DESIGN REVIEWED URBAN HOUSING

Lessons learnt from projects reviewed by CABE’s expert design panel
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FOREWORD

CABE’s design review programme has, over the four years since it began work, reviewed hundreds of projects for sites across England. We now want to ensure that the lessons we have learnt over that time are shared with decision-makers and practitioners involved in shaping our built environment. One good reason to do this is that we tend to see the same issues arising from one scheme to the next. By sharing what we perceive to be best practice, based on successful outcomes, we hope to help the development community to address and resolve these issues earlier in the process.

This report is one of a series dealing with ‘lessons learnt’, each of which covers a subject area of current interest and attempts to derive practical lessons from the design work that we have seen. In a series of short case studies, it brings together a varied but representative set of recent high-density urban housing projects, describing what was proposed, and CABE’s analysis of the designs.

Designing housing at higher densities and on brownfield sites, as is encouraged by Government policy, is challenging in a number of ways. Issues such as privacy, sunlight and daylight, and accommodating car parking all become more difficult the more densities rise. Standardised solutions will often not be appropriate, and a high level of design skill is needed if such schemes are to become and to remain places that people want to live.

In the best of current projects, this has been recognised by developers and housebuilders, and it is encouraging to see an increasing number of talented architects, both established practices and young hopefuls, becoming involved in the design of housing in recent years. The case studies in this report, and other projects seen by CABE, give some cause for optimism.

But how representative are these examples? Is the prevailing standard of new housing being built in this country living up to the aspiration set out in the Government’s own guidance on the subject in Planning Policy Guidance note 3, for ‘attractive, high quality living environments’? There is plenty of housing still being built which doesn’t live up to this standard – much of it at the lower end of the density range, much of it on green field sites. The challenge now facing private developers and architects to avoid low density, ‘anywhere’ residential environments and to produce attractive, sustainable places is great. It is essential that we do not repeat mistakes that were made in the second half of the twentieth century – we hope that this document contains pointers to good design that will reduce the risk of that happening.

Paul Finch
Deputy Chairman of CABE, and Chairman of CABE Design Review Committee
INTRODUCTION: WHAT IS THIS DOCUMENT AND WHO IS IT FOR?

During the course of each year CABE’s Design Review committee considers projects of all types and sizes, from urban masterplans to individual buildings as well as individual structures, landscaping and public realm schemes. Over the past three years, the committee has reviewed 20 high-density urban housing projects planned for many different parts of the country. These include schemes for both industrial and ‘green’ brownfield sites, the revitalisation of existing housing areas, towers, projects in historic cities, schemes by rivers and waterways, and proposals for sensitive sites in the heart of cities.

Over this period a number of common threads have begun to emerge. The purpose of this publication is to draw these together in order to illustrate that the goals of higher densities and higher design standards are compatible. This document is intended to be helpful to planning authorities, developers and their consultant teams.

Design Reviewed: Urban Housing examines a number of key issues for the planning of high-density housing at the beginning of the twenty-first century and then looks briefly at six case studies of housing projects from around England. The development of high-density housing is a complex chemistry of urban planning, architecture, finance and creativity. At its best the result can be the building of new communities, self-sustaining but at the same time woven into their surrounding neighbourhoods. This study focuses on just one element of that mix – the contribution of good design. It takes as fundamental the assumption that good design is an essential ingredient of any successful housing scheme. As noted in Better Places to Live, the companion guide to PPG3, ‘where people live has a major effect on their life. If where they live is well-planned, well-designed and well-managed, their quality of life is likely to be a great deal better than that of those who live elsewhere.”

Debates about the merits and faults of high density have continued almost from the moment that back-to-back terraced houses began to cluster around the mines, mills, factories and railway towns of the Industrial Revolution. High-density housing has moved in and out of fashion ever since.

By the latter part of the twentieth century, the social problems that had arisen in many of the same high density developments that had been praised in post-war Britain tended, once again, to give high density a bad name and a reputation that still lingers in public perception.

Demand for new homes, pressure on land and an increasing dissatisfaction with aspects of urban living, coupled with a concern to retain as much of the green belt as possible, have re-kindle the debate. The publication of Towards an Urban Renaissance, the report of the Urban Task Force, the Government’s subsequent white paper (Our Towns and Cities) and Planning Policy Guidance Note 3 (Housing) (PPG3) have encouraged a reassessment of housing densities.

PPG3 clearly sets out the Government’s objectives for housing at the beginning of the 21st century: ‘The Government intends that everyone should have the opportunity of a decent home. They further intend that there should be greater choice of housing and that housing should not reinforce social distinctions. The housing needs of all in the community should be recognised, including those in need of affordable or special housing in both urban and rural areas. To promote more sustainable patterns of development and make better use of previously developed land, the focus for additional housing should be existing towns and cities. New housing and residential environments should be well designed and should make a significant contribution to promoting urban renaissance and improving the quality of life.’

In order to provide guidance on what PPG3 means by ‘well designed’, the policy is supported by a companion guide, Better Places to Live, which provides a useful starting point for assessing the merits of housing proposals. It identifies, through case studies, a number of attributes of successful housing, shown in the table below:

### Definitions of terms used

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Term</th>
<th>Definition</th>
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<tr>
<td>Movement</td>
<td>A movement framework which is safe, direct and attractive to all users</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mix</td>
<td>A rich mix of housing opportunities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Community</td>
<td>A sense of neighbourhood and community ownership</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Structure</td>
<td>A coherent structure of buildings, spaces, landscape and routes for movement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Layout</td>
<td>Street layout and design which is appropriate to use and context</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Place</td>
<td>Attractive and clearly defined public and private spaces</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Amenity</td>
<td>Pleasant gardens and private amenity space</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parking</td>
<td>Convenient but unobtrusive car parking</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Safety</td>
<td>A safe and secure environment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Space</td>
<td>Well planned homes which provide space and functionality</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adaptability</td>
<td>Housing which is robust and adaptable to changing requirements</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maintenance</td>
<td>An environment which can be well maintained, over the long-term</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sustainability</td>
<td>Housing designed to minimise resource consumption</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Detail</td>
<td>Well considered detailing of buildings and spaces</td>
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1 Planning Policy Guidance Note 3 (Housing), DTLR, 2000, paragraph 1
PPG3 gives priority ‘to re-using previously developed land within urban areas, bringing empty homes back into use and converting existing buildings, in preference to the development of greenfield sites.’ It places a strong emphasis on quality in order ‘to break the mould of mediocrity that has characterised so much new housing development’ and looks to ‘encourage housing development which makes more efficient use of land (between 30 and 50 dwellings per hectare net).’ These are, in fact, quite modest density targets, typical of edge of town conditions; many of the inner city schemes considered by the Design Review Committee have a considerably higher density.

While regional planning guidance has examined housing needs at a more local level, some concern has been expressed that: ‘one size cannot fit all. A blanket national target for higher density does not fit easily in the North, where there is already a surplus of high density housing, and in the suburbs, where high density can sometimes (but not always) jar with well-established and highly successful development.’ The emphasis should be on walkable neighbourhoods and developing a critical mass of activity to support public transport and local businesses and services.

Issues concerning high density go beyond architecture and design. They include: sustainability; ownership and management; the relationship between the costs of innovation and land values; transport; social pressures including urban crime and vandalism; open space and the public realm; the need for community facilities as well as homes; the balance between community involvement and innovation.

It is clear that for some new housing developments, particularly those in former industrial cities, economic and social objectives are the primary drivers and that physical regeneration serves these ends rather than being an end in itself.

It does not, however, follow that issues of quality of design are therefore subsidiary. The higher the density of a scheme, the greater the design skill required to provide a high quality solution. Issues of amenity, aspect, prospect and sunlight, overlooking, and visual and acoustic privacy, all become more acute as density increases, and standard solutions are less likely to work. The answer to increasing density is unlikely to be to take standard low density solutions and then push the units closer together.

Indeed, if sustainable regeneration is the goal, then a commitment, throughout the country, to quality design and the creation of attractive physical places is an indispensable component of a successful strategy.

2 Planning Policy Guidance Note 3 (Housing), DTLR, 2000, paragraph 58
3 Higher density homes – the impact of PPG3, new-homes.co.uk, 2001
New housing in context

Revealing the site
By their very nature, new urban housing developments must respond to the context of their site and neighbourhood. No successful project can be parachuted in without care or attention to the built and natural environment in which the new community will grow. This relationship to the wider context, the existing environment and any likely future development beyond the site, whatever its size, needs to be carefully analysed. An informed character appraisal of the site’s wider context can lead to a project that is more likely to succeed.

This is particularly true in towns like York, Canterbury and Hull where sites, which are often small, can rub shoulders with an historic environment, developed in a piece-meal way over a long period of time. Here new development needs to be in harmony with the character and rhythm of its surroundings and the choice of materials may need to reflect and integrate local character. This does not mean, however, that the application of traditional materials has to be incompatible with contemporary design.

The development of historic industrial sites in city centres, like St Mildred’s Tannery in Canterbury, can provide an opportunity for historically isolated areas to be reintegrated into the city. This can lead to improvements to the inner city environment and giving public access, in this case opening up riverside walks and new pedestrian routes.

Some brownfield sites may need external help to reveal their true character. At Freemen’s Meadow, Bede Island in Leicester, for example, a disused railway and electricity pylons restricted and scarred a potentially attractive site by the River Soar. In situations of this kind, there may be a role for local authorities to broker a collaborative approach to the development of the site and for public funding to contribute to improving the post-industrial landscape. Moreover, many large post-industrial sites are by their very nature isolated from the neighbourhoods that surround them. In such particularly difficult cases it is especially necessary to achieve integration into the length and breadth of a site’s wider context.

In very large sites, the challenge may also be where to begin. Successful new development, whether for housing or employment use, needs to achieve critical mass. Experience suggests that it is better to create sustainable focused development in a few areas, if necessary leaving other areas largely untouched, rather than spreading development so thin it could simply evaporate in an economic downturn.

Going with the urban grain
As CABE’s publication Design Review points out, ‘one of the keys to a successful project is to achieve an understanding of its physical context through an urban design analysis [which goes] beyond the view from the site boundary.’ Most inner city sites are tightly connected with their surroundings by the historic grain of the streets, lanes and alleyways that have long provided the arteries of pedestrian and vehicle movement. Even in fragmented city centres, research and analysis can reveal the urban grain of the city or town plan around the site.

In such a context, what is frequently required is a strong, coherent and distinctive quarter that can integrate with the grain of its surroundings. Site planning and the arrangement of routes and spaces should make good connections with the site’s surroundings, creating a pattern of pedestrian routes that follow the grain and street typologies of the surroundings.

High-density housing can be commercially successful without building high or disrupting the urban grain. For example, reflecting the urban flow of a densely built medieval city, dissected by narrow lanes, may not be easy in the context of building
for housing at the beginning of the twenty-first century. In this case it may be better to be clear about this fact and its consequences, one of which might be to achieve greater site density in a new development. This may require fresh thinking and a break from formulaic apartment size that can often be at odds with the varied and intricate character of conservation areas.

Close to nature
In some developments such as Staiths, in Gateshead, a key issue is cohabitation with the natural environment. Staiths was an area of mud bank, revealed at low tide and providing an important and protected habitat for seabirds. Careful thought needed to be given to ways in which brownfield site development could enhance, and be enhanced by, the natural habitat and how it might use landscape features to create a pleasant environment. This included the retention of a salt meadow and mud flats, ensuring that these were kept quiet in order to encourage wildlife.

In ‘green’ brownfield sites, such as Bellway’s ‘Meridian South’ at the former Hither Green hospital in southeast London, mature trees can be a key constraint on development. Here the decision to retain these trees, which had formed a small arboretum, and incorporate them as a central element of the site planning, has been a key part of the development and has been welcomed by concerned local residents. Elsewhere, tree planting programmes have been important to the landscaping and greening of brownfield sites, but care needs to be taken to avoid an over-reliance on deciduous trees which in some hard landscaping can lack warmth in winter.

A sense of place
‘We want our towns, cities and suburbs to be places for people – places that are designed, built and maintained on the principle that people come first.’ It may be a truism to state that housing should be designed for people, but the question most frequently asked of projects considered by CABE’s Design Review Panel is what will this neighbourhood feel like to live in?

Above all, new communities need to develop a sense of place, both as a whole and within any newly created town centre. This difficult aim will not be achieved by schemes that offer a bland repetition of residential blocks and their public spaces, or by replicating rigid patterns of roads and paths.

Buildings need to reflect their specific location. All riverside settings, for example, do not require a Docklands clone, however successful some new apartment developments on the edge of that part of the Thames might have been. Care needs to be taken that the built form is not alien to its surroundings. Too often designs feel like nowhere in particular, often a problem that can be resolved by a legible logic in the choice of materials used. A sense of place is a sense of your own place, not one relocated from elsewhere.

This requires an architectural distinctiveness and an urban design that appreciates its surroundings and the natural topography of streets and footpaths, rivers, hills, and views. Some sites are already rich with history about which local people feel strongly. On these occasions design can take account of those histories in a way that will reinforce the development’s distinctiveness.

This may need determination and focus. The early phases of the Isle of Dogs development emerged under a laissez-faire regime and are generally now regarded as unsatisfactory. Later phases were planned under a more controlling vision. Here the masterplan or the more modest site strategy can prove its worth.

On occasions, the distinctiveness of a community can be enhanced in its open spaces and its communal buildings. But there is a need to be clear from the start about the purpose of both these spaces and buildings, as this will define their form and character. So too will the street environment including the hierarchy of spaces and the distinctiveness of different parts of the neighbourhood.

A sense of place is about character, identity and variety. Evidence that volume house builders are going further than before in developing a variety of house types for a single scheme is a welcome sign of recognition that this can help to enhance the quality of a housing development. The use of several architectural practices on one site can require sensitive management and care needs to be taken that the project is not watered down when handed over to executive architects. Here the robust masterplan really reveals its value. At its best, the involvement of a number of architects in the development of buildings on a single site can greatly add to the distinctiveness of the area, bringing diversity of design and helping to create imaginative schemes of real character.

A sense of style
The ability of a scheme to create a sense of place is greatly dependent upon the quality of its individual components, the buildings and the spaces between and around them. This not only requires architecture of high quality but a strong landscape strategy.

Individual buildings need not only to have their own character but also be able to be read as a unified whole. The architecture planned for a site needs to reveal a coherent rationale, especially before outline planning applications are made.

They also need to suit their situation and connect with their surroundings. Sometimes this may require a softer and less formal architectural approach; on other occasions the solution may lie in the right choice of building style. For example, blocks of flats with a design better suited for terraced housing can easily result in an awkward relationship between public and
private space, a problem partly resolved by the relatively simple solution of increasing the number of front doors. On another site, large blocks of accommodation can be ill suited to a conservation area, where a finer grain to the development might be expected. Here, narrower residential blocks can provide a more appropriate grain and assist in creating variety.

To achieve a balance between public and private space, lower-rise blocks in courtyard or part-courtyard form are now a commonplace of residential projects. This form of building is not well enough established or sufficiently understood by designers in England to guarantee success as a matter of course. Particular attention needs to be given to the relationship of the shared parts of the building (the corridors and staircases) and private accommodation, and to the planning of rooms next to internal corners, especially those with acute angles. This is to ensure adequate daylight gets to all rooms and that problems of overlooking are addressed.

Some of the schemes considered by the Design Review committee have been highly innovative. Ground breaking architecture, however, needs continuity of attention and design thinking. To ensure that projects reach the standard of quality to which their proponents aspire, planning authorities need to be assured that the key design team will carry out the detailed design. It is vital to be certain that the scheme approved will be the scheme achieved, especially where both the masterplan and architecture are highly responsive to a specific site context. Some more imaginative schemes may not survive if conventional house-types are substituted at a later date. CABE research shows: "widespread evidence of changes, often to save costs, being made after the grant of planning permission. Designs are altered, special features or landscaping are omitted, and lower quality materials substituted."

The success of any scheme depends upon the choice of materials and the detailing. Planning authorities should build in rigorous conditions with regard to these aspects, and where appropriate require drawings at 1:20 and 1:5 scales be approved as conditions of any planning consent.

**Something old, something new**

Few development sites come as empty blocks of land. Many have existing buildings; some are rich with archaeology or important natural environments. In some cases on-site buildings are listed or trees subject to tree preservation orders or within conservation areas.

CABE works closely with English Heritage, which is a valuable source of advice for both developers and architects about listed buildings and the historic environment of the surrounding neighbourhood.

Whatever the individual situation, each development site needs a clear strategy for dealing with all old and derelict buildings. Sometimes, as in Lincoln’s Brayford Quays, this means retaining many of the existing buildings and incorporating these into the site design, while at the same time allowing continuing views of the cathedral and historic Lindum hillside. In Manchester’s New Islington quarter, there are plans to refurbish the Grade II-listed former Ancoats Hospital, while at Hither Green in London, a retained hospital building will be used for non-residential purposes, including, fittingly, a doctor’s surgery. At King’s Crescent in Hackney, London, some existing post-war residential accommodation will remain on site. Here, as elsewhere, where existing buildings are retained, care needs to be taken to ensure that older buildings, even if refurbished, do not look tired in relation to the new.

In some developments existing buildings can be used to create a landmark feature, as at Hither Green. Here the hospital water tower with its large clock will become a centrepiece of a new landscaped public space.

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1. Our Towns and Cities: the Future – Delivering an Urban Renaissance, paragraph 4.3

Protecting Design Quality in Planning is available free in printed form by post from CABE and can be downloaded from the website.
A number of proposals that have come to the Design Review committee have been presented as part of masterplans. Some are on a large scale with a significant timeframe; some more modestly framed for the development of smaller sites, but where guidance is required for a number of architectural practices which may be involved in the scheme at a later date.

Good masterplans make connections and reveal opportunities which might otherwise not be apparent. They show how public investment is adding value to private development opportunities and vice versa, and they can provide coherence to a developer’s philosophy, setting out clear mechanisms for its delivery. Masterplans need to be defined in terms of both aspiration and execution. While they can help ease the development control process in the future, it is crucial that the level of detail given is sufficient to ensure that its intentions are not dissipated over time.

This does not mean that masterplans have to be rigid, prescriptive and restricting. Modern masterplanning for high density housing should be a robust but flexible process that allows designs to evolve in response to changing circumstances, while at the same time achieving a relatively unified and consistent architectural approach.

Masterplanning is dealt with in greater depth in two other CABE publications being published in 2004: Design Reviewed: Masterplans, which is part of the same series as this report, and Creating Successful Masterplans: A Guide for Clients.
Space, security and sunlight

One of the key mistakes made in the landscape design of social housing following the Second World War was to create islands of green space with little sense of enclosure or ownership. These often failed as a result of their design and a lack of maintenance. As important, therefore, as the buildings in high-density housing schemes is the space around them. Achieving the proper balance between public and private space and a successful hierarchy of streets and footpaths is essential to the success of any development.

Hierarchy of space

There should be a clear distinction between what is private or communal space, in the form of terraces, gardens and shared courtyards, and what may be expected to be public, such as streets, public squares or, perhaps, the water's edge. This may require work on a detailed urban strategy to identify those areas where activity is likely and at what time of day, thus determining what spaces can be expected to be busy and lively and what will be calmer and quieter and more appropriate for residential entrances. This can necessitate a clear distinction, as well as a sensible balance, between public and private space, avoiding having too much landscaped space which would be the responsibility of a management company and useful to no-one, rather than space that could more usefully belong to home owners, either individually or in common.

Spatial hierarchies are above all about relationships and achieving a proper balance between the uses of space, pedestrian and vehicular routes and the points at which they meet. This requires a detailed consideration of the form of the urban planning to avoid, for example, small blocks and overly wide streets or a confusion of the fronts and backs of residential units and where entrances are situated.

As Better Places to Live: By Design points out 'some of the most attractive and enduring residential environments have the simplest of
structures... houses face the street, gardens run end to end and cars are parked mainly on the street. The sense of quality comes from the detailed design of the buildings, the corners and boundary treatments, and from the mature landscape.9

Public space needs character. Often there is a requirement for greater variety in the nature and size, orientation and edges of both public and private spaces, taking advantage of the natural topography and allowing opportunities for vistas. These might include views of landmarks, important public buildings or public art.

Public space needs to take full account of the movement of pedestrians, creating an environment in which residents and visitors are encouraged to walk or cycle with safety and ease, but it must also be mindful of the needs of service vehicles needing access to the site. In Accordia, Cambridge, the close co-operation and support of the county council highway engineer has resulted in an imaginative hierarchy of streets designed to cope with all levels of use. A greater variety in street width can also help to avoid a feeling of homogeneity. Where a central square is at the core of the urban design, this needs to be a focal point, not merely a street intersection, faced by slightly larger buildings.

Safety and security

Getting that balance right between public and private space can be an important way of achieving a feeling of comfort and safety. There is a concern that in some proposed developments a grid pattern of courtyards, while providing enclosed private space, produces a series of buildings turned in on themselves, leaving streets without surveillance or pedestrian activity. There are dangers, too, of corners and edges of some schemes becoming forgotten back-land sites because of a lack of pedestrian flow – recreating the problems of neglect and crime that were a feature of less successful twentieth century developments.

Large distances between blocks, blank back walls and a lack of front entrances can make streets feel deserted and unfriendly spaces. A relentless use of high walls can mean that pedestrians cannot see around corners. Children using streets of this kind to travel to and from school, or people waiting for buses, especially at night, feel insecure and exposed. Streets, courtyards and alleyways need to be made welcoming, interesting and people-friendly, and residential blocks should be orientated so that they create active frontages. The informal surveillance of public areas that this enables can aid security, while the creation of thresholds to private dwellings can provide a feeling of privacy for residents. Where shared gardens are provided for the use of residents, these can be fenced and gated to keep children in and unwanted visitors out. The Design Review committee shares the view expressed in Safer Places: The Planning Systems and Crime Prevention that ‘within residential areas, there can be advantages for crime prevention to attracting a mix of people of different ages, lifestyles and economic status. This avoids concentrations of groups such as young people that may be more likely to offend, or be targeted as victims, or create areas devoid of occupation, activity and surveillance at particular times. Providing a range of housing types in terms of dwelling size, type, tenure and affordability can enable this’.10

The routes to community facilities, public green spaces and play areas need to feel safe. On larger developments, activity can be provided through a wide range of public facilities for residents and non-residents. In New Islington, for example, these will include restaurants and cafés, a launderette, a medical centre, a crèche, nursery and primary school. On the Vaux Brewery site in Sunderland, there are plans for 8,500 m² of café, leisure and retail space. All these will offer welcome daytime and night-time activity at street level. At the same time this could bring a large number of non-residents onto the site and

underlines the need for a clear distinction between public and private space so that residents can also find peace and tranquillity.

**Spaces for people**
The priority in any new scheme is to create places and spaces for people – a later section of this publication looks at ways of curbing the intrusion of the car. Residents, visitors and those passing through the site need to feel safe and secure. There is a need therefore to ensure that pedestrian access and egress are convenient and salubrious. People living in flats should, where possible, be given shared space at ground level and balconies or terraces where they can enjoy fresh air and sunshine. Special consideration needs to be given to the different needs of small children and young people.

The public space below and around towers should not be negated by servicing and traffic at ground level. Where residential access to towers is through a public park, careful consideration needs to be given to issues of security and safety, especially at night.

**Sunlight**
The orientation of buildings and streets is not only important in providing a safer environment; it can also increase levels of sunlight. Alleyways and courtyards that do not get much sunlight offer little in the way of welcome.

In some developments, the attempt to reach the desired number of units within a courtyard configuration can result in some habitable rooms receiving very little natural daylight and having little aspect, as well as being overlooked. The form and orientation of blocks and individual flats should take account of aspect, allowing sunlight into courtyards and onto balconies, making them more pleasant places and helping to reduce energy demands. Particular attention needs to be paid to units that are north facing and it seems desirable that these should be designed so that at least part of the accommodation can take advantage of the sun from the east or the west.

**Making the best use of site and space**
PPG3 found that in 2000, new housing development in England was being built at an average of 25 dwellings per hectare, but more than half of all new housing was built at less than 20 dwellings per hectare. “That represents a level of land take which is historically very high and which can no longer be sustained”

Deciding on the right amount of accommodation that the site can reasonably take is a difficult task, often driven by financial return rather than design criteria. There are times when too many residential units are proposed for sites not equipped to deal with volumes of that kind. Conversely, there are other schemes that do not seem to be making most efficient use of available land, where a sensible reduction in the amount of public space could in turn reduce costs of maintenance and increase the number of units without losing anything useful.

This is always likely to be a question of careful balance but the ultimate aim should be to create a place where people will want to buy, live and stay. Planning authorities will want to satisfy themselves that all options have been carefully considered.

**Towers**
The residential tower is for many the symbol of all that can be wrong in high-density housing. “Tower blocks face many problems, most of which relate to poorly-maintained social housing. Some relate to physical conditions; others to management and allocations policy issues. Image is often a draw-back and services provision a consistent problem. So tower blocks are often seen as problems rather than resources... If conditions are to improve, the physical environment and social qualities of the community must move forward together.”

11. Deciding on the right amount of accommodation that the site can reasonably take is a difficult task, often driven by financial return rather than design criteria. There are times when too many residential units are proposed for sites not equipped to deal with volumes of that kind. Conversely, there are other schemes that do not seem to be making most efficient use of available land, where a sensible reduction in the amount of public space could in turn reduce costs of maintenance and increase the number of units without losing anything useful.

This is always likely to be a question of careful balance but the ultimate aim should be to create a place where people will want to buy, live and stay. Planning authorities will want to satisfy themselves that all options have been carefully considered.

12. The residential tower is for many the symbol of all that can be wrong in high-density housing. "Tower blocks face many problems, most of which relate to poorly-maintained social housing. Some relate to physical conditions; others to management and allocations policy issues. Image is often a draw-back and services provision a consistent problem. So tower blocks are often seen as problems rather than resources... If conditions are to improve, the physical environment and social qualities of the community must move forward together."
CABE and English Heritage’s Guidance on Tall Buildings provides advice on good practice in relation to tall buildings in the planning process and sets out how CABE and English Heritage will evaluate proposals for tall buildings. This guidance applies to towers of all kinds and for all purposes.

On some small city centre sites, towers may represent the optimum way of achieving high density, though as the Guidance points out: ‘Tall buildings are only one possible model for high density development’. This is a view endorsed by the Urban Affairs sub-committee of Transport, Local Government and Regional Affairs Select Committee’s in its report on Tall Buildings. ‘Tall buildings are not essential to the urban renaissance. They are only one of several ways of increasing building densities. They can be energy efficient and can be part of mixed use schemes; however, other high density building types have similar advantages. In several respects high rise buildings are less sustainable than high or low rise buildings: the inflexibility of space and difficulties of change of use have been a problem’.14

CABE’s Design Review committee has examined a number of plans for residential towers. The successful tower can be a pristine, delicate building relying on the successful resolution of a number of subtle considerations including the purity of the façade, the detailing and issues such as the degree of reflection and transparency of the glass. To make any building beautiful or elegant is not simply a technical exercise and this is especially evident in the case of towers. Any new tall building should be of ‘first class design quality’ but residential towers need an additional investment of imagination and invention in their architectural language if they are not to be too readily associated with unpopular examples from the 50s and 60s.

Three issues have formed recurring themes in the consideration of residential towers:
- the relationship of form to height
- the nature of the top of tall buildings
- the relationship between a tower’s upper and lower parts

A key aspect of any tall building is how it is brought down to the ground. The base needs to make sense in the context of the rest of the building’s lower floors and to have a relationship with the scale of architecture nearby. A strong landscape design strategy can help to make sense of where the towers land and how the ground floor relates to the external spaces. Landscape treatment of the ground-plane needs to be of the highest quality – a place to enjoy, pedestrian friendly and not dominated by vehicle circulation. This is often best achieved by the early involvement of a landscape designer.

It is important to be sure what the ground floor of a tower will be used for, in order to achieve satisfactory relationships between the public realm, the neighbourhood realm and the private realm and how all three operate and inter-relate. These relationships, together with that between the ground plane and the landscape proposals, need to be analysed, and illustrated on plans and drawings.

The importance of form and its effect on the skyline is nowhere more apparent than at the tops of tall buildings. These can often work best if they are lightweight and transparent in appearance. Frequently there is a greater need for simplicity and elegance in elevations. But often too much is being done, resulting in the tops of buildings looking arbitrary when it would be better to be simple and calm. The imaginative use of the service core or the introduction of alternative accommodation on upper floors, such as duplex apartments, can provide a successful design solution.

1 Planning Policy Guidance Note 3 (Housing), DTLR, 2000, paragraph 57
2 Streets in the sky – Towards improving the quality of life in Tower Blocks in the UK, National Sustainable Tower Blocks Initiative, 2000
3 Guidance on Tall Buildings English Heritage/ Cabe, 2003
Taming the car

There is no doubt for many housing projects, one of the greatest design challenges is taming the car and other traffic. Getting this right has a considerable effect on the way the site works and what it looks like. Despite the frequently stated ambition to subordinate the car, it is evident that there remains a need for greater imagination in solving its noisy and potentially dangerous demands.

Historically underground car parking has failed significantly on high density urban housing schemes and has contributed to many of the problems associated with them, particularly when in public ownership. If great care is not taken in their design, including such key issues as lighting, ventilation and security, the quality of the spaces provided for such parking can easily erode the overall quality of a housing scheme. This is not to say that they cannot provide an elegant solution as Hastings’ Borough Engineer Sidney Little showed as early as the 1930s with an elegant underground carpark near the seafront. If designed and managed successfully, the underground option can be the best way of dealing with the amount of parking demanded by an appropriate high-density site.15

Care needs be taken to ensure a proper relationship between cars and domestic spaces, especially in central courtyards where car noise can be intrusive. Proposals often contain courtyards dominated by parking for cars when streets might be a better place to keep them, allowing courtyards to become more private spaces. Car parking in courtyard blocks can threaten the quality of central landscaped spaces and should be kept to a minimum. There is a danger of altering the well understood models of public street and private courtyard and providing the worst of all worlds, courtyards crowded with parked cars – and empty streets. In most established residential areas, on-street parking has traditionally been an
acceptable solution. Therefore it is often preferable to see car parking at the edges of site roads, carefully integrated into a strategy for hard and soft landscaping, always remembering the needs of those with restricted mobility for whom easy access to and from a vehicle is essential.

Solutions not only need to be found to the stationary car, but also to vehicles on the move. Road layouts can sometimes seem at odds with a desire to control the car and the hierarchy of streets and paths are based too heavily on their needs. Efforts to build in traffic calming measures are to be applauded. Some schemes, like the Seager site in Deptford, have taken bolder measures to reduce car numbers by limiting car-parking numbers to 50% of the dwelling numbers (and incidentally using three-car stackers to reduce the size of the car park). In other cases efforts to solve problems caused by the existing road layout may in turn create other difficulties. In one example where two new one-way roads were proposed, albeit with short-term stopping, traffic speeds may actually be increased.

There are many journeys made by car which, with better planning, could be made by walking, cycling or public transport. The lay-out of housing development can have a significant influence on that choice.\(^1\) Exemplary status is sometimes exaggerated. Ambitious targets for energy efficiency need rigorous testing and assurances that materials proposed as part of a green strategy are indeed the materials used.

The committee has remained sceptical of claims about sustainability in relation to glass, and is not convinced of the energy efficiency of towers clad in glass. An energy strategy for tall buildings should aim to make it more energy efficient using different forms of cladding.

Undoubtedly many developers see the price of going green as one they are hesitant to add to the standard costs of their homes. In some cases developers are offering a shopping list of ‘green’ features from which purchasers can if they wish select.

At New Islington, the developer is taking a long-term view and becoming part of the energy supply chain. Water for the new development will be provided from a borehole, electricity by a series of on-site gas-powered Combined Heat and Power plants. Heat, produced as a by-product of electricity generation, will be used for heating homes and water. Dry waste and sewage will be treated on site. The economic viability of this approach remains to be proven.

### Sustainability

PPG3 urges local authorities to promote ‘a greener residential environment’\(^2\) and a number of schemes considered by the Design Review committee have made some efforts to meet this aspect of the Government’s agenda. It is clear, however, that much more could be done.

\(^{15}\) There are obviously very real difficulties in providing underground parking in archaeologically rich sites.


\(^{17}\) Planning Policy Guidance Note 3 (Housing), paragraph 46.
Building a community
At its best new housing development is not simply about building houses. It is about creating new communities with the same rich diversity of residents, the same level of day-time activity and the same range of local facilities that might be found in any other part of a town or city. PPG3 believed it was: ‘important to help create mixed and inclusive communities, which offer a choice of housing and lifestyle. It does not accept that different types of housing and tenures make bad neighbours. Local planning authorities should encourage the development of mixed and balanced communities: they should ensure that new housing developments help to secure a better social mix by avoiding the creation of large areas of housing of similar characteristics.’ 18 This is not easy – despite the developer’s best intentions and the availability of affordable housing, price, lifestyle and the size of available properties may tend to set the style of the average resident.

Some developments like New Islington in Manchester, or Kings Crescent in Hackney, east London, are in different ways building on existing communities. Others are starting from scratch. There is a concern about developments that are created to appeal primarily to those who have disposable income, will buy organic food and recycle their waste. Here the residents are likely to be well educated, highly mobile in the employment market and seeking careers in well-paid jobs. Often unlikely to be employed locally, many may leave the area for much of the day, creating little activity during daylight hours. In these circumstances even the highest density housing can have relatively low intensity of population during daylight hours.

To counter this anxiety, some larger developments have proposed work/live accommodation, offices, shops, restaurants, cafés, hairdressers and other community facilities, not only for residents but also for those living in the surrounding neighbourhood. In some cases, the choice of shops and facilities was made after identifying the needs of the existing local community and in the belief that providing these on site can help to unite new and existing populations. Learning lessons from the decline and frequent failure of isolated shops and pubs in the middle of post-war estates, these new facilities are often planned for the roads at the edges of developments, thereby planning to attract passing trade. The potential for a larger catchment area and turnover may help to attract an inner city store of one of the national food retailers.

Commercial, retail or cultural activity can make sensible use of ground floor spaces where residential development might be problematic. This is particularly the case in buildings overlooking a new town square or on the ground floor of towers, giving daytime life and activity. Devising sustainable and convincing uses for spaces of this kind can in itself create a focus for a new development.

Consulting the community
High density developments are not likely to be perceived automatically as desirable by local residents, and their nature and benefits will often need to be explained and demonstrated.

Some of the schemes brought to the Design Review committee have met with determined and sophisticated local opposition, some based on genuine concern, some on uncertainty, others perhaps concerned about any new development on a familiar site.

Community consultation of some kind has been a feature of many of the projects the committee has examined. Sometimes this has taken the form of public meetings. These are often occasions where developers, architects and, sometimes, members of the local planning committee can explain the project, listen to concerns and try to allay fears. In the case of St Anne’s Wharf, Norwich, there was active involvement of the local Quality Panel, amenity societies and residents.

Public consultation will not always win over the most determined of objectors, indeed it may not be desirable to allow existing local interests to shape future form – it is rarely possible to consult future residents, who will have a more direct interest in the new housing than those who live nearby. Consultation can, nevertheless, help to create understanding of points of view and clarify misconceptions. When consultation takes place before formulating the development brief, this can help to test (and if necessary challenge) local perceptions and concerns and allow these to be factored into the scheme as it develops. At the very least it can allow local residents to be involved in some way in the development process. If done well and approached by all concerned in the right spirit, it is likely to produce positive ideas and constructive criticism that will help to achieve a better scheme.

Management
‘The real test of design and planning processes is to compare what was first proposed and what was actually built.’ 19 The next test is to ensure that what was built and landscaped remains in good order as the new community matures. In the past, many housing schemes have failed not because of poor design but through ineffective management. Having made every effort to create a development of high design quality, the same level of effort needs to be applied to ensuring this quality is maintained in the future. For some this is a key issue for the future success of high-density housing. ‘Designers, developers and social landlords are grappling with the issue of how to create new versions of the vibrant city, but it is a far from simple task. It relies partly on sensitive design and requires intensive management and a willingness to meet future running costs as well as initial construction fees… Strong local
management and support, plus good building maintenance can help to ensure that projects do not deteriorate and enter into a spiral of decline.\textsuperscript{20}

‘Creating high quality residential environments requires a continuing commitment to quality and detailed design right through to the completion and handover of the scheme.’\textsuperscript{21} But this is not the end of the story. For the residents of the new urban community, it is just the beginning. High density housing, by its very nature, needs more intensive and proactive management in order to make sure that the estate remains safe, clean and well maintained and that problems are quickly resolved. Residents will wish to be confident that efficient, effective estate management structures are in place. These need to be open and accessible with opportunities for residents’ participation.

Developers are therefore urged to ensure that a robust management company is established, or contracted, on a firm financial basis that will allow for the proper maintenance and administration of grounds and buildings. Maintenance agreements for the future of green spaces and other external areas are especially important and, in order to ensure that the high quality of landscape is maintained, a landscape management plan should be agreed early in the development process.

The mix of privately owned and affordable housing, the latter likely to be managed by a Registered Social Landlord, makes it important that a clear working relationship is established between the two elements of estate management. In some cases, the management service might be provided by the RSL.

\textsuperscript{18} Planning Policy Guidance Note 3 (Housing), DTLR, 2000, paragraph 10
\textsuperscript{19} Protecting Design Quality in Planning, CABE, 2003, p30
\textsuperscript{20} Barry Munday, PRP Architects, Property People, October 2002
\textsuperscript{21} Better Places to Live: By Design, DTLR/CABE, 2002, p77
‘Achieving an urban renaissance is not only about numbers and percentages. It is about creating the quality of life and vitality that makes urban living desirable. We must bring about a change in urban attitudes so that towns and cities once again become attractive places to live, work and socialise.’

Over the past two decades the benefits of England’s diverse society have been increasingly evident in our urban centres and have begun to play a major part in the regeneration of the country’s cities. Contemporary society, less homogeneous than in the previous generation, has different, and differing, expectations and patterns of living. For a significant number of proposals, and households, the traditional English suburb on the edges of towns and cities is no longer the ideal model for twenty-first century living. These changes in the nature and ambitions of society now need to be followed by corresponding developments in housing.

There are some, including developers, who remain sceptical or nervous about the desire to intensify levels of dwellings per hectare, as set out in PPG 3 and the report of the Urban Task Force. It is clear, however, that with a continuing demand for housing, the British pre-occupation with home ownership and a concern to limit intrusion into the green belt and the countryside, the focus, at least for the foreseeable future, will be on the inner city and the high density development of available brownfield sites. Developing new housing, however, is perhaps the least difficult part. What is also required is the building of sustainable, integrated communities of the kind created in so many Victorian and Edwardian developments, which still underpin housing provision in most British cities. This is a daunting challenge but one that we must meet if we are to avoid the failures which characterised many post-war experiments in high density living.

It is clear from many of the urban housing projects considered by CABE’s Design Review committee that there is cause for cautious optimism. Already there are high levels of demand for well designed inner city homes whether in new-build developments or in refurbished buildings that have outlived their original purpose. The evidence of the best schemes is that there is no reason why high density developments, properly managed and maintained, should not result in places and communities that will become, and remain, popular. It is clear, too, that what is required is variety – from one-bedroom apartments to four or five-bedroom houses, homes for private ownership as well as affordable housing, as well as a range of community facilities that reflect the needs not only of the new development but also those in the existing neighbourhoods that border it.

These are not simply challenges for developers, planners and architects. They require joined-up thinking, involving all appropriate departments of both central and local government. Building new communities is as much about education, health and highways as it is about architecture and landscape design. This means pulling down the silos that have too often divided the professionals who could bring their skills and experience to the task of creating the new communities for a new century. ‘It is a simple but essential truth that great buildings and spaces are built by great people – inspired and committed clients, talented architects and landscape architects, engineers and planners who can see and respond to the bigger picture.’

As this study has shown, the creation of successful high density communities is a challenging task for which there is no simple recipe, only a complex array of ingredients. Each development will need to find its own response both to its site and its neighbourhood. How far the development teams have got it right will be judged over years rather than months but the seeds of that future success depend on the quality of design today and thus in the creation of places where people want to live, prosper and stay.

23 Building Sustainable Communities: Developing the Skills We Need, CABE, 2003, p2
Examples of good practice

The Building for Life project is a commitment to the quality of new homes made by three partners – the house building industry, represented by the House Builders Federation; the Government, represented by CABE; and the campaigners, represented by the Civic Trust. The Building for Life website www.buildingforlife.org contains case studies, showing new housing, from all over England, that is ‘functional, attractive and desirable’.

In order to promote the benefits of good quality, well designed high-density housing Hampshire County Council has established a Directory, using information provided by Hampshire’s city, borough and district councils, to demonstrate how high density can be successfully combined with good design to create a high quality living environment. This is available on a publicly accessible website www.hants.gov.uk/environment/highdensityhousing which gives 13 examples of high-density developments throughout the county.
The case studies that follow have been reviewed by CABE’s Design Review committee, some on more than one occasion. Usually the projects have been seen by the committee well before the submission of a planning application, while designs are being developed. This allows the reviews to make a constructive and timely contribution to the design process.

A list of other housing projects seen by the Design Review committee is given after the case studies. Reviews of these and other projects seen by the committee can be read on the CABE website www.cabe.org.uk.

**CABE’s Design Review programme**

CABE’s Design Review programme offers free advice to planning authorities and others on the design of selected development projects in England. It is particularly interested in strategic projects in their early stages – ‘strategic’ encompassing not only projects of national importance but also those which have a significant impact on a local environment or set standards for future development. About 100 projects a year are seen by CABE’s Design Review committee. These include large scale development proposals such as major housing developments, masterplans for regeneration areas, and tall buildings in city centres, but also many smaller scale projects where CABE’s expertise can make a useful contribution. Advice is given on several hundred other schemes each year outside the committee process.

CABE is a non-statutory consultee within the planning system, and local authorities are asked by the Government to consult CABE about significant projects. The criteria for consulting CABE are set out in a letter from DETR to planning authorities dated 15 May 2001. Broadly speaking, they cover projects which are significant in some way: in themselves (they are major public buildings); because of their sites (they might affect a World Heritage site); others such as those which are out of the ordinary in some way (they might raise design issues such that the planning authority is likely to benefit from independent advice); but also more everyday projects seen as important to everyday life or to raising the quality of life in the neighbourhood.

CABE strongly encourages pre-planning consultation at an early stage in developing designs, as this is when advice on strategic issues is most effective and can most readily be taken on board. It welcomes informal discussions about projects at the earliest possible stage. CABE’s website www.cabe.org.uk gives more information about the design review programme and contact details.
The site
A 4.7-hectare site formerly occupied by Hither Green Hospital, Lewisham, south-east London; the site contains a number of mature trees, believed to have been planted as part of an arboretum by a former superintendent of the hospital and includes what is reputed to be the largest Indian bean tree in the country.

Development description
The creation of a total of 442 residential units, a leisure/health club, 13 live/work units, retail and office/café space including the retention of six former hospital buildings to provide a doctor’s surgery, crèche and 3 live/work units, associated parking and landscaping, the formation of a public piazza and retention of the water tower as a site management office. 22% of the development (88 units) will be affordable housing, spread across the site.

Site history
This is the second phase of development on this site; the first phase comprising 152 units was completed in 1998. Tesco’s application for a supermarket on part of the Phase 2 site (with Bellway Homes planning residential accommodation on the remainder) was rejected in 1999 and Tesco subsequently sold the site to Bellway. They in turn submitted an outline application for residential development relating to the area of land for which Tesco had previously sought to provide a food store. This application was withdrawn in March 2001 following last-minute objections from CABE.

Key issues and lessons learnt
The architects looked at a number of key issues for the site:
• Its integration into neighbouring areas
• The need for linkages – both visual and physical, into and across the site
• Respect for the characteristics of the site – access, trees and both the natural and physical environment
• Striking a balance between the public and the private realm

Their solution was to create an urban village knitted into the local community and permeable by foot. Generous public space included a piazza to provide a sense of place and a ‘green wedge’ pushing into the centre of the site.

CABE’s first involvement in this site was as a result of approaches by local residents. The Design Review committee believed that the early proposal for the sensitive Phase 2 site lacked the care and attention required for high density urban developments and appeared to be piecemeal.

Bellway responded positively to CABE’s concerns and with CABE’s assistance and the support of the local authority, arranged a design competition and interviewed three...
architectural practices. As a result PRP were commissioned for the creation of a design framework for the site.

In July 2001 the Design Review committee found PRP's outline scheme for the site a massive improvement on earlier proposals. It was coherent and appropriate but some concerns remained.

CABE's Design Review continued to work closely with the developers, their planners Barton Willmore and the architects as the scheme developed to a further, and successful, planning application in March 2003.

In some instances, when a scheme has gone adrift, it is best to take a deep breath and start again. This may benefit the developer as well as present and future residents.

When a site that has always been distinct from its surrounding residential neighbourhood, in this case a former hospital, comes up for development, it is important to reconnect it. However, it is not necessary and may not be desirable to match the pattern and density of the new development closely to those of the surroundings.

An existing mature landscape can be treated as an opportunity rather than a physical constraint to be overcome.
The site

The New East Manchester regeneration area covers 100 hectares of land stretching eastwards from the city centre. The existing population figure of 30,000 is in decline. The site is too large for masterplanning in the usual sense and what has been developed is a framework, followed by masterplans for individual areas. The 10-hectare New Islington site (formerly known as Cardroom) has been selected as the third Millennium Community initiative. The site is bordered by the Ashton Canal and the Rochdale Canal, which are being reopened, and contains the Grade II-listed former Ancoats Hospital.

Development description

The developers, Urban Splash, plan to create 1,400 new units, including 66 houses, 500 two and three-storey apartments, 600 one or two bed apartments and 34 ‘urban barns’ on stilts, mostly in linear blocks at right angles to a new canal linking the Ashton and the Rochdale. Some of the existing terraces will be retained. In addition the scheme proposes workshops and office space, retailing, pubs and restaurants, a primary school and heath clinic. There will be approximately 140 affordable homes through the site. Planned density is 140 dwellings per hectare.

Site history

Urban Splash were selected as lead developers by the Urban Regeneration Company, New East Manchester Limited, English Partnerships and the community. This was based on their approach, practice and record, rather than as a result of presenting a draft scheme. The strategic framework developers, Alsops, were appointed on the same basis. This deliberate avoidance of ‘a beauty parade’ of ‘dreamtime schemes … produced in a vacuum’ will also apply to the appointment of up to twelve architectural practices likely to be designing buildings on the estate. FAT are the first practice to have been appointed in this way.

Key issues and lessons learnt

Involving the existing community

Seventy-four homes on the Cardroom estate remain occupied. Almost all residents have been actively involved in a consultation process that set out to ensure that the residents play a key role in the changes that would affect their community. Every resident living on the estate as of June 2000 has been given the unequivocal right to a home similar in size to the one they now occupy, anywhere in the new development, and every effort has been made to preserve the spirit of existing family and neighbourhood links. Consultation in a community that was already suffering from consultation fatigue was not always easy, and the process revealed a wider dilemma. ‘The densities required to support the sustainable infrastructure the community wants – the newsagent, the chippy, the greengrocer, the baker – are at odds with the densities created by typical post-war terraces and semis’.
**Sustainability**

An on-site Combined Heat and Power plant will provide electricity for the site and warm homes and water. Sewage will also be dealt with on-site. Water will be provided from a borehole sunk into the underlying sandstone. The developer aims to become part of the energy supply chain so that the additional costs of energy efficient buildings can be justified in the long-term.

CABE’s Design Review committee welcomed what it saw as a bold proposition for what is to a large extent an experimental model for living in the future. It was impressed by the emphasis placed on the design concepts around the re-population of the site and the significance of water in people’s lives. The committee was anxious to see this ambition matched by a realistic and thorough analysis of the site, the development strategy and above all the principles of place making.

It is important to be clear about illustrative images accompanying outline schemes. Is this what is proposed to be built or an example of what might happen? In this case, the images were intended to establish ambition and ‘tone’ of future development rather than a literal interpretation.

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*New Islington – Manchester’s Millennium Community, Urban Splash, 2003, p10*
The site
This 6-hectare brownfield site was formerly occupied by the Vaux Brewery. It occupies an important location between the existing city centre and a natural cliff edge, some 30 metres above the Festival Park and the River Wear. Across the river is Sheepfolds, an area earmarked for later development, and the 1997 Stadium of Light. The site is divided from the city centre by an arterial road, which forms part of a ring road around the city. The site is currently owned by Tesco plc who have also submitted a planning application – to build a new £50 million hypermarket on the site.

Development description
Sunderland Arc’s proposals for the site, prepared by CZWG Architects, include approximately 1000 apartments (91,000m²) in four-to thirteen-storey blocks, office space, a 150-bed hotel, retail and leisure space and a new public building, a ‘mediatèque’ which will act as an information and resource centre for the city and include a new performance space. Residential density will be approximately 200 dwellings per hectare.

Site history
The Vaux Brewery was closed in 1999 and demolition of existing buildings began in 2002. Sunderland Arc submitted an outline planning application for the site at the end of that year. The Tesco proposals, which have not been seen by CABE’s Design Review committee, also include some business and residential development.

Key issues and lessons learnt
Meeting the City’s needs
The 2001 census showed that Sunderland’s population had fallen by 11,500 since 1991 and a similar fall has been predicted for the following decade. Industry and business is in decline and the City’s current housing stock is limited in terms of diversity and quality. The Vaux scheme aims to offer high density, higher value housing of a kind not currently available in Sunderland and thereby help to redress the balance in the housing stock and attract residents back to the city centre. The vision is to generate thousands of new jobs, provide new housing of real quality, regenerate the environment and welcome people back to the city.¹

Reconnecting the city
In 1875 the Vaux Brewery moved to this site, the third for what was then a growing business. Over the next 124 years it occupied a prime site, separating the commercial and business centre of Sunderland from the river, a division exacerbated by St Mary’s Road, part of the 1960s ring-road which cut across the southern edge of the site. It is proposed that the existing dual carriageway will be divided into two one-way routes, while new north/south connections will reconnect the site to the urban grain of the existing city centre while at the same time creating ease of movement through the new mixed-use development toward the river and riverside green space. A new foot and cycle bridge will connect the new development and the city centre to the north bank of the Wear and the Stadium of Light.

While CABE is a non-statutory consultee within the planning process, it is not its role to act as an arbiter between competing schemes for a particular site but to offer ‘expert advice on the quality of designs for selected projects.’²

The Design Review committee found the Sunderland ARC proposals to be ambitious and brave. They were concerned to ensure that the masterplan provided sufficient flexibility for the design of subsequent buildings on the site, by different architects and in changing market conditions.

There is a need to give careful thought to the purpose of any open space proposed, and whether it is the right size – more is not necessarily better.

¹ A Vision for Vaux, Sunderland Arc, 2002, p1
² Design Review, CABE, 2002, p2
KING’S CRESCENT
HACKNEY, LONDON

The site
The 4.5 hectare King’s Crescent Estate in north London was built in 1968 and originally comprised 632 units of varying types. Two 19-storey tower blocks were demolished in 2000 and 2002, leaving 1,274 residents occupying 404 units at a density of 425 habitable rooms per hectare.

Development description
A total of 880 housing units, 440 affordable and 400 private units for sale. Of the total, 210 will be refurbished and 670 new build, in a variety of styles, including three towers overlooking neighbouring Clissold Park. A number of architectural practices would be involved in the design of individual buildings on the site. A third of the total units will be family housing with three or more bedrooms. Density would rise to 650 habitable rooms per hectare. There would be an increase in the number of properties with private gardens from 56 to 140 while green spaces on the estate would increase from 13,000m² to 17,500m². There are plans for 340m² of retail space.

Site history
A Council-led proposal to regenerate the run-down King’s Crescent estate began in 1998 with five months of consultation with residents, followed by an options appraisal. The subsequent regeneration brief specified design and masterplanning requirements and set out a mix of affordable housing as part of the proposals for estate regeneration. Since public funding was available for only limited elements of this scheme, the provision of affordable housing needed to be financed by cross-subsidy provided by the construction of homes for sale. The Rotterdam-based urban designers West 8 were engaged to undertake masterplanning and landscape design. An outline planning application was considered by the planning authority in July 2003. Because of concerns over the impact of three towers on Clissold Park and its conservation area, the number of towers was reduced to one, with the remainder of the development being at 10 storeys or below.

Key issue and lessons learnt
Cross-subsidy
The need to achieve the ambitions of estate improvement and 50% affordable housing through a cross-subsidy solution has not been easy. The project, planned for completion in seven years, has already taken three, challenging both business plans and cash flows. Despite the comparatively high levels of social housing, it is the commercial housing market that has to provide the necessary finance and the scheme must therefore compete in an active market place. The loss of two of the three planned towers, although not reducing the overall number of units, has cut the number with views out across the London skyline, thus damaging the
optimum design solution and business plan. Furthermore high density homes with their additional requirements for security and access tend to cost more to construct and are more expensive to manage.

When CABE’s Design Review committee first examined this scheme at the beginning of 2001, it welcomed the approach to masterplanning and design. In particular it welcomed the three dimensional richness, believing that the three towers would make a positive contribution to the design as well as allowing more open space than would otherwise be possible. The use of different architects would also bring variety to the overall design but care would need to be taken that the overall design concept for the site was maintained.

The committee noted the need to ensure that the additional green space that the redesigned estate would provide was well designed and well managed and that the relationship between pedestrians, parked cars and traffic was clearly established. It also noted the importance of achieving a high level of quality in the appearance of the refurbished buildings on the site so that these matched the quality of the new.

At a second examination of the proposals, now further developed, the committee felt that the scheme promised to be a huge improvement on many local authority schemes of past decades.
The site
The St Mildred’s Tannery site covers 3.4 hectares and is located within the city walls and the Canterbury City Conservation Area. The site had been operated as a tannery by the same family firm since the mid-nineteenth century. The site – one of the last big development sites in Canterbury – is a difficult one as the soil has high levels of residual contamination. Moreover the River Stour runs through it and most of the area to the north lies at one in 100 year flood levels. Other factors: the site is close to Canterbury’s busy ring-road; inevitably in an historic city like Canterbury the site has a significant archaeological history; of the 37 existing buildings on site, four are Grade II listed.

Development description
The new development would provide 463 new residential units, the conversion and refurbishment of an existing warehouse building to create a 66-bedroom hotel and eleven flats in historic buildings. Affordable housing would constitute 20% of the scheme. Residential density would be approximately 135 dwellings per hectare. A new riverside walk would be created.

Site history
After extensive public consultation, Llewelyn Davies’s development brief for the site was approved as Supplementary Planning Guidance to the Canterbury Local Plan in September 2001. This noted that any scheme for this site ‘must create a distinctive new urban quarter of real quality and character, and one which fits efficiently into the fabric of the historic centre.’ Outline planning application for a scheme for the site was submitted in May 2002. Although never formally considered by Canterbury’s Development Control Committee, the proposal was criticised by members, officers, CABE and English Heritage. The developers Bellway then commissioned new architects to prepare a new scheme. A planning application for this scheme was considered and rejected in May 2003.

The reasons for refusal said the ‘scale, density, mass, appearance, layout and siting’ being ‘unsympathetic to the townscape of Canterbury’, and complained of the failure of the ‘architectural design and detailing, roofscape and materials to … respond to its historic context’.

Key issue and lessons learnt
Meeting requirements
Without doubt this is an historic, difficult and environmentally sensitive site in which there is considerable local and national interest. The planning application resulted in 44 representations, many of them from local bodies. Finding the right design solution for any new building on this site would be no easy task but this has been made more complex by the demands of high density housing and a hotel, including access and car parking. The difficulties are clearly illustrated by the history of this development: the first scheme was criticised for having no sense of place, the second more contemporary approach being seen locally as having the wrong sense of place. ‘Public consultation advice was in favour of contextually applicable contemporary solutions, not historic pastiche.’ The Development Brief continued: ‘A high quality scheme of contemporary design is expected, with reference to the irregularity of skylines, facades and a range of materials typical to Canterbury.’ No definition of the word ‘contemporary’ was attempted. However, in the event its interpretation locally was very different from what was perceived by some to be a metropolitan view, reflected in a scheme that was felt to be unsuitable to the context of an important and complex site.

CABE’s Design Review committee considered both proposals for this site. Members found the first proposal failed to grasp a great opportunity and was generated by a response to the constraints of the site rather than by positive ideas. As a result of CABE’s views, the developers moved towards a more contemporary
approach to the site. The second scheme, prepared by Llewelyn Davies after consultation with English Heritage, was felt to be a considerable improvement that revised the approach to the whole site, responded more clearly to the neighbouring urban grain and included more green space. The architects found CABE’s input invaluable in helping to develop appropriate contemporary architecture for a sensitive site. In response to committee concerns about the character of a proposed central avenue and the relationship of cars to domestic spaces, further changes were made to the scheme before it was submitted to, and rejected by, Canterbury’s Development Control Committee.

A further application with a new design for The Tannery site has now been submitted.
The site
Formerly occupied by Government offices, the 9.5 hectare site at Brooklands Avenue has been described as the last major undeveloped ‘brownfield site close to the centre of Cambridge’. The site includes the Regional Seat of Government Building, constructed during the 1950s as a nuclear bunker to be used by Regional Government in the event of nuclear attack. The bunker was listed as Grade II in 2003. Once part of the gardens of nearby Brooklands House, the site contains 790 mature trees. There is a Restrictive Covenant (1850, revised 2001) on the northeast of the site.

Development description
A new four-storey Government office building has been built on the corner of the site and opened in May 2003. The residential scheme for the remainder of the site includes 382 houses and flats at a density of 47 dwellings per hectare. These take the form of blocks of one to four bed apartments and one to five bed houses. There are both apartments and houses in the provision of 30% of affordable housing. The scheme includes street gardens and landscaped lawns, woodland walks, a wildlife corridor, a ‘village shop’ and children’s play areas.

Site history
The development of this important and locally sensitive site has been a protracted affair. The planning brief was prepared in the mid-1990s and the site was the largest to be designated for housing in the City Council’s 1996 housing plan. Countryside Residential and Kajima Construction were selected to develop the site and Feilden Clegg Bradley were appointed as masterplanners and lead architects. To give variety to the scheme two other practices – Maccreanor Lavington and Alison Brooks – have been contracted by Feilden Clegg Bradley to contribute to elements of the development. Residents in the Victorian villas and terraces which border the east of the site were concerned about the site density, wanting this to be reduced to 30 dwellings per hectare, and the impact that the development would have on traffic flow in the surrounding area. A strong and vigorous local campaign was mounted against the development proposals. The subsequent listing of the nuclear bunker has also had an impact on the development plans, although Countryside has submitted an application for listed building consent.

Key issues and lessons learnt
Living in a garden
The belts of existing trees that frame and intersect the site create a mature and dominant landscape framework for the development and formed the basis for the landscape architects, Grant Associates’ approach to the development. The integration of this established landscape has been central in shaping Feilden Clegg Bradley’s masterplan for the site which also reflects the traditional Cambridge urban design of two to four storey villa and terraced housing, arranged around open spaces (Greens or ‘Pieces’). The site layout is described as ‘urban rugs on a carpet of landscape’, mature trees edge the pedestrianised central square. The relationship between residential units and the landscape is reflected in the architect’s plan to create private balconies, courts, terraces and shared gardens. The relationship between blocks of apartments and townhouses is a modern reworking of Georgian terraces and their mews.

CABE’s Design Review committee welcomed what it saw as an imaginative approach to this ‘green brownfield’ site and the decision to base the masterplan on a clear landscaping concept. This, members felt, helped to place the site within the context of the broader countryside. With the strong emphasis being placed on the landscape, the committee urged the early consideration of a landscape management plan. This was so that the quality of the existing and proposed landscaping could be maintained, making the area feel both used and cared for.

The involvement of a skilled highways engineer in a collaborative process rather than a confrontational one has been invaluable in allowing the approach to succeed.

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Planning authority
Cambridge City Council

Site location
Brooklands Avenue, Cambridge

Site area
9.5 hectares

Principal accommodation proposed
Residential

Developer
Countryside Properties

Architects
Feilden Clegg Bradley/Alison Brooks Architects/Maccreanor Lavington

1 Brooklands Avenue, Cambridge: Architectural Planning Report, Feilden Clegg Bradley, 2002, paragraph 4.1
MAJOR HOUSING DEVELOPMENTS
CONSIDERED BY CABE’S DESIGN
REVIEW COMMITTEE 2000-2003

An account of each proposal can be found on the cabe website. www.cabe.org.uk

Cambridge: Accordia, Brooklands Avenue
Canterbury: St Mildred’s Tannery
Chester: Tower Wharf
Lewisham: Old Seager Distillery, Deptford
Gateshead: Staiths South Bank
Hackney: King’s Crescent
Kingston upon Hull: 63–71 High Street
Lambeth: Vauxhall Tower
Leicester: Freemen’s Meadow, Bede Island South
Lewisham: Meridian South
Lincoln: Brayford Quays
Manchester: New Islington, East Manchester
Newcastle: Quayside Tower
Norwich: St Anne’s Wharf
Reading: Queen’s Road
Southwark: 44 Hopton Street
Southwark: Potters Field
Sunderland: Vaux Brewery
York: Hungate
Liverpool: Rumford Place
Bristol: Wapping Wharf
Ipswich: Cranfield Mills
St.Albans: Victoria Street

FURTHER READING AND INFORMATION

Building in Context: New development in historic areas
English Heritage/CABE 2001

Building Sustainable Communities: Developing the Skills We Need
CABE 2003

Creating Successful Masterplans: A Guide for Clients
CABE 2004

Design Review
CABE 2002

Design Reviewed: A review of some of the most significant building projects seen by CABE’s expert design panel
CABE 2004

Design Reviewed: Town Centre Retail
CABE 2004

Design Reviewed: Masterplans
CABE 2004

Guidance on Tall Buildings
English Heritage/CABE 2003

Protecting Design Quality in Planning
CABE 2003

The Value of Urban Design
CABE Thomas Telford 2001

The Councillor’s Guide to Urban Design
CABE 2003

A Vision for Vaux
Sunderland Arc 2002

Affordable Housing, Better by Good Design
Housing Corporation 2003

Better Places to Live: By Design
DTLR/CABE Thomas Telford 2002

From Design Policy to Design Quality: the treatment of design in community strategies, local development frameworks and action plans
Carmona M, Punter J, Chapman D, Thomas Telford 2002

Housing for a Compact City
Greater London Authority 2003

Our Towns and Cities: the Future – Delivering and Urban Renaissance
DETR The Stationery Office 2000

Planning Policy Guidance Note 3 (Housing)
DTLR 2000

Safer Places: The Planning System and Crime Prevention
ODPM/Home Office, Thomas Telford 2004

Secured by Design http://www.securedbydesign.com
Association of Chief Police Officers

The Community Planning Handbook: How People Can Shape Their Cities, Towns and Villages in Any Part of the World
Wates N, Earthscan 2000

Towards an Urban Renaissance
Rogers Richard (Lord Rogers of Riverside) & Office of the Deputy Prime Minister ODPM 1999

Urban Design Compendium
English Partnerships
The Housing Corporation 2000

Urban Design Guidance: urban design frameworks, development briefs and masterplans
Urban Design Group Thomas Telford 2002

CABE’s digital library: www.cabe.org.uk/library

Building for Life: www.buildingforlife.org
(This site includes extensive downloadable resources based on volume housebuilding best practice workshops at www.buildingforlife.org/resources.html)

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