Distillation of place
Creating places which respond
to their context

Inspiration for connecting new developments to the local context can come from a variety of sources – vernacular building forms, local history, the grain of surrounding settlements, topography and geology. Designers should look beyond the copying of past styles towards a more profound celebration of context, interwoven with a response to community aspirations and practical needs.

What we mean by distillation of place

In his 1939 novel *Coming up for Air* George Orwell made an observation on typical suburban expansion, commenting "I don't mind towns growing so long as they grow and don't merely spread like gravy over a tablecloth."

One of the biggest obstacles to the creation of new residential developments on the edge of existing towns and neighbourhoods is the invariable opposition they meet from local residents and stakeholders. Rather than inspiring new communities, locals see only anonymous suburban sprawl.

To garner support from the existing community, good neighbourhood design should begin with an analysis and understanding of the local physical, historical and cultural contexts as a way of exploring potential design narratives. This exercise in capturing a 'distillation of place' will help to deliver new neighbourhoods with a strong identity and sense of belonging.

Mere lip service is too often paid to the specifics of context, resulting in the superficial application of local materials and building elements. This might be a projecting bay, pitched roofs or decorated barge boards, retrieved from a cursory overview of the local vernacular and applied to a standard house plan – all in the anxious search for a sensitive and 'safe' response to local planning guidance.

Unfortunately, this strategy delivers the same or similar generic outcomes across the country, resulting in spatially incoherent and disconnected suburban layouts of small 'executive homes' with little or no architectural variety.

New neighbourhood designs should exhibit the distinctive characteristics of locality in terms of scale, grain and a specific relationship of built form to landscape. All of these have historically contributed to the distinctiveness of place. As Gordon Cullen, the great exponent of townscape pondered in his 1974 design report for a new settlement in Maryculter to the south west of Aberdeen, "People live in houses, but where do the houses live? If they are homeless, then all we are left with is the typical endless, featureless suburbia".
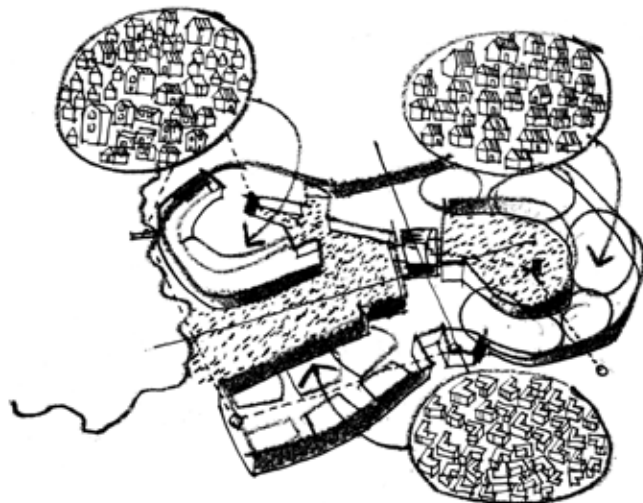
Concept Sketch for Mayculter by Gordon Cullen 1974.
© Thomas Gordon Cullen Collection, Archives of the University of Westminster, courtesy of the Cullen family
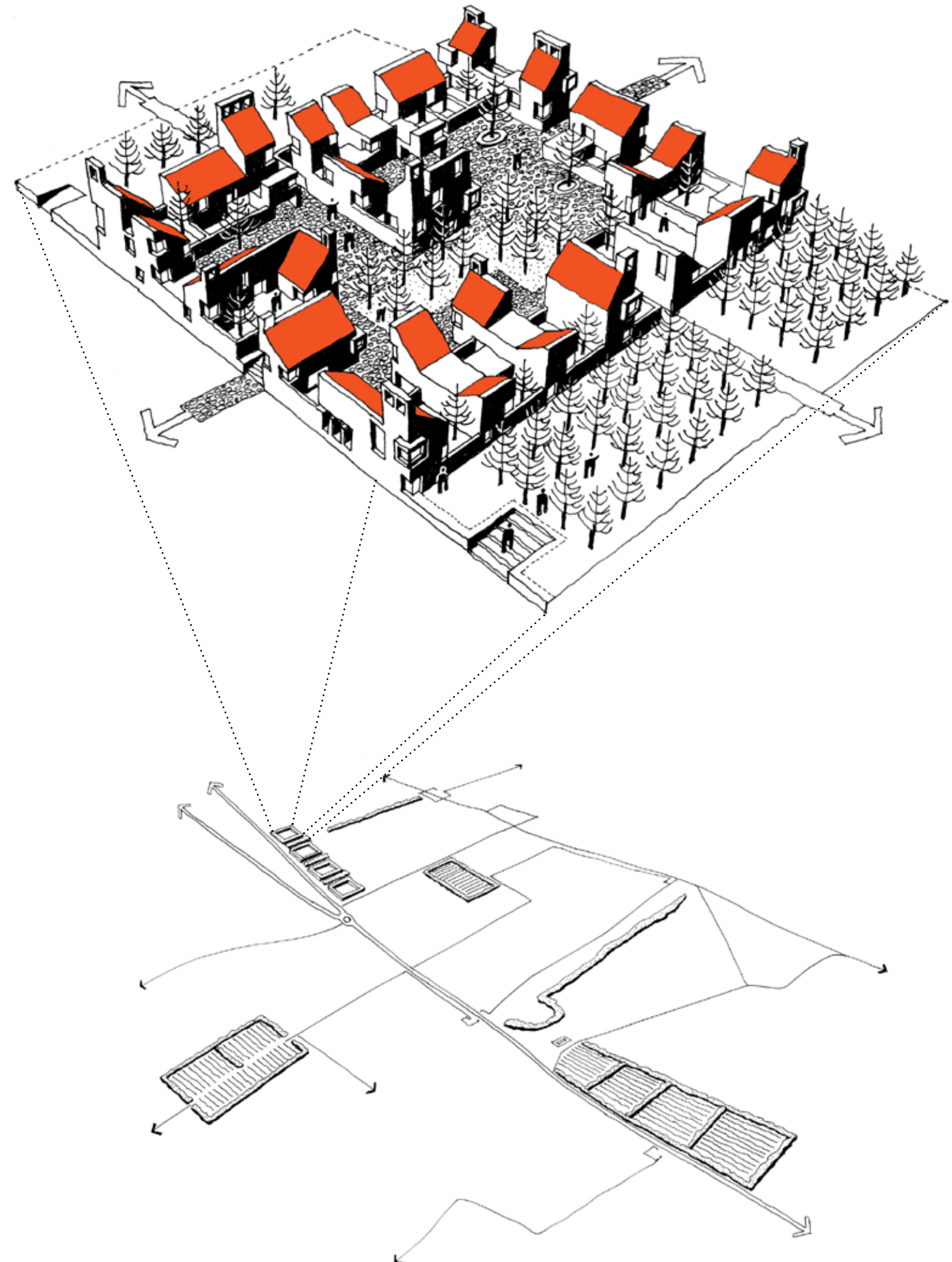
To reiterate, it is therefore important to initiate the design process with a thorough investigation of the immediate local physical context. It may start with an analysis of the existing topography, built fabric and landscape patterns (within or adjacent to the site) as a way to understand the nature and configuration of any strategic landscape and the way this informs any proposed site layout. For example, in a recent narrative study for Ebbsfleet Garden City an analysis of the topography of chalk cliffs and the distinctive nature of the local Thames Estuary typography formed the basis for a series of design guidance strategies for the creation of distinctive character areas within the post-industrial landscape.

Similarly, it is important to identify the potential for spatial connectivity to an existing neighbourhood's streets and parks through an understanding of existing movement patterns of pedestrians, cycles and vehicles. This will ensure that future neighbourhoods are not designed as isolated, introverted and disconnected estates, but are fully engaged and integrated with adjacent communities.

Respect boundaries
It is also important that the nature of an existing settlement's edges and boundaries is clearly understood. This is a key ingredient in the distillation of place, as it is often the precise configuration and celebration of edges and boundaries that form the defining characteristics of existing neighbourhoods. A good example is the distinctive grain of the 18th century New Town of Edinburgh juxtaposed against the medieval quarter of the Old Town. Here, the contrasting grain and texture of the urban quarter helps to define a strong boundary and celebrate the distinctive qualities of each section of the city.
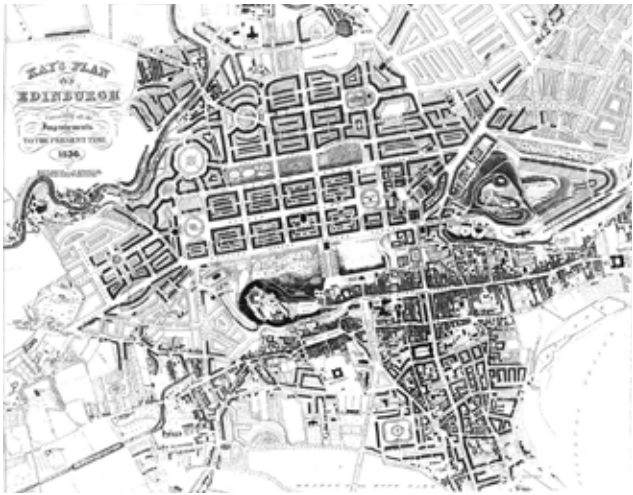
In contemporary housing, the edge of the new neighbourhood at Abode in Great Kneighton, Cambridge is defined by a strong profile of house gables and connecting garden walls at the plantation edge.

Ebbsleet figure ground with quarry
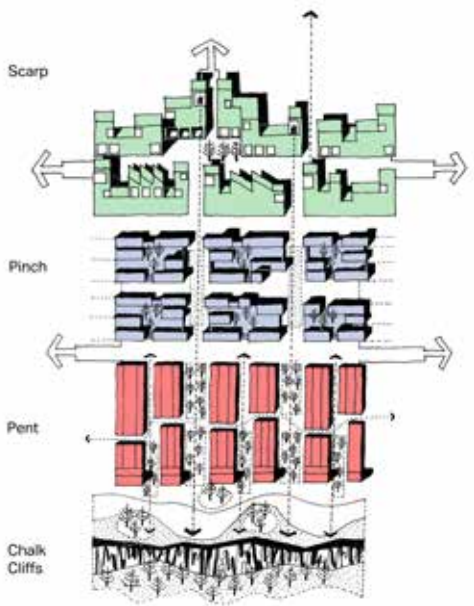
PMA cartoon of proposed urban grain across the Ebbsfleet topography

Eighteenth century map showing the Old and New Town of Edinburgh

Green Lanes, Abode at Great Kneighton, Cambridge

A similar strategy is adopted for Horsted Park, on a pivotal site between Rochester and Chatham in Kent, where the interconnected houses and garden walls define a strong silhouette on the landscape escarpment. The threshold from new neighbourhood edges to surrounding landscape is too often ill-defined with disruptive perimeter roads or worse: the endless cheap timber fences to rear gardens. In this location opportunities exist to create new dwelling typologies which help to define a strong transition from built form to landscape. For example, early studies for a new neighbourhood at Northstowe, Cambridgeshire, reference the form of ancient settlement embankments discovered during local archaeological investigations and propose a contained new quarter of around 400 homes with a clearly defined settlement edge.

The neglect of a coherent response to these conditions with the erosion of boundaries by future expansions can lead to suburban sprawl - the spreading gravy stain of Orwell's tablecloth.

Similar care should be given to the transition from one specific area of a neighbourhood to another, in order to help build a sense of identity. This needs more than a superficial change in material or colour. The covered portals leading from the Great Court at Abode, for example, define the threshold between the arrival space of this significant neighbourhood and the more intimate mews streets behind. Without these devices this spatial distinction would be lost.

For this reason, investigations should be extended to include an analysis of the scale, grain (the pattern of streets and paths) and texture of the existing fabric. This will help identify the characteristic scale of existing streets, the relationship of built form to landscape and importantly, the configuration of housing clusters, which are often the most distinctive element of any neighbourhood layout.

Concept sketch showing defined settlement edge of a new neighbourhood at Northstowe, Cambridgeshire

Concept model of a new neighbourhood at Northstowe

Threshold portal at Abode Great Kneighton Cambridge

Create contextual masterplans
Simplistic design guidance, requiring clear definition between public and private spaces, has resulted in a tendency to configure new neighbourhoods with a repetitive layout of perimeter blocks with continuous terraces of back-to-back dwellings. This type of layout is often a poor response to context, as are the now derided cul de sacs of so many post war developments.

More imaginative masterplans are required for urban expansions to peripheral suburban neighbourhoods which lack distinctive character. In these settlements an analysis of the grain of more typical regional settlements, vernacular forms or characteristics of local landscapes may provide valuable design cues for future neighbourhoods. At Horsted Park, Kent and Polnoon, East Renfrewshire, for example, the form of residential clusters took inspiration from local farmyard typologies. (Case studies pages 96 and 100). Mountfield Park, Canterbury is an example of a design directly inspired by Kent's orthogonal orchards, hop fields and shelter belts. Here the groupings of houses around a shared communal 'orchard' offer a contemporary communal focus directly related to the landscape history of this part of the county (Case study page 98).
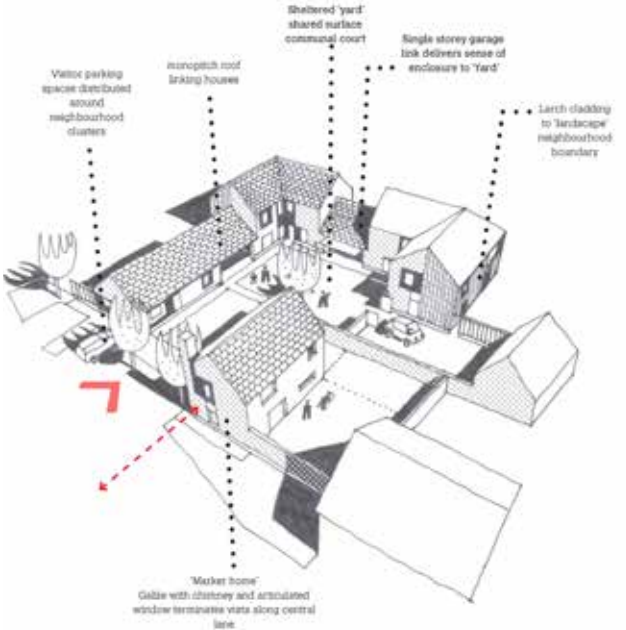
Concept cartoon of 'farmstead' cluster at Polnoon, Eaglesham

In addition, an examination of many historic settlements (mostly pre industrial) may reveal a more localised response in building layout. The linear forms of ancient burgage plots, or the distinctive garden walls which connect the dwellings of some of Britain's historic villages, are examples of the UK's defining regional vernacular architecture.
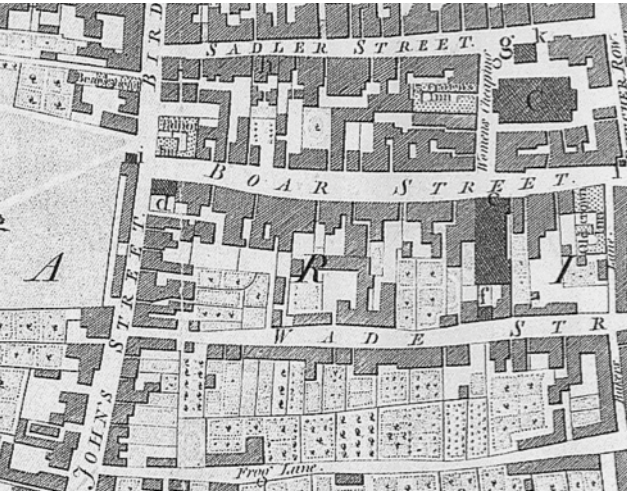
Eighteenth century map of Lichfield chowing walled gardens

Adopt new typologies for modern lifestyles
By eschewing the suburban conventions of front and back gardens, opportunities arise to explore plans which may be more appropriate to contemporary ways of living. A garden to the side and not merely to the rear, for example, may open up the potential for more than one living space to have garden access. This offers the possibility of greater internal flexibility, and the potential benefit of extended seasonal use of this outside amenity.
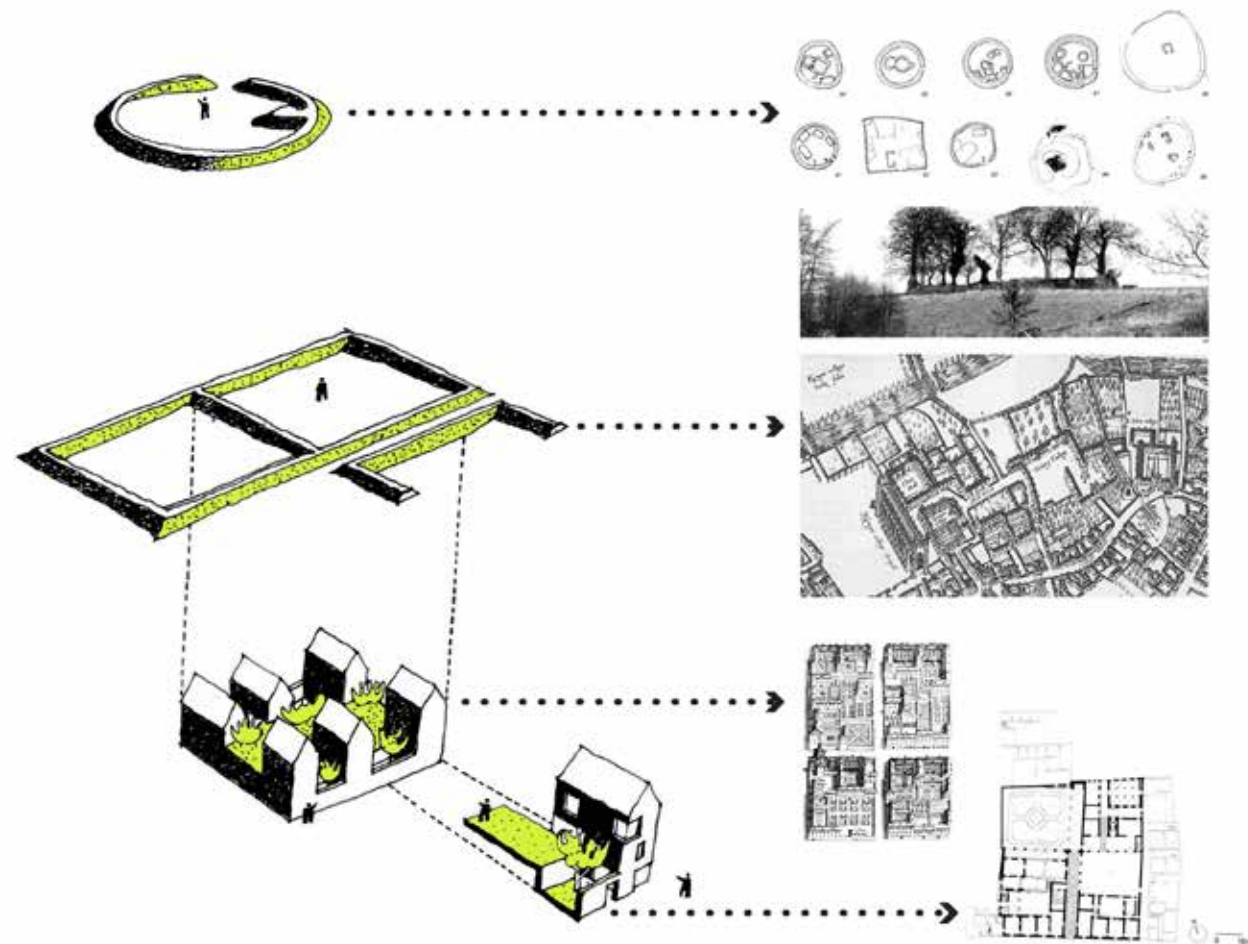
This configuration is explored in houses at Horsted Park and Great Kneighton (Case studies pages 96 and 94).

View from flexible interior to walled side garden at Horsted Park, Kent

Long house cluster at Abode Great Kneighton

Concept sketch for Ridgeway Village North West Cambridge

Reinvent traditional building forms

In searching for a design narrative, designs inspired through a distillation of place should not merely resort to stylistic mimicry.

The study of regional farmsteads or vernacular farmyard configurations, for example, may trigger a specific design response to the clustering and orientation of new homes within an exposed and windswept landscape. However, regional vernacular should not precipitate a thoughtless replication of agricultural vernacular architecture. This devalues the original typology and fails to respond to the everchanging requirements of 21st century living patterns.

Researching an appropriate narrative is just the starting point in a design process which is continually enriched by the overlaying of responses to a range of other technical, social, economic and environmental issues - all of which are important components of good residential design.

The simple barn structures that are a distinctive feature of the British rural landscape, for example, have a simplicity and economy of form which provides a useful precedent for the design of contemporary domestic space: highly flexible, adaptable, economical in form and easy to construct. The Long House configurations of black boarded dwellings at Great Kneighton are an example of this form. This is combined with the local village morphology of connecting garden walls and the linear grain of medieval field patterns and burgage plots to create distinctive clusters of new homes.

Interpret historic settlement patterns

Certain locations have very distinctive physical characteristics: the collegiate courts of Cambridge; the wynds and closes of Edinburgh Old Town; the twittens of Hastings; the gridded orchards and the hop field landscapes of Kent. Others have hidden or less obvious defining characteristics requiring a more forensic approach to contextual analysis.

Examining historical records - old maps, archaeological surveys and place names - can reveal patterns which suggest contextual design narratives. This might be a structured hedgerow or historic field pattern or archaeological remains, such as Bronze Age, earth works, or the Victorian military structures at Horsted Park. Archaeological investigations of Cambridge University's major development site at North West Cambridge recently revealed evidence of Bronze Age, Roman and medieval enclosures.

The alignment of these earthworks helped to define the distinctive street form of the initial design proposals for the new Ridgeway Village as part of the wider development strategy.

The design narratives that grow out of these studies should be reinforced by a similar approach to the development of a specific architecture and use of materials. While modern manufacturing and transportation allows mass produced products to be deployed across the country (with building economics being the driver for material selection), this does little to anchor new housing developments in a local context.

Regional building characteristics reflect the culture, climate and materials that were once locally available. Very often the geological characteristics of an area gave rise to centuries of building forms and material qualities. These established highly distinctive local characteristics that communities identify with and value as timeless expressions of the region's history. The stone buildings and dry-stone walls of the Peak District, with its undulating landscapes, make for a very different visual quality to that of East Anglia, with its large low hedgerows, brick and flint walls and steeply pitched red Roman tiled roofs. Similarly, the urban terraced forms of Cambridge are very different from those of Edinburgh, and rural housing in Kent with 'outshut' projections differs from the long low stone buildings set in a Cornish landscape.

The architect's role must be to find a contemporary regional language that can support 21st century living requirements and become an authentic evolution of tradition. Open plan living, large kitchens, utility rooms, home working spaces, parking, large glazed areas, and gardens that are now 'outside rooms' all require new plan forms for our time. These aspects are discussed in more detail in the chapter on the iconography of home (page 38).

Historic typologies - often with low ceilings, cellular rooms, small windows, utilitarian external space (that had nothing to do with leisure) and pre-car - present a stark contrast with the requirements of the modern home.

The adaptation and replication of these historic forms can become a caricature of history, and neither adequately address new lifestyles nor satisfactorily extend regional traditions. Local communities are very aware that little or no conscious design effort has been deployed to create an architecture that can successfully reconcile tradition and innovation.

Find inspiration in local architectural detail

Just as research can be deployed to develop a narrative for settlement form, so too can an understanding of regional character help deliver a narrative for a new place-specific architecture. While material choices make reference to place, they should also be assembled and detailed to support the overriding settlement narrative. Detailing should augment architectural expression in a way that distinguishes one neighbourhood from another.

The steeply folding tiled roofs of Kent that almost reach the ground, or the distinctive rendered chimneys of the 18th century village of Eaglesham near Glasgow (unusually located on principal building facades), are examples of significant architectural devices that could be redeployed to define a new contemporary language of place. At Polnoon, a new extension to Eaglesham, the harling-rendered Eaglesham chimney is reinterpreted to support the new streetscapes and provide wayfinding markers across the neighbourhood. (Case study page 100)

A distinctive chimney at Eaglesham, East Renfrewshire

A reinterpretation of the Eaglesham Chimney

Elsewhere, new development proposals for Mountfield, on the edge of Canterbury, employ modern housing typologies with large Kent 'outshut' red-tiled roofs. These roof forms have been adapted to absorb car parking and provide a sectional configuration to the new homes that connects ground and first-floor living through double-height volumes (Case study page 98).

In Cambridge, gault brick is used in many of the city's new settlements, acting as a visual and historical thread across the city. The city's urban housing stock is, however, quite different to that found in the surrounding villages. This observation informed the design response at Abode in Great Kneighton, where distinctive interwoven character areas support very different contemporary housing typologies, including urban terraces and mews housing, as well as 'gatehouse' apartment buildings and long rural barn houses. Materials are deployed in this development to support these differing housing forms. Gault brick and parapet flat roofs are used to give expression to the more urban forms, while large pitched roofs and dark-stained boarding develops the more relaxed and rural qualities of the housing on the settlement edges. The detailing on this development is also significant with pattern and textured brickwork giving expression and celebration to entrances and providing domestic scale and compositional articulation.

Textured brickwork provides composition and articulation to homes at Abode Great Kneighton

Concluding remarks

A thorough understanding of context will achieve a 'distillation of place' and imbue the design of new residential neighbourhoods with a strong identity.

Referencing local characteristics such as scale, grain, typological form, materiality and colour can assist in anchoring new developments within their immediate and regional contexts. These should be integrated with wider design considerations such as the definition of edges and thresholds, streetscape silhouettes, and a clear hierarchy of streets, lanes, mews and squares, which can be combined to deliver new neighbourhoods with their own unique character.

Recommendations for creating places which respond to their context

- **Understand the context** - good neighbourhood design should begin with an analysis and understanding of the physical, historical and cultural contexts, including topography, built fabric and landscape patterns.

- **Interpret the context** - understand vernacular forms and the characteristic grain of regional settlements to inspire new contextual masterplans and create a strong narrative of place.

- **Respect boundaries** - existing and new settlement edges and boundaries should be understood and clearly defined to prevent urban sprawl.

- **Celebrate thresholds** - use architecture and landscape to mark the transition between distinctive character areas.

- **Reinvent traditional building forms** - take inspiration from the local vernacular where appropriate while inventing contemporary typologies for modern lifestyles.