undermined by its present use as a surface car park. The proposal recommends that the space be developed as a public open space, with occasional vehicular access permitted for church functions. The proposal for placement of a grid of trees at the entrance to the space define its boundary onto the Ballymahon road.

5.0 Materials:

The determining factors in selecting materials should be high standards of visual attractiveness, durability, and environmental performance, and that investment in high quality materials will be beneficial in the long term. For paved areas, user perception will determine the type of material to be used. For example a very trafficked area will require a smooth surface for speed of access, where cobbles and rusticated materials will slow down traffic.

New Public Open Spaces

It is proposed that the Public Spaces at Custume Place, Church Plaza, Mardyke Place, St Mary's Square are paved in Modular natural stone paving.

Link Spaces between Public Open Spaces

It is proposed that the link spaces are paved in Modular concrete paving.

6.0 Street Furniture

A strategy should be established to co-ordinate and consolidate the selection and design of Street Furniture. A carefully selected palette of materials and elements should be determined to present a definitive and cohesive urban form to the public domain. As a result, the streets of Athlone will be visually 'branded' and will present an immediate positive image of the town.

It is our recommendation that Athlone Town Council should specify good modern design in place of pastiche 'traditional' or 'heritage' fittings. Good contemporary design recedes into the background whilst the more pastiche ranges of off the shelf street furniture are more visually assertive in the street, thus cluttering the public domain with their dark colours and heavy style.

The co-ordination of street furniture and management of public spaces is essential, as the removal of unnecessary and obsolete street furniture will create an urban environment which is instantly legible to all users.

7.0 Appendices

ATHLONE VISUAL AMENITY STUDY

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CUSTOMER PLACE
PROPOSED ENVIRONMENTAL IMPROVEMENTS

ATHLONE VISUAL AMENITY STUDY

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7.1 Appendix 1 - Drawings - Proposal for the Environmental Improvement of the network of streets



7.2 Appendix 2 – Diagrammatic Elevations - Proposal for Visual Enhancement of the Street Facades



A3-A4 RECOMMENDATIONS FOR UPGRADING OF FACADES
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