



What home buyers want:
Attitudes and decision
making among consumers



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Foreword

The point of CABA is to champion great design and its impact on our quality of life. And for us, design excellence is not just about finding a technical solution. If a building or neighbourhood is to be fit for purpose, then it has to recognise the views of the people who use it.

As this report argues, we have to start from where people are at. That doesn't mean slavishly following the stated preferences of home buyers. But developers, policy makers and the professions need to take account of consumer views – alongside other, wider considerations – when they make decisions.

This report brings together information about home buyers' attitudes to new housing. But rather than simply reporting the headline figures, it tries to pick a path through their sometimes contradictory opinions and suggest ways that trade offs between different priorities can be achieved.

There are certainly more nuances to home buyers' views than the headlines of market research often suggest. When consumers talk about their aesthetic tastes, most do not like minimalism; but nor do they like the blandness of so much volume house building. They want character; neighbourhoods that feel like places with their own attractive identity. And while they don't like feeling overcrowded, they do value the sorts of local services and sense of community that higher density developments can sustain. Often it is our common associations with the worst of compact living that we reject, rather than the reality of the best.

On other questions, home buyers' priorities are very clear. Car parking obviously remains a huge issue. People don't seem to be happy with solutions that simply put the squeeze on the number of parking spaces in standard housing estates. Yet they might just be prepared to accept smart design to reduce car dependency by creating neighbourhoods that can sustain a good range of local services.

Because new issues such as environmental sustainability require new solutions it is always important for those who are designing new homes to show leadership of the market. However, the design leadership role needs to be tempered by listening to what people want. The fact that consumer choice is limited by land supply should not become an excuse for ignoring the fact that people want well designed homes and neighbourhoods with real character and sense of place.



Richard Simmons
Chief Executive, CABA

The last time a building programme was attempted on anything like the current scale – an additional one million new homes are envisaged for the south of England by 2016 – was 40 years ago. The legacy of that project has too often been tracts of poor-quality housing and the social problems that go with it. We are now demolishing much of the stock built during that great expansion. This time we have to do better.

Forty years ago, politicians and professionals, with the best of intentions, embarked on a massive housing programme throughout the country, without taking into account the views of the consumer. At that time, the bulk of the stock created was municipal housing for rent. Today it is market housing for sale. This reflects the massive social change in the UK in the intervening years. Yet despite this shift, and the related concern with customer-focused government, there is little evidence that home buyers' attitudes are playing a significant role this time. Given the current level of demand, the market itself is unlikely to be a sufficient mechanism for revealing consumer preference. Certainly, the opinions voiced by home buyers in this research reflect some severe reservations about the type of housing that is now being produced.

The extent to which the consumer preferences of individual home buyers should shape the delivery of new housing should not be overstated, of course. There is an essential job to be done in balancing the wide range of interests and priorities that surround the issue. But in providing this leadership, professionals and policy makers have

to start from the genuine aspirations and assumptions of the consumers themselves.

Drawing on a range of recent opinion surveys, this report sets out what we know about what home buyers want and compares this with the supply being created. The picture that emerges from the evidence base is complex, the messages sometimes ambiguous. Clearly, the aspiration for a detached house with country views from the back garden, and a range of local services on the front doorstep, is unattainable for the vast majority. However, the contradictions need to be recognised and the trade-offs they reflect addressed, if the massive programme of new housing is not to repeat the mistakes of the past.

The limits of consumer preferences

Of course, consumer views cannot be the only determinant of new housing design. A direct match between stated consumer preferences and supply does not guarantee successful and viable housing. The home is not simply another consumer durable. A house has a life that must be measured in decades rather than months or years; it is not a fashion consumable to be left at the local charity shop when tastes change, but the single major lifetime investment for most people and, increasingly, a source of financial security.

The way the housing market operates can also limit choice and the availability of well-designed homes and neighbourhoods. In markets which are not spatially constrained (fashion, cars and electronic consumer goods being pertinent examples) good design can offer real product differentiation and comparative advantage, encouraging manufacturers to seek a design edge in response to customer demand for sharply styled products. This process is aided by technological innovation and the globalisation of markets and

production. Suppliers can enter the market with new product designs more quickly and sell to bigger markets, drawing on a wide range of cultural influences in design and making changes quickly to respond to competition.

Consumer choice in the housing market is limited not only by affordability but by regulation and geography. The planning system limits the potential supply of new homes. Consumers looking in the new homes market need to find somewhere within a limited radius of search. Consequently they may settle for a less well-designed home because choice is limited within that radius. It is not, therefore, inevitable that housebuilders will perceive the need to innovate and offer a design edge. Nor will they necessarily feel the need to differentiate the design of their products significantly to secure a market. They can get as many customers as they can supply by relying on basic standard products which offer little individuality. As in all markets, of course, some suppliers do offer a choice of good designs but the evidence of CABE's Housing Audit suggests that this happens less often than it might in a more open and competitive market.¹

Throughout the course of its useful life, a home will be lived in by a succession of inhabitants and all of these will have different lifestyles and priorities. The home that fits precisely the needs of its first occupiers may not match those of the next. Lifestyles change over time so that the house has to accommodate not only the changes in individual behaviour but also cultural, technological and demographic change. Within reasonable limits, the home should be capable of adapting to changing circumstances.

Finally, homes do not stand alone but in neighbourhoods. The choices of individuals can have unintended consequences for others and, given the long-term nature of housing, the





impacts can be as much for future generations as for today's neighbours. A home buyer may want a range of characteristics in their house and its setting that is simply not viable in the wider context of shared priorities and aspirations.

While the views of potential consumers should influence the form of the product they are going to purchase, we should seek to understand the deeper reasons behind responses rather than simply taking them at face value. First it will be necessary to identify those views which are soundly based on evidence and must be allowed to influence practice. The second task is to identify those opinions which, because they are based on popular misconceptions, need to be corrected

where there is empirical evidence available. Recent history can teach us lessons in this respect. It is acknowledged that there was little consumer involvement in the housing programmes of the 1960s, many of the products of which have proved so disastrous, yet simply to have followed preferences expressed by consumers would not have necessarily provided better homes. The new housing was often appreciated by the first residents and problems only arose after some years of occupation.

These problems have led to an understandable reluctance on the part of both builders and home buyers to depart from traditional forms. However, when these forms – which were evolved for lower-density contexts and in a time of different

social aspirations – are used as a response to the demand for higher densities arising from by public policy priorities, then different dissatisfactions arise.

The appropriate response to consumer views is not simply to tailor supply directly to it but to find ways of addressing these stated preferences, while balancing other pressures, not least that of land availability. Our contention is that, in some cases, supply should change to accommodate demand, while in others there is a leadership role for policy makers to explain and reassure. Getting this balance right is a serious challenge that should not be ducked by public authorities. But in all cases, the views of home buyers themselves cannot simply be ignored.

The primary sources for this report are three pieces of work on attitudes and decision making among home buyers conducted for CABA during 2004 by Mulholland Research and Consulting.

The first is an evidence review of 25 consumer surveys commissioned by a range of charitable trusts, house building interests and government agencies over the last decade. This was followed by qualitative research, based on six focus groups chosen to represent a cross section of prospective home owners and, finally, a quantitative study, which conducted over 900 online surveys of prospective home buyers. We have organised the findings by spatial level, starting with those issues which are of collective concern relating to the area and the street network and ending with the internal arrangement of the house, which – in theory at least – is the easiest to change.

The report is not simply a summary of these three substantial pieces of work. Rather it aims to use the most significant

findings to discuss issues with an important bearing on the layout and design of new housing and the extent to which they support or contradict design policy and practice. We have also included selected quotes from the qualitative research, to offer a flavour of views expressed.

On a number of occasions the surveys appear to be contradictory and we have pointed this out where it has some bearing on the issues under discussion. There is, however, a considerable degree of consistency, not only between the various sources, but also across different groups of home buyers. It is important to note here that there are significant differences between London and the rest of the country. In particular, those surveyed in London were more prepared to accept higher densities, which elsewhere were universally rejected. Londoners were also more willing to rely on public transport and were less preoccupied with the problems of car parking.

The most important decisions taken by new home buyers are the 'big picture' issues, which are usually givens and

involve little choice. These are the prices that can be afforded which, together with family circumstances, influence the choice of location. We do not deal with these but rather the numerous decisions taken within these general parameters which influence the choice of dwelling.

Of course, not all individual aspirations can be met. Not everyone can have a detached house with a garden in quiet surroundings, a view of pastoral landscape, be within easy reach of a good school, a variety of specialised shops, a railway station and a motorway. Housing choice involves decisions made by the rest of the community about wider priorities such as the economy, service provision and climate change. These inevitable trade-offs between the private preferences for the home and the shared aspirations for the neighbourhood are reflected in the sometimes contradictory views expressed by home buyers. Consumer preferences cannot dictate policy, but should help to inform it.

For potential buyers, the first concern in choosing a new home is the quality of an area, notably in terms of access to facilities and services, a sense of community, and safety and security.

Location really does matter. These preferences suggest that a neighbourhood with facilities which can be reached on foot (home buyers believe this helps engender a sense of community), along well-lit streets, which are overlooked by home entrances, are fundamentals which can produce a quality environment. It is no surprise that these are broadly the recommendations of all the recent housing design guidance.

'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 in the street. The sense of quality comes from the detailed design of the buildings, the corners and boundary treatments, and from the mature landscape.'
Better Places to Live, DETR, 2001

It is one of the contradictions revealed by the evidence that many of those qualities considered to be desirable by home buyers are no less likely to be achieved in urban areas than they are in the countryside, the preferred location of most new home buyers. In fact, some – such as proximity to services and friends – are more likely in urban settings.

Access to facilities and services

'There is nothing there. It's a new estate in the middle of nowhere. I've been to one where it's £280,000 a house. There's nothing to do there and there isn't even a bus.'



The presence of shops, schools and local services – particularly schools – all enhance the attractiveness of a locality for home buyers. But the picture is not clear-cut. While just under half the respondents in one survey said they would put up with a home which was not exactly right in order to have convenient access to shops and services, the majority – 55% – were willing to forego these amenities for exactly the right home.

Proximity to a wide range of shops did rank highly in a number of surveys, and was third in the Mulholland work. This was linked to lifestyles and stages, with the majority of those who lived in metropolitan or urban areas placing particular value on

convenient access to a range of facilities. Good access was particularly important for the oldest and the youngest, while families with children were most likely to trade off convenience against other criteria such as a larger house or a bigger garden.

The character of local facilities was also considered important. A small neighbourhood centre with a variety of small shops was considered as desirable, while respondents regarded unfavourably being near to a larger centre with supermarkets, take-aways and businesses because it was feared it would attract too much traffic.

Despite the large proportion of the population who do not have school-age



children, research, including that done in 2003 by Alliance & Leicester Plc, suggests that 'schools are the single most important local amenity for Britons when they are choosing a new home'. It may be that the school is regarded as an asset which will make the home more marketable in the future, or that its presence is an indicator in itself of a desirable neighbourhood. While the finding that a local school adds value is not universal – one survey does not mention schools among 11 of the factors considered most important to potential new build buyers – it is certainly an important positive factor for home buyers.

Views on access to public transport are however more complex. The issue rated lowest, at twelfth, in a 1997 survey

ranking local amenities, while a later survey found that proximity to a main railway line (presumably a station) was an asset. This might suggest that public transport for commuting is valued, whereas local transit is viewed as less of an asset. However, with the exception of young couples, for whom public transport was 'desirable but not essential', all age groups claimed that good public transport was either important or essential.

A sense of community and of security

'If you always go everywhere by car you might not know people two houses down, as you never walk past the house.'

Closely related to access to local services are the linked issues of a sense of community and security in the neighbourhood. The ability to walk to a range of local facilities was seen as an opportunity for social contact and an important factor in generating a sense of community, consequently making the place feel more secure. A public space network, with focal points coinciding with facilities, has a key role in helping the process of community building, and the role of street layouts in creating these conditions is discussed in Section 3. However, when asked where people would like to live, as opposed to where they actually live, the balance of aspiration was heavily tilted towards the countryside, with almost half of intending movers expressing this preference. One

of the reasons given for the preference for out-of-town living was a perception of relative safety and low crime.

This does not necessarily reflect the reality of the incidence of crime. Nor is it necessarily the case that urban living must be less secure than that in the countryside. Indeed, it could be argued that through design and management measures urban areas can be made as safe – and to feel as safe. Given the remoteness of police in some rural areas, there is no reason why urban neighbourhoods cannot be even safer.

Concerns about security sometimes focused on the physical security of the dwelling which can be achieved by the installation of security devices. But safety can also be considered as an attribute of the public realm and the relation of public to private space within the neighbourhood. While the safety of a development could be emphasised in the marketing of housing, it is understandable that house builders may be reluctant to draw potential buyers' attention to this issue.

Density and consumer views

'Younger people don't mind living on top of each other. They aren't in the house all day, they go out more but when you have a family it is important to have your own space. I would hate to live in an area that was so dense.'

The surveys emphasise that modern housing is considered to be too dense. The difficulty in drawing conclusions from

these findings, however, is that we do not know what is meant by high density. It could, for example, be argued that the tendency to build houses with very small gardens and narrow streets is in part to blame for the perception of overcrowding in new neighbourhoods. Simple measures such as building higher buildings along wider streets might make for more acceptable forms of higher density housing. Indeed, the image of the Georgian or Regency city – where densities are far higher than most new housing – could be a more effective model in producing positive associations with the densities required to sustain more successful neighbourhoods.

Ease of access to a variety of facilities and public transport networks should be one of the advantages of living in an urban setting. But higher-density living does not guarantee this. As a public service, the location and provision of schools can be ensured by local authorities. Libraries, sports centres and swimming pools are also publicly provided although the latter are increasingly being left to the private sector. The tendency to centralise facilities such as libraries in the interests of efficiency can work against the need for local services within easy walking distance.

The opening of shops depends on the private sector and, with changing patterns of retailing, small shops need higher support populations so it becomes ever more difficult to deliver them early on in any project. Other local services are subject to the same changes. Local post offices are being closed despite

the negative implications for achieving sustainable development. It becomes increasingly difficult to argue for the advantages of density in making possible urban life as advocated by the 1999 Urban Renaissance report:

'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.'

The popularity of local services, often only sustainable at higher densities, suggests that it is intensity of use rather than simple numerical density of dwellings that matters. But this opportunity has to be realised. It is perfectly possible to create higher-density neighbourhoods without access to services – and certainly without a sense of community or of security. If we are to avoid creating residential dormitories, we need to ensure that local facilities and the other potential benefits of higher-density living are present early on in the development of new neighbourhoods. This may need some sort of cross-subsidy to enable commercial enterprises to be established in advance of the achievement of a support population. It also requires some more creative thinking on the part of planners and policy makers to ensure that developments are designed for intensity of use rather than numerical density.



Over the last two decades the single biggest shift in housing design has been the rediscovery of the central role of the street. Indeed many of the projects of the 1960s that are now being demolished are those which rejected the street.

The street is where all the actors in the development process come together – developer, house builder, planner, highway engineer and architect. The public spaces of a town, primarily the streets and those structures which define them, can be the stage for a range of human contacts from the youngest to the oldest – and they should be designed to facilitate these.

No questions in the surveys specifically refer to streets, but the design of the street and the interface between public space and the private space of the home is crucial to many issues which figure in the surveys. Privacy is clearly related, as is the question of security. The street is also the conduit for traffic and is often dominated by highway interests to the detriment or even exclusion of all the others. So the street, which should be the setting for the widest consensus can become the stage for the greatest conflicts.

Car parking

‘The trade-off is linked to your ability to get around by car. As long as I can do so, I will.’

Home buyers most acutely feel this conflict in relation to car parking. The accommodation of the motor car is an issue that affects both the neighbourhood and the individual dwelling, but its greatest impact is on the street.

The reduced parking standards of planning policy guidance 3 on housing (PPG 3) have produced a high degree



of frustration among those living in developments designed according to its principles. It was the most frequently mentioned of all problems encountered by the buyers of this type of housing. In the survey of those living in schemes designed to PPG3 standards, 45% of respondents complained spontaneously about parking, while only 1% commented positively about it. One of the reasons for the rejection of higher densities was a concern about parking problems. Inadequate on- and off-street parking forces residents to park their cars in adjacent areas.

However, while the issue of car parking aroused such strong feelings, the survey findings present an interesting anomaly in consumer attitudes. While complaints about inadequate parking were very prominent among those already living in PPG3 housing, it was bottom of the list of those factors considered important by prospective home buyers. It may be

that the actual experience of hunting the locality for a parking space is more frustrating than the abstract notion of a parking ratio.

Specifically, on-street parking created a number of frustrations. Many respondents complained that streets were too narrow for parking and there was a lack of space for visitors or for two-car households; further, on-street parking could lead to disputes with neighbours. All these reasons have little to do with the qualities of on street parking but are rather due to the amount available and its configuration.

There is an apparent reluctance on the part of developers to provide for on-street parking on wider streets, rather than rear parking which was disliked because it was too far away from the house and perceived to be subject to vandalism and access routes to rear parking were



considered to be unsafe. Local authorities are also reluctant to adopt wider streets because they regard them as a maintenance burden. The Poundbury model depends for the quality of its street scene on rear parking and this may be one reason why it has been adopted so enthusiastically by both developers and local authorities.

Other traditions, such as the Georgian and Regency planned quarters, are celebrated for their wide spaces and long vistas, which could accommodate parking without destroying the qualities of the street as a space of encounter. With an increasing proportion of new homes now being provided in flats, it may be opportune to rediscover the virtues of these models.

The deficiencies of public transport were put forward as an important reason for regarding a car as an absolute necessity.

Only one group of respondents, young people without families living in London, were prepared to consider public transport as an alternative to car ownership.

The school run was an important factor in dual car ownership. Concerns about the reliability of public transport and about road safety were exacerbated by the long distances some families live from school. While it is impossible to insist that children attend the nearest school, access by foot, cycle and public transport should be made a possible and attractive option for those who do. Furthermore, public transport should be provided in new developments, in advance of reaching the support population normally required, in order to establish patterns of behaviour and reduce car reliance.

However, there is a distinction drawn between the use and the ownership of

cars; restrictions on the former were seen as acceptable but obstacles to the latter provoked complaint. The use of the car may be becoming both more restricted and expensive but the ownership of cars is expected to continue to grow until 2021. Emerging technological developments in electric or hydrogen fuelled non-polluting vehicles will only increase the pressures, as the environmental impact of emissions from car use reduces. Even if these technologies are still 20 years away from widespread use, this still is only half the life span of most contemporary homes; new developments will have to accommodate the likely persistence of increased car ownership. Given there is already notable discontent with parking provision, a parking policy which ignores this future growth is probably not viable.

Policy makers and designers need to consider people's behaviour as it really



is and not as how we would like it to be. Given that accommodating cars satisfactorily in the 30–80 dwellings per hectare range is difficult, the need to find acceptable forms of higher-density living that can allow for more innovative parking solutions is more acute. For example, underground parking – presumably private parking with controlled access – was perceived as acceptable by home buyers for reasons of security, convenience and appearance.

More radical solutions, such as concealing multi-storey car parks at the rear of blocks of single-aspect housing, might be relevant in certain situations. The extra costs associated with such solutions become economic only at higher densities; the extent to which home buyers are prepared to absorb these costs is unknown, so the cost thresholds need to be explored in relation to the willingness of buyers to

pay extra for this benefit. Little work seems to have been undertaken on the relation between cost and value of increasing car parking ratios in projects without reducing the public realm to the appearance of a supermarket car park.

Security on the street

'I like a quiet area and also where there isn't a lot of crime around.'

As well as transport and parking, street crime is a major concern. Street layout and public space generally can have a significant impact on real and perceived security. While the cul de sac was considered to offer security advantages over streets, the same research found no empirical support for this view.² It is difficult to argue that cul-de-sacs are more or less safe than other streets – it is the way they are designed that affects the security of those who live there.



In considering what specific design measures could increase safety, there was a large majority in the focus groups in favour of better street lighting, with only a small proportion (slightly smaller than those favouring gated development) considering homes that overlooked streets and footpaths as important. This finding needs further consideration given that 'eyes on the street' are now part of the conventional wisdom of urban design and this characteristic has been supported by empirical evidence in producing safer environments. It is complicated by some survey findings that car parking, located away from the home as well as back alleys that were not gated or overlooked by houses, were considered to be a security hazard.

The second most important measure which could create a safer neighbourhood, after better street lighting, was considered

to be the introduction of a community neighbourhood watch scheme. It is impossible for residents to keep watch over the public space systems of their neighbourhood if their homes do not overlook the streets or their front gardens are surrounded by high walls, so the survey findings explain in human terms the effectiveness of what is a widely accepted technical component of secure design.

The desire for privacy in the form of a front garden needs to be offset against the wider desirability for buildings to overlook streets. Privacy in the front of houses can be achieved while allowing overlooking of the street – for example, the traditional Georgian house with its raised ground floor achieves this perfectly well. The careful location of the most public rooms at the front of the dwelling, overlooking the public realm, with the more private spaces located at the back

of the house, is another traditional device for ensuring an acceptable degree of privacy.

Home buyers' attitudes towards streets represent perhaps the most intractable problem around housing design. On the one hand, there is the clear aspiration in some of the surveys for the kind of the benefits associated with walkable neighbourhoods – such as the presence of local services and a sense of community. However, this is in tension with the twin demands for security of the private realm and for accommodation for multiple private cars. Responding to these conflicting impulses will require innovative design solutions, as well as an open conversation between all parties about the trade-offs involved.

In this section, we move from the public to the private realm, to discuss preferences for individual homes. Unsurprisingly, this is the area where most work on home buyers' attitudes has been done and there is a rich, if still ambiguous, body of evidence to consider. Given this, we have divided the discussion into four levels: the type of dwelling; outside the home; external appearance; and inside the home.

Dwelling Type Preferences

'A large garden and detached are the two main things.'

'I wouldn't want to be aware that there was somebody above or below me.'

House type preferences are strongly influenced by family circumstance and life stage, and, of course, by affordability. However, there are some constants that cut across all categories, and these factors become more significant if we are seeking to build new homes which will serve families and individuals through the different stages of their lives.

Families with children aspire to owning a detached house because of privacy, security, ease of access and amount of space inside and outside the home. Older couples also expressed a preference for a detached home for similar reasons. Recent research funded by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation supports the preference of first-time buyers for detached or semi-detached houses, but also reveals that significant proportions would be prepared to live in terraces or flats – while 68% liked semi-detached and detached homes, 49% were prepared to live in terraces and 30% in flats.³



Three-storey houses – increasingly common as a response to the density requirements of PPG3 – were not favoured by a majority. Indeed, less than a fifth of those intending to move would consider living in this type of house, and the profile of those who were willing to consider a town house was biased towards an upmarket segment in the south of England. Earlier surveys reported that town houses were seen as impractical because the living space was spread across three floors. In contrast, a later investigation reported that families were 'rather excited' at the prospect of multi-level town house living and supported the concept of children having their own space at the top of the house. This may suggest a shift in opinion as more families become acquainted with this type of house or it may reflect the increased availability of better designed town houses in recent years.

The reaction to a usable roof space (2.5 storeys) was more favourable. If well designed, this was expected to be light and airy and to be used for a variety of functions. This suggests the tendency for a desire for larger spaces which were capable of being used in different ways. Basements were similarly regarded as additional 'unlabelled' or 'unallocated' space which could be used for a variety of functions such as storage, utility or recreation rooms. The main reason for their relegation to these types of use rather than bedrooms seems to be unfavourable associations of darkness and dampness.

Many of the surveys are contradictory on the popularity of flats. It is not clear why, if older people and younger singles and couples like them, over a third of single person households are unwilling even to consider living in a flat. In particular, one-bedroom flats were disliked and only bought (or more often



rented) because they were the only affordable housing especially in central areas. It is understandable that families with children do not like them, but two of the three reasons given for this aversion, that there is too little space and, in inner-city areas, that they are likely to border on areas of crime, are not inherent qualities of flats. Government figures show that, while over the last decade the number of flats being built has increased from 10% to 24% of all new dwellings, flats with three bedrooms have remained at only 1%; a negligible number of flats are being built with four or more bedrooms. This suggests that the delivery of flats which are too small and often in the wrong places could be biasing people against a type of living which is acceptable in so many other countries.

There are features of flats which should make them more popular with certain groups. For example, the possibility of living on one level is potentially

attractive to older people. Given this, when combined with the widespread preference for a detached house, the popularity of bungalows among this age group is understandable. The same convenience of access could be provided in flatted developments by the more frequent inclusion of lifts. However, those 'empty nesters' who would consider apartment living expressed a clear preference for living in a block specially designated for people like them and insisted on good security measures and effective management that did not allow it to become run down.

Another factor that undermines positive attitudes to flats, and to higher-density living more generally, is the questions of visual and acoustic privacy. In reality, this is not a question of house type but rather of detailed design and construction methods. However, surveys reveal some frequent, specific and sometimes harsh criticism of higher-density projects

directed against noise transfer between rooms and through walls shared with neighbours. These problems could be exacerbated by, but are not caused by the density of a scheme and could be eliminated by higher design and construction standards, thus removing one of the perceived drawbacks of higher density.

House type and security

'We need our own gardens with fences, so we have our own safety. You need security. We don't have communities now.'

In a survey conducted for CABI in 2002, security against crime emerged as the single most important factor in housing design. This MORI survey found that safety rated three points higher than built to last and 24 points higher than energy efficiency. It was particularly sought after by those living in metropolitan and central



urban areas and, not unexpectedly, in enclaves of relative prosperity in areas of social deprivation. However, in a 1998 survey of potential new build buyers, safety figured only half way up a list of 11 factors. Although this may be explained by the fact that the first of all the factors was considered to be a 'nice area', which includes a dimension of safety.

Security was one of the two reasons given for a preference for detached houses, especially by families with children at home. However, recent research has demonstrated that the detached house is in fact the least secure form of dwelling.⁴ This is obvious when we consider districts with large detached houses and the way the whole perimeter of individual dwellings has to be guarded by security fences, special lighting systems, private CCTV systems and controlled entrances. When all other variables are held

constant – including tenure – the most secure type of dwelling is the flat, especially above the ground floor, followed by the mid-terrace, the end terrace and the semi detached and, finally, the detached house. The author of this research has pointed out that exactly the opposite message has been reported in newspapers. This is, clearly, an area where better information, in the sense of correcting popular misconceptions, is needed.

Outside the home

'They should start giving single people gardens – why the hell do the families always get the gardens? Single men need a bit of space outside as much as anyone.'

A crucial factor for home buyers in choosing a house is the provision of outside space, and of gardens in particular. But it is not just the availability of a garden that is important, but also its usability and size. In a 2004 survey, over three quarters of the respondents preferred to have a private garden rather than sharing a communal space with their neighbours; and about one in five buyers of houses built under PPG3 guidance complained about the size of their gardens.

The demand for some usable outdoor space is common to all life-stage groups and all types of dwelling. It is a high priority for families, and studies testing the market for higher-density housing have found a great resistance to smaller gardens. The desire for a larger garden was often the motive for moving house.



One of their functions is as a children's play space and gardens need to be considered in relation to the available range of other nearby possibilities. For example, it was reported that the gardens at Poundbury were too small for children's play, while the streets were considered too dangerous and there were no suitable public play areas nearby. The careful design and considered location of spaces for the use of different age groups could reduce the dissatisfaction with small gardens.

Balconies and roof terraces were not considered a safe option for families with children. However, they can be designed to be safe and they were acceptable to flat dwellers provided they were big enough for such activities as having drinks or sunbathing.

A front garden acts as a buffer zone between the private inside space of the house and the public realm of the street. Only 1% of buyers said they would accept no space between the house and the street and only 20% would accept less than 1.8 metres. For the majority of potential buyers a front garden was considered necessary for privacy, but also as somewhere to park the car and because it added value to a house.

Front gardens also increase the possibility of casual social contact between neighbours and passers by and are, therefore, an element that fosters a sense of community. In their absence, or with very small setbacks, problems of privacy have been encountered in some types of housing. The careful design of the interface between the public and private realms can overcome perceived problems of privacy. While traditionally

this problem has been overcome by a raised ground floor, the need for level thresholds now calls for different design solutions.

As suggested, the idea of communal gardens is not popular, and families with children are particularly hostile, with concerns about the danger from strangers and the quality of maintenance. Other research suggests that there are conditions where communal space can work provided certain requirements are fulfilled. Most of these are related to the management and social background of the individuals using them. For instance, older people were prepared to use a communal garden provided it was exclusive to people like themselves and single flat dwellers valued access to a communal garden.



Where communal gardens had been provided as part of a development, they were often criticised for not being well-designed and were considered more decorative than useful. It is possible to design effective and popular communal gardens, but the message of the evidence review is that this is not happening often enough.

External appearance

'Something that looked, if not unique, then at least individual... even if it wasn't old, that looked as if it could be old.'

External appearance is rated very low on the list of new home buyers' priorities, just above the appearance of adjoining housing and landscaping, which was bottom. Similarly, a survey of residents in five recent housing developments produced little comment on external

design, with the exception of the Greenwich Millenium Village where the houses, despite their distinctive, modern appearance, met with approval.

However, there is a caveat attached to these findings. A separate post-occupancy study indicated external design as rating more highly, slightly higher indeed than the number of rooms.

This survey also suggested that the appearance of individual dwellings is less significant than the overall appearance of the area. Individuality was desirable, within limits – a home should look similar but not the same as others in the vicinity.

Studies of 'kerb appeal' are dominated by three sets of desirables – having character, being individual and being traditional. In general, character was considered to derive from details or

features such as sash windows, chimneys, pillars and iron railings which avoided the houses looking like featureless boxes – a perceived disadvantage of new homes. However, one modern scheme (Lacuna) which had steeply pitched roofs, wrap around windows and railed balconies, was considered to have character.

The importance of shape and proportion to a design was cited by 85% of respondents, although what were considered to be the desirable attributes of these properties were not spelt out. Roofs and windows came next in importance. These are significant findings which could have important implications for any discussion of external appearance and design.

In terms of architectural style, Edwardian, Victorian and Georgian buildings are, in



general, regarded favourably. However, the juxtaposition of traditional versus modern seems to be too simple, as witness the acceptance of what has been called in the Mulholland surveys 'neo-vernacular'. Indeed, developments that might be termed as neo-vernacular appealed to 28% of home buyers, with 20% favouring an explicitly modern design. For the most part, support for modern designs came from a minority of younger people, typically from those with aspirations to live in a metropolis. But, when asked what sort of housing future generations would like to live in, a majority of all the respondents in the online survey groups chose modern or neo-vernacular projects.

The desire for new houses not to look like featureless boxes and for some sort of detail or feature may give some clues to the reasons for this choice. The key to

acceptability appears to be not the style but rather the degree of richness of the architecture, so that a modern architecture that is not minimalist and is rich in detail would be acceptable.

The positive reaction to porches and doorways reinforces this hypothesis about richness of detail. It may be that the conflict is not between modern and traditional but between different versions of these two styles. On the one hand, between a minimalist modern design and one which is rich in detail and, on the other hand, between a vernacular design which crudely parodies traditional details and one which finely executes appropriate local detail.

The design of windows seems to be particularly important to the acceptability of schemes. There are examples of vernacular schemes which would be

expected to be highly appreciated, but which were rejected because of the small windows. Given that good natural light ranked second in the features that were considered important in a quality home, the Modern Movement's concern for light and sun and large windows should give a modern style a clear advantage over more traditional designs, but this advantage does not seem to have been understood by home buyers. It may be that the tendency to reduce window size is assumed to be the most cost-effective way of meeting increased energy efficiency regulations (a solid wall can more cheaply meet the requirements of part L of the Building Regulations than a window) and is reducing the positive impact of this feature of contemporary architecture. The detail design of windows and their surrounds offers an opportunity for careful enrichment which could counter



the criticism that designs were often 'commercial', rather than domestic.

Landscape quality rated lowest among those factors which influenced the choice of a house – only 6% of respondents cited the quality of landscape in the top five of 11 factors listed. However, the presence of high-quality landscaping does seem to increase the approval rating when respondents compare different developments. In the focus groups' response to housing exteriors, those which were set in a 'green' context were popular. In the online survey most of those schemes which were appreciated for their external design were illustrated by photos which included foreground planting or street furniture. On the other hand, many of those which were less appreciated were illustrated by views which had a bleak and often featureless foreground.

The quality of landscaping greatly influences the general perceived quality of an area which is considered to be significant in choosing a home location. The demand for 'leafiness' in general,

and more street trees in particular, responds to this desire. It is noteworthy how few schemes now being built have any street planting – even those which rate highly in other respects – which may reflect difficulties of maintenance, adoption, insurance, initial cost or simply that streets are generally too narrow to allow trees to be planted.

Inside the home

'I find a lot of houses have five bedrooms and downstairs there isn't enough room to sit round the table.'

It is one of the paradoxes of housing that as we have grown richer as a society our homes have shrunk. It is therefore not surprising to find that a key drawback of new homes was considered to be an overall shortage of space. Around a third of intending new home buyers were dissatisfied with this aspect of their new home and 40% of second-hand home buyers were put off buying a new home by the lack of space.

The number of rooms is also important for potential buyers, for whom it rated second after a 'nice area' in the list of most important factors. However, another survey qualifies this by noting that each room must be an appropriate size for the purpose the purchaser has in mind for it.

A post-occupancy survey rated internal layout as the first of eight important aspects with size of rooms fifth and number of rooms seventh (Mulholland 2004). It may be that this finding reflects dissatisfaction by purchasers who have bought on the number of rooms only to find they cannot use them as they intended. Other surveys in the evidence review seem to support this hypothesis, while a survey of prospective buyers ranks spacious rooms as the first of eight features considered desirable in a good-quality home and points to the importance of space over number of rooms. Given these findings the practice of advertising homes exclusively by number of rooms rather than by floor area can only reinforce user dissatisfaction. It also prevents easy comparison between alternative choices of home.

New homes were perceived as having smaller rooms, very small bedrooms and no storage space when compared with older houses. More living space was preferred, as were fewer but bigger bedrooms. For families, kitchens needed to be big enough to accommodate a table for meals and for all lifestage groups this was regarded as the heart of the house. Specialised rooms for utilities and computers were also considered desirable. The emerging preference is for rooms that are capable of being used for a number of functions rather than a large number of bedrooms and this would mean providing more living space. While this is not easy in a two-storey house, the three-storey type may have advantages in this respect since living space is located on two floors.



The criticism about lack of space was expressed by all groups of home buyers with singles just as vociferous as families. They all wanted a spacious living area although there were different aspirations across the lifestage groups about the degree of open-plan living, with families favouring a greater separation between adult and child spaces. Again, a well-designed three-storey house could offer some advantages in this respect.

The subdivision of interior space may be an aspect of housing design where the requirements of a more fragmented market begin to make an impact on design. When demographic and economic circumstances oblige more homes to be shared, more bathrooms and larger bedrooms may emerge as future preferences in contrast to the large 'downstairs' shared space, which is an expressed preference for families in single occupancy whatever their size or life stage.

The focus groups identified high ceilings and good daylight as the most sought-after qualities for interior spaces; the popularity of lofts may be an expression of this preference. We have already commented on a tendency to reduce window size and this, together with lower ceilings, would limit interior light levels. Since boxiness or lack of spaciousness was a major complaint about new housing, higher than minimum ceilings might help reverse this perception at a lower cost than increased floor areas.

Inadequate storage was a complaint voiced by all the groups of home buyers. Storage was especially important in bedrooms and kitchens while roof space and cellars were valued for this reason. Many people used a garage for storage of tools, bicycles and garden equipment, even in PPG3 developments, where parking was restricted. There may, therefore, be fewer complaints about the lack of garages and as a consequence about parking problems if more storage space could be incorporated into housing.

In important respects, the debate prompted by the survey work is not new, dating at least from the publication of that most iconic of planning diagrams, Ebenezer Howard's Three Magnets. The attractions of the countryside still exert a powerful influence on locational choice because of the perceived amenities of living out of town, even though penalties will be incurred because of the need to travel to work and to reach facilities. This aspiration certainly works against policies of increasing the density of development.

As developers begin to appreciate the value of creating a distinctive sense of place for their own projects, there could be a temptation to respond to the desire for country living by building small pockets of relatively high-density housing (perhaps labelled as urban villages) that are separated by open space and poorly connected with one another. This may satisfy the home buyers' desire to live out of town and will save land – and be PPG3 compliant – but a development pattern of this nature cannot be regarded as sustainable. It will increase car travel because it is unlikely that the critical mass of population needed to support a useful level of services can be located within easy walking distance. It would also be difficult to serve a settlement pattern of

this configuration by more than a token public transport service.

There is a danger of getting the worst of both worlds. The new neighbourhoods could be perceived as high-density because of the narrow streets and mean private or public open spaces yet are not of a sufficiently high density to support the range of facilities and transport networks which are the real bonus of urban living. Without an understanding of what makes a scheme sustainable in the long term, we are in danger of building homes that meet targets in terms of numbers but which will fail to meet society's needs and aspirations and will not be places people desire to live in the future.

There is a long history of suburban living in England and simply rejecting a way of life that has been the aspiration for several generations is not a viable position. The vast majority of the English – 84% – live in areas that can be characterised as suburban. This is not the case in Scotland, nor in most continental European countries. This history has brought expectations and practices which are embedded in the collective unconscious and we cannot expect home buyers to discard them or change them overnight – especially as there might be no perceived benefits from their loss.

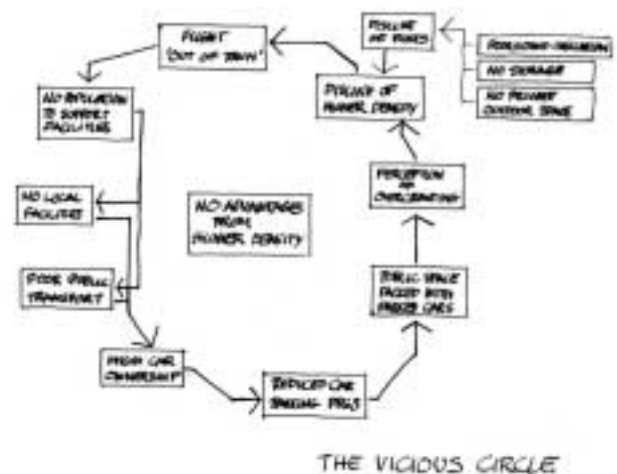
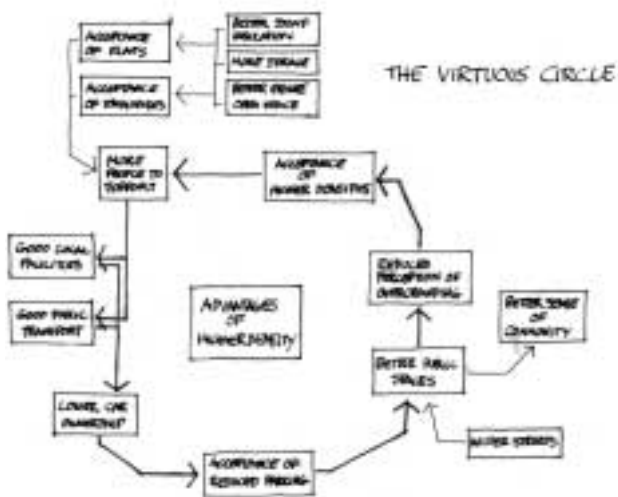
Care must be taken now if the housing being built now does not meet the same fate as that constructed during the 1960s. Much of this housing was built in

a similar sellers' market in the sense that slum dwellers were only too pleased to get a new home of whatever type and little note was taken of consumer preferences.

But consumer preferences are complex and cannot be treated superficially. They are also expressed within the context of the possible: few can afford to live in a detached period house in a village, even though it might be what they would prefer. Nor is it wholly practical to wish for a view over countryside from the back garden and an array of services on the front doorstep.

So the preferences of home buyers represent a set of trade-offs. Behind the initial responses, there is support for the sorts of public 'goods' – local services and the like – that are only sustainable at higher densities. While detached houses are the ideal, terraces and flats have proven themselves to be more secure – one of the key concerns of home buyers – as it is harder to break in. Flats also offer greater accessibility, especially for older people, if serviced by well-maintained lifts. And people want the local services and facilities they need to be locally available, only made possible with the critical mass that higher densities bring.

The issue of car parking is potentially harder to resolve. There is little likelihood that car ownership will reduce over the coming decades, no matter what happens to levels of usage. Home buyers will continue to demand houses that can



accommodate their cars. Simply ignoring this will only create other problems. But the alternatives need not be either windswept parking courts or building at densities that allow for a double garage for each household. There are other, more innovative solutions – which in turn can be presented as an advantage of higher-density living.

Architectural style turns out to be less important, except that most people want to live in somewhere distinctive and with character – which is often expressed as a preference for old buildings rather than new. But it is richer architecture that is wanted, and bland ‘traditional’ is unpopular along with minimal modernism.

If we are to produce truly viable, sustainable housing, we cannot simply

focus on the cosmetics of development. We need to address the more profound and possibly more expensive changes to layout and home design, which will make the trade-off between the individual and public goods demanded by home buyers easier to resolve. Achieving an urban renaissance and creating sustainable communities require a culture change, but they also require changes in practices. If the sorts of neighbourhoods envisaged by policy makers and professionals are to be made acceptable and attractive to consumers, then the layouts, the types used, the internal arrangements and the performance specifications of the construction must incorporate features that benefit the users.

Consumers are smart – it is not a question of ‘educating’ them, but of ensuring that the potential benefits are

in fact realised. We have to recognise our suburban history and the concomitant aspirations and reconcile that with a vision of compact cities and a supply-side strategy premised on higher densities. Critically, if we retain the strategy in the face of uncertain public opinion, we have to make sure we deliver on the benefits of higher densities, or else we will end up with the worst of both worlds.

References

This report has been prepared for CABE by Ivor Samuels. It is based on the findings of *Attitudes and Decision-Making Among Home Buyers*, a programme of research undertaken for CABE by Mulholland Research and Consulting during 2004. The work was in three parts. A review of existing evidence was conducted, based on 25 consumer surveys commissioned by a range of charitable trusts, house building interests and government agencies over the last decade. This was followed by qualitative research, based on six focus groups chosen to represent a cross-section of intending home owners. Finally a quantitative study, which conducted over 900 online interviews with intending home buyers. Unless otherwise indicated, the evidence cited in the report comes from the three pieces of Mulholland research.

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