

Making places

Placemaking involves the continuous refinement of the built environment in many dimensions, explains Ben Derbyshire.



Ben Derbyshire is design director at HTA

Many people find it extremely difficult to identify anywhere of any significant scale built since the second world war that approaches an ideal place to be. It gets even harder if you restrict the choice of examples to places where people live - excluding town centres, shopping districts and resorts.

This is not for want of trying. The dearth of successful examples of placemaking is all the more striking taking into account the new and expanded towns and comprehensive redevelopments of the second half of the twentieth century which, at its height, amounted to a programme of 40 - 50,000 new homes every year.

At HTA, particularly since our competition winning entry for the Greenwich Millennium Village some ten years ago, we have been thinking about "placemaking". We have restructured our practice to deliver it, we have set up a learning network we call the Placemaking Forum (which we now run jointly with the financial consultants, PricewaterhouseCoopers), and we have defined what the word placemaking means to us:

"Placemaking is the creation of animated, successful, sustainable environments, weaving together the inputs from local people and stake-

holders with professional expertise from a wide range of disciplines."

What is placemaking?

In our belief, the core skills for placemaking are more closely related to project management, or process and change management. Urban Design, Architecture and Landscape Design are important contributors, of course, but they are not enough on their own.

HTA has mapped the placemaking process and, working with The Placemaking Forum, has identified the key success factors. The implications for designers are fundamental. There are new opportunities for design professionals as part of a collaborative process. The design professions must understand the contributions of other key disciplines and learn to work with them.

HTA has restructured in order to respond to the challenge of placemaking. We are now a matrix organisation, in which project directors take a brief and deliver a range of services drawn from a wide portfolio of disciplines. Each discipline is encouraged to specialise, refine its service in relation to client needs, and operate increasingly as a business unit in its own right. At the same time, the emphasis is on collaboration - meshing together internal and external contributions with the placemaking process.

Towards a placemaking design philosophy

Charles Eames noted that the architect of the home must be:

- The Student of Behaviour
- The Scientist
- The Economist
- The Industrial Engineer

This approach seems to encompass the breadth required and the depth of understanding we believe to be necessary for designers involved in placemaking.

An historical perspective is illuminating too. Places that have proved lastingly popular seem to have the following ingredients:

- An economic raison d'être and a physical plan that facilitates this
- Adaptable responsiveness to user requirements based on suitable building typologies that have successfully met changing needs

There are a great number of examples:

- Manarola, in the Italian coastal region of Le Cinque Terra, where an agrarian economy has given way to tourism. Town planning based on contours, ancient pathways and watercourses. Vernacular houses beautifully distorted to fit.

- The Bedford Estates in London. A classical composition of streets and squares. Town houses built to a prescriptive design code. The forerunner of the ubiquitous London house plan that has survived all kinds of use and occupancy.

Genotypes - the building blocks of place

Human Beings are superficially similar and yet readily distinguishable by their differences. Individually and collectively, people are a metaphor for the dwellings and assemblies of dwelling that make up the homes and places in which they live.

In historically successful places, dwellings have usually been refined to become familiar archetypes of built form - adapted to lifestyle and climate. Homes support the lives of individual families. Put together, groups of homes create an effective backdrop for society and collective activity. In the best examples the built form, textures and patterns of assembled homes are an identifiable and often beautiful characteristic of place. In such examples, there are usually also patterns of behaviour which animate the place with diurnal, seasonal and annual cycles of activity.

Homes for the future





Campbell Park, Milton Keynes



West Hendon, Barnet

The continuous refinement of generically successful typologies should improve performance, increase user satisfaction and create value. The standard house-type is a perfectly legitimate concept for developing and refining environments that meet human need. As I have pointed out, there is plenty of historical precedent for this.

The speculative developers' standard house-types have become discredited because they are often poorly designed, offer very little choice or differentiation, and do not respond to consumer preference. Housebuilders use them because standardisation offers predictability in cost, construction process and quality. They could do so much more.

Today, industrialized mass customization offers the opportunity for an almost unlimited variety of a kind that reflects human diversity

and taste. We have coined the phrase "Modular Modern Vernacular" in order to capture the way in which contemporary technologies can replicate the relationship between human diversity and built form that is so elegantly exemplified by the examples quoted above.

For us, placemaking involves the continuous refinement of the built environment in many dimensions; masterplan, landscape, buildings and building elements, technologies and processes. We seek to refine the individual dwelling built form, spatial organization and functionality. Assembling dwellings into blocks or streets, we seek to optimize efficiencies. The discipline teams in our matrix structure pursue this at various levels and from different points of view. Our project managers weave these contributions together with external inputs. It is a collabora-

tive process which at its best would be driven by the needs and aspirations of the consumer.

Greenwich Millennium Village

It is ten years since the arrival of New Labour and the beginning of the Prescott era which brought the seminal Greenwich Millennium Village competition which we won with Ralph Erskine and Battle McCarthy. We planned a zero carbon scheme based on biomass CHP, customer responsive and adaptable timber based flat-pack construction, and a locally accountable, financially endowed village management trust.

Oakridge Village, Basingstoke

Some years later we revisited GMV ideas at a more modest scale in the regeneration of an existing estate at central Oakridge in Basingstoke. The scheme is a mixed community of

50% social housing, entirely tenure blind. It is made of cold rolled steel flat-pack construction and we configured the design for the mass customization of components. We even built a website, USER-online, to enable customers to configure their homes on-line.

Upton Site C, Northampton

At Upton Site C, another English Partnerships competition, we designed a standardised range with modular extensions to meet different requirements. The scheme is designed to meet EcoHomes Excellent and made the cover of the DCLG 'Code for Sustainable Homes'. The design features barn-like raised living areas which facilitate solar penetration in winter as well as affording great views. Renewable energy collectors are integrated in balustrades, solar shading devices and



rooftop pergolas.

Lawley, Telford

At Lawley, a 3,000 home town extension to the west of Telford, Shropshire, we have applied our experience of housetypes in the mass market with three national housebuilders, Wimpey, Barratt and Persimmon. The housebuilders deployed a significant proportion of their own types within EDAW's masterplan. We used our HTA barn archetypes around major spaces and designed specials for key locations. Alison Peters of EDAW acted as an effective champion of design quality.

Barratt: Home for the Future

We used the Velux-sponsored The Mail on Sunday Home for the Future competition to develop our barn archetype into a structure capable of meeting the Code for Sustainable

Homes six star rating. We worked with Barratt and Arup Environmental to create a standardised range with modular extensions, again with a raised living area that promotes winter gain & stack effects. Barratt are looking at the possibilities of including similar designs on their 60k sites or in the Carbon Challenge competition.

West Hendon, Barnet

This developer-led competition, won with Metropolitan Housing Trust, is an estate-based regeneration project that relies on radical urban intensification and cross subsidy to re-provide 500 council-owned homes in West Hendon, Barnet, in a mixed tenure development three times that size. HTA's competition winning masterplan has survived nearly five years of negotiation with residents and now has planning approval.

The Triangle and Leica Sites, Cambridge

These projects are part of the extensive urban intensification being planned around Cambridge train station. We brokered a masterplan with the enlightened city planner, Peter Studdert.

A very efficient timber frame block typology has afforded the developer, George Wimpey North Thames (formerly Laing Homes) the opportunity of spectacularly large balconies that have proved extremely popular with purchasers.

Campbell Park, Milton Keynes

Our experience with George Wimpey North Thames helped lead to this successful English Partnerships competition, part of the extensive plan to intensify central Milton Keynes. We worked with MacCreanor Lavington to create timber framed perimeter blocks on and around landscaped concrete podium structures. In this scheme we have developed the balcony system into a multifunctional frame supporting winter gardens, rainwater collection, shading and renewable energy devices, lighting and a climbing frame for plants.