Urban Form

7.35 In the town centre core, development is organised in perimeter blocks (building fronts facing streets, with servicing and private amenity space to the rear). This provides a clear definition between public and private spaces, with the opportunity to provide intermediate levels of privacy where appropriate (such as small front gardens to houses or outdoor seating areas for cafes). There will be active uses on the ground floor where possible to ensure maximum interaction between the buildings and the spaces they front onto, thus maximising natural surveillance, increasing the sense of security and deterring anti-social behaviour. This approach, in particular, should extend to providing active building frontages along Holborn Way, not only to provide activity, but to provide a visual presence for the town centre to passing traffic. It will not be an acceptable argument to provide blank frontages to Holborn way on the grounds that it is a hostile environment due to high volumes of traffic.

7.36 The urban layout of the area around the two retained pubs, including the three mixed use blocks located to the west and south of the retail anchor, is dictated by the desire to reinforce the human scale and increase the richness of the urban environment. This is achieved by re-establishing Sibthorp Road as a street lined with retail units and by creating a new pedestrian route from the north side of the White Lion pub to St. Mark’s Road, thus introducing new and improved pedestrian routes in the town centre whilst respecting and retaining the historic urban form defined by the most valuable historic buildings. Thus the new triangular building (Site 4) and the redevelopment around the White Lion PH (Site 5) are critical to achieving this pedestrian friendly, human scale richness in the town centre. It is also an important means of reducing the impact of the larger scale buildings and helping them fit in to the townscape.

7.37 Creating exciting and vibrant urban character and a sustainable mixed-use development is closely linked with the issue of high density, which not only increases potential for mixed-use, but leads to more efficient use of land and services. This is particularly relevant for town centre locations. Higher density often brings with it taller buildings (though not always the case). Apart from providing more accommodation, taller buildings can be used to create appropriate enclosure of streets and spaces and ensure more efficient natural surveillance of public spaces from upper floors of buildings. It is important that taller buildings are located around places of special importance, such as squares, focal points, important intersections of routes or gateway locations, to ensure that buildings relate to the townscape in a meaningful way. Vertical elements placed at strategic locations in the urban fabric provide important landmarks and contribute to an interesting and varied urban character.

7.38 However, the demand for high-density/tall buildings in Mitcham Town Centre has to be balanced with the requirement to respond to its largely small scale historic setting. This is particularly important in respecting and reinforcing local distinctiveness. The proposed building heights within Mitcham town centre therefore vary from 3 storey buildings around the Fair Green to 6 storey buildings framing the entrance from London Road into the core area of the town centre.

Building Design

7.39 All development proposals should be accompanied by a design statement in accordance with policy BE.16 and BE.22 in the Merton UDP. Guidance on the preparation of design statements is provided in the Council booklet “Delivering Good Design and Urban Design – Guidance Note for Applicants and Agents”. The Design Statement should be based on a careful study of the context of the development site. It should explain the ways in which that contextual study has informed the design process from the outset, and the ways in which it has influenced the final design of the proposed building.

7.40 There are many ways in which a new development can achieve a good relationship to its context, this does not have to be done by means of mimicking their architectural design. The Council believes that there are opportunities for high quality contemporary design in the town centre, and it does not feel that there are any contextual reasons for requiring that the design of new buildings should adopt only a traditional approach, or seek to mimic architecturally other buildings in the town centre. Poor quality pastiche schemes would not be viewed favourably.

Active Building Frontages

7.41 An important factor in maintaining sufficient levels of pedestrian activity and making streets and public spaces attractive and safe, is the way buildings are laid out in relation to these streets and public spaces. Also important are the location and number of building entrances and windows.

7.42 It is important that there is a clear distinction between public and private spaces, in order to provide ‘defensible space’. In this way uncertainty over the ownership and abuse of spaces can be avoided. Poorly defined and ambiguous spaces should be avoided. A gradation of this definition is sometimes appropriate, though the ownership and purpose of the space should still be clear. In a residential context this gradation could be: public street - small enclosed front garden – porch - private interior – private rear garden, or public street – lobby – courtyard - private interior. In a commercial context this could be: public street – street display – customer interior – private service yard, or public street – lobby/reception – offices/business.
achieved by following traditional street layouts, where buildings have many entrances (unlike many modern housing developments, where large numbers of dwellings are accessed by relatively few entrances), which open directly onto pavements and are clearly visible from the public realm. For flats above shops individual front doors are likely to have to open onto courtyards or semi-private spaces, but opportunity should be taken to maximise the number of entrances onto the street to ensure a good level of street activity.

7.44 The presence of active frontages is equally important in residential as well as in retail or commercial areas. Research has shown that presence of dead frontages (e.g. blank walls) significantly reduces attractiveness of streets and public spaces for pedestrians, which is critical in centres dominated by retail and other pedestrian sensitive uses. In contrast, private spaces in new developments should truly be private, with controlled access. This particularly applies to the interior spaces within residential blocks. Interior courtyards should be used for parking, servicing or amenity space (e.g. gardens) as required, accessed only by the people living or working in the buildings surrounding them.

7.45 In the survey of ground floor frontages in the town centre carried out in December 2004 (see Plan 11) various types of frontages were recorded, based on the degree of separation they pose between the interior of the building and the space around it. The categories also distinguish between frontages of buildings with ‘live’ (retail, services, catering) and “non-live” uses on the ground floor. The survey shows that the core area of the town centre is separated from the surroundings by an almost complete enclosure of blank frontages, having a negative affect on pedestrian movement and the functioning of the town centre. This has a particularly detrimental effect on both the image as well as the functioning of the town centre. This is most evident in the blank frontages found in the heart of the town centre facing the Green and around the entrances into the town centre.

7.46 The redevelopment of the town centre is an opportunity to address the design of ground floor frontages, and thereby improve quality and safety in the public realm. It is therefore essential that the new buildings be organised in outwards facing blocks, with continuous frontages and active uses on the ground floor, maximise entrances into the public realm and have ground and upper floor windows overlooking the public realm. Spaces within blocks of buildings should be clearly private with restricted access.