

MORE, BETTER, FASTER

Local distinctiveness and the challenge to build more homes



How can we reconcile the push for increasing housing numbers with the aspiration for high quality and locally distinctive homes and places, especially against a background of skills shortages and rising construction costs? And how can we create places which are genuinely rooted in their context rather than making superficial gestures towards local styles?

Crisis which crisis?

Before we begin discussing the meaning of distinctive local design and why it is so important, it is worth considering this in the context of housing delivery more widely and the often-competing nature of different requirements.

Everyone is talking about the 'housing crisis'.

To some this means a crisis of homelessness, illustrated by rising numbers of rough sleepers and people in temporary accommodation.

To others it means a crisis of home ownership, illustrated by falling numbers of owner occupiers and the growing cohort of 'generation rent'. This especially worries those who believe that home-ownership is the bedrock of a stable and prosperous society.

Everyone agrees that there is a problem of affordability: that the price of homes to rent or buy is too high in relation to average incomes, and that there are not enough homes at suitably subsidised rents for those on low incomes. The media likes to blame greedy developers, parsimonious government and smug, older homeowners.

Most of our leaders agree that the way to remedy the situation is to build more homes, thereby redressing the balance between supply and demand. (Some dissenters think that a better solution is to reduce demand by closing our borders.)

For the first time in 40 years housing is near the top of the political agenda, regarded by all parties as a significant election issue. In 2015 government pledged to boost supply, building one million new homes from 2015 to 2020 and increasing annual completions to 300,000 by the mid-2020s. The newly revised National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) published in July 2018 aims to promote new housing development and to increase housing densities on developable land, provided it is the right sort of thing in the right sort of place. In the November 2017 budget, the chancellor Philip Hammond pledged £15.3 billion of new financial support for housebuilding and land supply over the following five years – taking the total to £44 billion.

Housebuilders and large housing associations (which increasingly see themselves as housebuilders with a social purpose) are gearing up to deliver. They talk confidently about development programmes running into tens of thousands of homes.

But there is another looming crisis, the skills shortage in the construction industry: skilled people are retiring, and not enough young people are entering an industry perceived as old-fashioned; physical conditions on site are uncomfortable and the culture is seen as 'laddish'; productivity is poor; training and apprenticeship programmes have not recovered from the last recession. All of which was made plain in the 2016 *Farmer Review*

of the UK Construction Labour Model: Modernise or Die, which called for greater innovation and offsite manufacture to be adopted in housebuilding.

This systemic skills shortage has been masked by the UK's reliance on imported skills and labour from Europe. In London about 50 per cent of site workers (and 30 per cent of architects in the larger housing practices) are from the EU. We cannot grow indigenous capacity overnight; it will take a generation.

Another symptom of an industry in difficulty is the perception of poor quality and the reality of technical defects in new housing. The YouGov survey for the housing charity Shelter in 2017 found that 51 per cent of homeowners of recent new builds in England said they had experienced major problems including issues with construction, unfinished fittings and utilities.

Unsurprisingly, some would say there is a crisis of quality.

In addition, the construction skills shortage, coupled with the high cost of imported materials and components, is pushing up construction prices and extending delivery programmes. At the same time, house prices are stabilising or falling. As before, this decline in the development cycle is coinciding with increased planning obligations, as local authorities try to secure a bigger slice of development profits to fund affordable housing and other social or technical infrastructure. Just when nearly everyone agrees that we need more homes, it is becoming harder to achieve financial viability. Housing starts have begun to decline.

Back to the future

In response to this challenging situation many people in industry and government are turning to standardisation. It is hoped that having fewer but more rigorously tested solutions will deliver many benefits: less cost and more speed, fewer defects and less reliance on site skills.

Standardisation does not require factory production, but it does neatly dovetail with what is variously called offsite fabrication, modern methods of construction (MMC) and design for manufacture and assembly (DfMA). We have of course been here before: pre-fabricated houses and systems-built flats for the post-war baby boomers contributed to the last

great council housebuilding push, but the image and performance of much of the resulting stock discredited the concept of manufactured housing. Sir John Egan's 1998 Task Force Report *Rethinking Construction* came to some similar conclusions to the Farmer Review: the former chief executive of Jaguar thought that homes should be produced like motor cars. The government encouraged housing associations to promote MMC in their development programmes, but offsite fabrication never amounted to more than 7 per cent of their outputs, according to 2015 figures. Meanwhile many housebuilders favoured timber frame (a hybrid of site and factory construction), which has survived well-publicised technical issues and remains a significant part of their output.

Conditions today, and the potential severity of the various 'housing crises', mean that the time for DfMA may have finally arrived. Processes and products are greatly improved, there are many new entrants to the market, ranging from micro-specialists to behemoths like Legal and General. The housing ministry and the Greater London Authority are looking very carefully at its potential.

In Britain, MMC, and its parent pre-fabrication, have usually been seen as a top-down solution for affordable rented housing. Of course, this raises some questions and challenges; for example, how will homebuyers respond to the DfMA revolution? And for designers the task is to create locally distinctive places using a standardised kit of parts.

The need for choice

Amid all the excitement about housing supply targets, standardisation and design for manufacture, it would be all too easy to forget that we are building homes for people, not units for population cohorts.

Thankfully, there is a very different conversation going on: this focuses on people and community, and it converges in the concept of placemaking.

The NPPF is committed to "strong, vibrant and healthy communities" inhabiting "distinctive places" and the value of community engagement in harmonising new development with local aspirations and context. Places should be "sympathetic to local character and history, including the surrounding built environment and landscape setting".

This localism agenda introduces the final 'crisis' in our recital of today's housing dilemmas – a crisis of choice. There is a perception today that tenants, buyers and neighbours lack effective influence over local development. The truth is more complex, with some groups dominating debate and others lacking a voice. But it is surely the case that consumers of new homes have very little say in their design and very limited choice in the market place.

Public discourse voices people's frustration about lack of influence over our domestic environment, and it expresses a yearning for something more than generic products. Even well-intentioned initiatives to raise design quality (for example the London Housing Design Guide) can have the unintended effect of narrowing the range of what is on offer.

This report contains case studies which show how homebuyers can enjoy real influence over some very topical areas of demand, including co-housing for our ageing population and custom-build family houses.

What it means to be distinctively local

As we note in the introduction, the government has underlined its commitment to better design quality of new housing with the launch in November 2018 of the Building Better, Building Beautiful Commission. The commission is chaired by the political philosopher and conservative polemicist Sir Roger Scruton, who has been an outspoken critic of modern architects. Its remit is to help ensure new developments meet community needs and expectations, making them more likely to be well-received rather than resisted.

We know little about how the commission will work as yet, and how it might integrate its message with the pressure for volume and standardisation as we discussed above. Our case studies may help to show the way: all combine contextual placemaking with an understanding of the customer and a rigorous approach to the 'means of production'. One of the most innovative, Beechwood in Basildon, is entirely manufactured in the factory and shipped to site for rapid erection. What's more, the concept provides occupiers with a huge degree of choice, as the homes are tailored to suit individual design requirements. (Case study, page 80)

Successful placemaking involves much more than stylistic preference. It begins with an effective masterplan containing the seeds of distinctive character and identity. At the outline stage there is no need to commit to any specific form of architectural

expression – indeed, to do so is sometimes a distraction from strategic plan making, and designers should tread carefully in this area. However, in order to illustrate the feel of a place, design teams often do get drawn early into the question of 'style', and present seductive illustrations to help sell the overall concept.

It is therefore important to understand that character will grow out of a wide and complex range of inter-connected issues, including viability and process as well as visual preference. The character of buildings and places must balance many factors, including:

- Learning from the built and landscape context and taking clues from it, especially in those places where a distinctive local vernacular has evolved and survived.
- Connecting the past to the present: meeting the requirements and aspirations of today's residents for modern standards of comfort, convenience and flexibility.
- Modern construction techniques, achieving robust and enduring quality, while minimising cost, wastage and environmental impacts.
- The influence of phased development of large sites and the scope to create 'harmonious diversity' through a variety of development agencies and design teams.

What is the proper character for new development in the countryside? Take the example of new settlements on former military sites, such as Dunsfold Park, which will occupy a former WW2 airfield surrounded by woodland in the Surrey Hills. Rather than copy the low-density linear form of a traditional Surrey village, the masterplan creates a concentric walkable settlement with its centre set on the alignment of the runway, which will become a spectacular piece of 'land art'.

Vernacular traditions and modern lifestyles

Relating large new developments to the local urban design and architectural context is challenging. Rural planning authorities and their constituents tend to be stylistically more conservative than their urban counter-parts, so it's commonplace for developers and designers to make reference to the 'local vernacular' in order to soften opposition. But what does this actually mean and how can it respond to contemporary technology and lifestyles? How do we avoid so-called local vernacular references being no more than superficial additions to generic planning and house types?

Historically, vernacular architecture was the direct product of local building materials and techniques practised by craftsmen applying knowledge accumulated over generations. Vernacular architecture grew out of a particular set of circumstances in a particular place and time.

Regional differences in vernacular architecture struggled to survive the arrival of the railways, which enabled materials (such as Surrey bricks and Welsh slates) to be transported cheaply over long distances and used in contexts far from their original source. Nevertheless, distinctive craft skills and local materials remained available and affordable until the early 20th century. Today, hand-crafted solutions cost much more than modern construction approaches and are likely to be found only in bespoke homes at the upper end of the market.

In order to borrow and learn from the past, it is vital to identify the successful and appropriate elements of the local vernacular which could inspire and influence the design of new buildings and spaces.

The objective of the designer should be to adopt the spirit of the vernacular while introducing elements of innovation. This involves drawing on the characteristics of local buildings - their scale, use of materials, and relationship to the landscape - and at the same time responding to modern lifestyles and aspirations. Thatched cottages look pretty but are often cramped, dark and damp, while homebuyer surveys invariably feature space and light among people's highest priorities.

To create and sustain beautiful and popular homes and places requires a holistic understanding of the many aspirational and practical aspects of design, as well as long-term occupancy and management. 'Style' and 'character' will emerge from an integrated design process and from the way that places mature with use. The right architectural language for the particular brief and place, located on the spectrum of traditional to modern, will evolve, and need not be imposed at the start.

We expand on these considerations in greater detail in the following chapters.



Homebuyers like traditional materials enclosing spacious modern interiors with generous windows



Dunsfold Park

Placemaking at scale: how to create a new rural settlement



Dunsfold Park will be a new Surrey village for the 21st century. The former WW2 airfield has outline planning permission for 1800 homes, set within a 250-acre country park and focused on a market square with shops and schools. Unlike many new settlements, the residential village will be grafted on to an existing business park with potential for 2,000 jobs: a genuine working community and not a dormitory.

The vision for Dunsfold Park was formulated long before the current revival of the garden city movement, but closely mirrors the TCPA's garden city principles.

The layout is structured around the main runway, which will become a linear park and striking piece of 'land art', and the 5 km perimeter track. Everyone will live within 10 minutes' walk of the centre and two minutes from a bus-stop. This compactness challenges conventional travel assumptions: although Dunsfold Park will accommodate cars, it is not designed around conventional highway and parking models, and it anticipates future changes to car ownership, vehicle technologies and travel patterns.

The village centre will feature an intricate and human-scaled network of streets, with limited access for vehicles.

<p>An active centre with shops, schools and other 'social infrastructure'</p>	<p>Enhancing the landscape</p>
<p>A range of homes for all household sizes and incomes</p>	<p>A healthy place</p>
<p>A compact settlement, scaled for the pedestrians</p>	<p>Innovative technologies for energy and waste</p>
<p>Promoting jobs alongside homes</p>	<p>Celebrating Dunsfold's aviation heritage</p>
<p>Convenient alternatives to the motorcar</p>	<p>Inspired by Surrey's architectural traditions</p>