

HOUSING DESIGN QUALITY



CAMPAIGN TO PROTECT RURAL ENGLAND (CPRE) – WEST MIDLANDS REGION

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Campaign to Protect Rural England

(CPRE West Midlands Region)

Contacts

Gerald Kells
Regional Policy Officer
55 Follyhouse Lane
Walsall
West Midlands
WS1 3EL
Tele: 01922 636601
gerald.kells@talk21.com

Phil Goode
Hon Technical Advisor
CPRE Staffordshire
15 Martin Street
Stafford
ST16 2LE
Tele: 01785 277890
protest@cprestaffordshire.org.uk

Cover Design

Top Left: Clockwise

Trent Lane, Great Haywood, Staffs: *Designed Village approach to Shugborough Hall*

Market Place, Abbots Bromley, Staffs: *Village focus and offset main street*

Stafford Street, Brewrod, Staffs: *Three storey emphasis of village centre*

Dean Street, Brewrod, Staffs: *Dealing with level changes*

Lord Leicester Hospital, Warwick, Warks: *Composing building massing and entrance emphasis*

The Square, Caverswall, Staffs: *Central village 'place', offset access roads*

Clarendon Square, Leamington Spa, Warks: *Elegant urbanity, terrace housing*

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Introduction

Housing forms the major part of the built environment, its quality most closely touches people's lives and forms the touchstone by which the success of the planning process is commonly judged. In the past mass-build housing has been provided in great numbers but there has been mounting concern over its amorphous sprawl, its failure to create attractive and characterful environments and its disregard for its situation or setting. In extreme cases it has aggravated social problems.

Design shortcomings have been recognised and acknowledged for 70 years and more. Every planning document in the post-war period has called for improved design quality. Recent publications such as PPG3, "*By Design*" and "*Better Places to Live – By Design*" and the proselytising activities of CABE (The Commission for Architecture and the Built Environment) and the practical exemplars of new housing sponsored by the Prince of Wales have highlighted the issue, its importance and some detailed solutions.

Advantage West Midlands (the Regional Development Agency) has progressed with the intention to develop mechanisms and standards by which design quality can be judged and improved. Although it comes to the view that additional regional design guidance is not required, it seeks a common understanding of what is meant by good design, and the principles that should guide public policy. CPRE concurs with that view to which it contributes this document derived from its own specialised experience.

It should be noted that in the main the conclusions reached relate to low to medium rise housing in the 30 to 50 dwellings per hectare range, which are likely to constitute the majority of new-build housing. The principles outlined in this paper, whilst they are applicable in the highest degree to the particular circumstances of the West Midlands Region, are relevant to housing design generally.

Design Concerns - The Regional Dimension

From being an often localised and subjective issue, the quality of housing design and layout has now assumed a Regional strategic urgency for the reasons that:-

- a) *in terms of numbers, demand for 241,000 new homes is being predicted over the next 15 years within the West Midlands Region. Such large scale urban development and re-development schemes should not be built to design standards long seen as unacceptable, nor perpetuate the worst aspects of urban sprawl.*
- b) *The easier-to-develop environmentally-acceptable land release options are being progressively exhausted (whether on brownfield or greenfield land). Unless there is to be severe cumulative environmental damage, encroachment upon the more attractive locations requires that compensation for their loss should be made by at least an equivalent environmental gain in the quality of new development itself.*
- c) *the whole Regional Strategy is predicated upon attracting and retaining population within the Major Urban Areas (MUAs). Unless the environmental attractiveness of*

MUAs actively encourages a wish to live within these areas, the whole strategy will fail. The region, with large areas of blighted land in its conurbations, has no more important strategy than to raise the level of their attractiveness.

- d) Two major housing objectives depend largely upon design quality. These are, firstly, the importance expressed (at 6.18 of RPG) of a range of dwelling types and sizes to attract economically independent households. Within high density MUAs traditional high quality dispersed housing is no longer an option for the top end of the market and only innovative and imaginative quality design offers a solution. Secondly, at the other end of the housing spectrum lies the relatively huge demand for affordable housing. Here only the highest design skills are likely to be effective in creating attractive neighbourhoods and street scenes from the raw material of individually-insignificant house units.*

To achieve both high-priced aspirational housing and affordable dwellings together in social and environmental cohesion is largely a design challenge.

- e) Changing social and demographic patterns of family life are rapidly shifting, in the West Midlands as elsewhere. Family sizes and marital re-adjustment, increased active life expectancy, varying racial balance all influence housing needs. We need to especially address the challenge of smaller families including singles and couples, the young and the elderly, the disadvantaged, needy and immigrant populations. All these sectors pose new housing problems but also offer opportunities for much greater design diversity and originality in their execution.*

- f) The regional strategy of concentration of housing supply within and adjoining urban areas is based upon sustainability issues of accessibility to employment, social and educational facilities within minimum travelling distance. Fulfilling this aim points towards more compact, higher density housing as a solution; a “garden suburb” approach is neither appropriate nor adaptable to the higher densities needed. Such urban-orientated designs require architectural and landscape solutions that draw on the best traditions of town building nationally, internationally and historically for their inspiration, interpreted into a West Midlands context.*

Regional Spatial Strategy

The Regional Vision outlined in RPG11 stresses the underlying objectives of higher environmental standards. It envisages a Region “rich in culture and environment” (2.2) “where there are opportunities for all toimprove their quality of life” (2.4a) “where urban and rural renaissance is achieved” (2.4c) “which is recognised for its distinctive, high quality natural and built environment”. These are indications of an approach to housing design based on quality.

In Chapter 6, “Communities for the Future, Sections 6.18 and 6.19 outlines design objectives for housing development in the above terms whilst stressing the rôle of local planning policies and initiatives in “providing local perspectives”.

Good, indeed exceptional design of housing areas is accordingly seen as a key driving force behind strategic policies aimed at the renewal of blighted towns and conurbations, the

achievement of higher living standards and the retention of an attractive countryside accessible to both town and country people. CPRE sees this drive towards a higher quality of life in towns and cities as wholly complementary to its own campaign promoting the beauty, tranquillity and diversity of rural England.

Design Principles

The necessary quantum change in quality of housing design is most likely to be achieved if consensus can be found amongst the several professions involved as to the principles and criteria which govern good design in this specialised field. Such common ground should be capable of being tested across the whole field of planning and environmental design, and its legitimacy seen to be derived from accepted principles of composition exemplified in other art forms such as painting and music. Initially CPRE would suggest that the following themes should underlie the design process and provide the basis upon which more precise proposals could be founded.

1. Creativity

Pure design is creativity, the composition of forms, patterns and shapes, colours, textures, light and shade, so as to evoke pleasurable emotion. Such a definition embraces housing design, a process involving nothing less than the creation of a three-dimensional composition of buildings and landscapes accommodating and shaping the whole life of a community.

2. Process of Design

The finished product is not only fine art, it is applied design; it has functions to fulfil and needs to accommodate. Amongst others these include access, safety, security, space and sunlight, sustainability, accommodation standards, resource protection and provision of community facilities and public open space. “Good design” is however not merely one of these functional or operational needs, it is the process which brings them all together in an inspirational whole greater than the sum of its parts. “Needs” change with changing attitudes; the purpose of “design” is to accommodate the changes.

3. Design, the Whole Picture

Housing design concerns itself with the whole picture, that which is seen and experienced. It is not the individual house design or the shape of each open space and its planting but their interlocking relationships, each dwelling to its neighbour and its setting, to its cumulative effect that is important. “Not individual design but how things combine”. The operative word, and principle, is “relationship”.

4. Scale

Regarding the scale of individual buildings, it is important that people feel that buildings and the space around and between them is designed for them and not as some abstract intellectual exercise. Both classical and vernacular buildings and building groups have in the past demonstrated this humanity, reflecting a close response to how buildings are lived in.

5. Form and Function

Design gives physical shape to the many functions of a housing scheme and its planning requirements. Its form is not however dictated solely by practical needs or the doctrine that “form follows function”. For any given design problem many alternative arrangements present themselves, and many design philosophies also. The aesthetic achievement of beauty, order and structure ranks high in the hierarchy of human needs and is a basic goal. Design philosophy should ideally be largely independent of stylistic arguments.

Inspiration may be derived from many sources, most productively from historic towns and villages at home and abroad. Human living requirements have varied, basically, little over time and those examples now universally considered of exceptional beauty are not to be discounted as irrelevant to present day but rather studied as to which of their attributes can best be utilised and adapted within the West Midlands. CPRE would advocate an appraisal of the vernacular architecture of the region, including the wealth of 19th century and post-Victorian era styles, as one likely major contribution to this understanding.

Principles Applied

Each housing scheme will be different, in its size and location, its site characteristics, its functional demands and density. Unfortunately a large amount of housing in the past has resulted in a wearying and repetitive monotony and anonymity. CPRE suggests that the design principles set out above have the potential to transform the housing scene to the extent made necessary by insistent regional, and national imperatives. As an indication of this potential CPRE considers their interpretation and application.

The first application of the principle of relationship in planning design is a site’s relationship to its wider setting, and then to local character. The most basic characteristic of the environment is that of being either town or country, urban or rural. In the countryside the natural landscape dominates, with buildings entirely subordinate; in towns and cities buildings dominate and landscape elements and open space provide a setting and subordinate contrast. To depart from this essential distinction is to degrade the rural environment, and to forgo the creation of distinction in town design. By emphasis and enhancement of their contrasting physical characteristics, both are mutually enriched. The approach to housing design and layout will differ between the two environments.

In the countryside the greatest importance should be placed on assimilating buildings within the landscape, siting and locating housing as a natural extension of existing towns and villages, on lower rather than higher ground avoiding hilltop locations or prominent slopes and using existing or augmented tree cover to the maximum. Additional screen planting extending to off-site planting may be needed to assimilate or conceal new building within the landscape with strong planting within the site to break up the building mass. However planting’s key rôle here is in strengthening the landscape within development and around it, but what is critical is not to spoil hitherto unspoilt views of the landscape’s rural quality, and that light spillage/pollution should be eliminated. Buildings should adopt long, low and linked massing to conform to the predominantly horizontal landscape proportions, and materials especially

that of roofing, should be mainly dark in tone with minimal light-coloured contrasts again to reflect the darker shadow tones of landscape and blend into the background. Both scale and materials should adopt local characteristics but be essentially small-scale, rural in grain and texture. Village housing is considered later.

In urban areas new housing should be expected to respond to, and avoid conflict with, attractive areas or those of architectural or historic value by reflecting their design characteristics or landscape setting. Where however the purpose of the new housing is to renew, enhance or replace existing areas of poor character or quality the opportunity should be taken to advance housing design often in innovative ways responsive to the highest traditions of town design. The British classical tradition of town houses aligned in terraces, parades, squares and crescent is exemplified in the spas, county towns and cathedral cities of the region displaying a character of formality, dignity, elegance and rationality without the sacrifice of domestic scale. Even more widely distributed, mediaeval town centres and especially those of the older university towns, offer overwhelmingly beautiful compositions of street patterns and compositions of closes, cloisters and quadrangles as exemplars to which modern housing should aspire without parody or pastiche.

The relationship sought here is to the highest qualities of national and regional civic design. In the Region's smaller urban centres and villages, each area displays strong local characteristics ranging from the black and white of the Hereford borders to the differing stone traditions of the Worcestershire Cotswolds or the Staffordshire Moorlands, and the red brick tradition of Warwickshire and central Staffordshire. The Region's many hundreds of Conservation Areas represent, in themselves, a text book of vernacular design character, a study of which would benefit every housing designer.

In this respect, a description of Conservation Areas as "attractive groupings of buildings each often of little individual value but which, together with their street pattern, open spaces and trees, nevertheless constitute compositions of outstanding and timeless beauty and character" would have considerable resonance as a definition also of desirable housing design.

Response to the Character of each Site – its “Genius Loci” or “Spirit of the Place”

The character of each housing site will be individual to that site, and if respected and exploited can contribute that individuality to its consequent development. Its site personality is both a "land bank" of history and ecology and a valuable design resource ensuring continuity between past and present which builds into the scheme an irreplaceable local context. This may include its geology, topography, archaeology, history, flora and fauna, outlook, water and drainage features and relationship to adjoining buildings. All such features once identified should not only be conserved but form a contributory and formative design input into the site's development.

A Dominant Theme – Achieving Unity

Housing layout design should be, and is capable of being, an art form, a three-dimensional composition capable of infinite variety in the design and arrangement of its parts. As with other forms of art, ranging from music to architecture, a satisfactory composition requires an

overriding unifying motif or concept, a theme to which all its variations are both subordinate and contributory. This unifying theme must be sufficiently strong to impose its stamp, as we see in historical towns and villages which have an overriding character derived from topography, architecture, building materials, dominant buildings or building compositions, road layout etc. Variations to, or departures from this theme are acceptable in the form of counterpoint (music) or contrasts which emphasise the composition and do not conflict with, weaken or blur its central concept.

The necessity for this dominant theme is especially marked where a housing layout approaches the size of a neighbourhood or village. Unless some striking and overriding built or natural feature already exists, the layout design will seek by means of its physical structure to create a unique character that unifies all its components into a striking whole. Such an achievement, regardless of its architectural merits, could be expected to induce a sense of community, ownership and belonging amongst residents, remedying an all-too-common failure in this respect in most large housing complexes. Principal devices contributing to such a physical identity could be:-

- ⇒ *definition and incorporation of its inherent site features so as to impart individuality and character*
- ⇒ *strong physical demarcation of its boundaries and of its entrances and exits – its “gateways”*
- ⇒ *progressively important massing of buildings and their treatment approaching the centre. Corridors of movement towards the centre defined by their design and that of flanking buildings*
- ⇒ *design of the centre itself to make it the self-evident culmination and natural focus of the community*
- ⇒ *overall coherence of building design, massing, composition and character with designed variations and contrasts to maintain interest (see next section)*
- ⇒ *an open-space system that at all scales complements and accentuates the building groupings, and forms a linked network for added value, accessibility and as a major element in the overall neighbourhood design concept*
- ⇒ *a strategy for tree planting and other environmental enhancements (including existing features such as streams, hedges or ponds) that complements in well-defined ways the character of its built-up areas, and gives three-dimensional form and meaning to its open-spaces*

Housing – The Street Scene

If the essence of “design” is seen to be the composing of individual parts in a larger, more satisfying whole, a housing scheme with its many separate elements – houses, bungalows, apartment blocks, open space and trees – is the archetypal subject. And if the overall intention of the design is to create form and shape, present orthodox layout practice of uniform width parallel estate streets, footpaths and building lines fronted by standard repetitive house types, inevitably fails in that aim. Variations confined to design and siting of individual houses must also fail to retain interest, with each succeeding street presenting very much the same aspect as

each other in a cumulatively-monotonous pattern. The low-density garden suburb tradition with large private gardens and avenue tree planting unifying the leafy suburb “character” is unlikely to be repeated bearing technical, sustainability and land costs considerations in mind. Continuing with the “string of beads” approach to estate design is unequal to the challenge of new circumstances.

To achieve and sustain interest and variety within a common design theme the “unit of design” needs to be larger than that of the individual house unit – it needs to be that which is seen together at any one time, usually the street picture. A street picture is a three-dimensional composition of house facades framing a space. Each street falls to be considered not as a corridor but as a “room” with potential for endless combinations of size, shape, proportions and planting treatment whose walls – the building facades – add further permutations in their architectural massing and treatment.

Such spaces, defined and contained by bends, turns and angles or offset street alignment – or more dramatically by pinch points, archways or “gateways” would each create their own unique sense of “enclosure” or belonging to a small community, a social experience the lack of which is presently keenly felt. Containment achieves the essential element of enclosure, but conversely gives also the opportunity for “release”, opening out to wider and different views, a sense of contrast and vitality. Such spaces flowing each one into another would provide a sequential and constantly-changing visual experience. The word “townscape” would be brought alive.

Composition of the street facades themselves in relation to the spaces they enclose is an exercise likely to be architecturally rewarding. Proportion of height to space; repetition of building elements within an overall considered unity of design, variation within that unity; punctuation at roof and floor levels and at termination of building lengths, inflection of design at changes of direction or level, are just a few of the basic townscape tools of the designer. From the housing developer’s viewpoint arises the opportunity even of developing standard house types for use in each common situation, such as change of direction or of level, termination of view or transition between different dwelling types.

Variation of shape and form of street spaces – informal or formal, circular, square, rectangular, tapered or linear, rising or falling, require a wall-to-wall surface treatment both for defining their shape and for imparting individual character. It is important, indeed critical, that the highway authority should assume in this respect a more imaginative partnership rôle based upon the concept of a “home-zone” approach to residential areas with speed limits set at 20mph or less, and embracing also shared road space and/or pedestrian priority principles. Enhancement and demarcation of street surfaces, tree planting and public art should be integrated with the whole design of the “space”. Planning submissions should require illustration of the effect intended to be achieved.

Density and Design

The potential for increased housing density is considered in a companion paper to this report: *“Housing Density – can we get more homes without sacrificing the countryside?”* CPRE, West Midlands Region/May 2005. This concluded that considerable increases in average housing densities could be achieved in the West Midlands while still improving the quality of housing.

This is made feasible by mixed housing schemes which include a proportion of small-family apartment housing or specialised housing for groups such as the elderly and single residents, and by innovative approaches to aspects such as car parking, private garden space and street layout. This form of urban grouping could also provide a greater proportion of public or semi-public open space creating tree planting and other biodiversity opportunities.

Such solutions are likely not only to provide a wide range of accommodation attractive to all income ranges, but an equally wide design palette for the urban designer in the form of one, two and multi-storey houses and medium-rise apartment blocks, which together with their designed setting could, with skill, create building compositions of the historically high quality envisaged earlier in this report.

While variations in housing densities are to be anticipated within each planning authority area, responding to local environmental imperatives the great majority of new housing would be located within town or, where appropriate, village locations. Here enhanced densities are usually capable of reflecting local vernacular in building design, their grouping and response to their setting.

Details

Planning design rightly starts with enunciating wide aims, principles and criteria. However in design of housing the effectiveness of such broad considerations, their success or failure, may well be governed by matters of relative details. CPRE has examples in mind where the colour, tone, effect and texture of brickwork walls can be totally changed by the details of its mortar joints; roofing character dramatically varied by its pitch and the difference between plain tiles and single-lap pantiles; whilst building elevations may be dull and bland, or vital and interesting dependent upon such a small detail as depths of window reveals.

Even matters of importance such as achievement of privacy inside dwellings may be effective, or not, dependent upon internal room planning, height of window sills above pedestrian eye-level in the street outside, window proportions or thickness and colour of glazing bars or mullions.

Street paving will create, or respond to, an overall effect by careful choice of scale, materials and colour. Indeed popular acceptance of a scheme may hinge on the detailing of steps, railings and planting at the foot of the building itself.

Success or otherwise of a scheme can thus be reliant on such details. Concern for wider concepts should not be negated by lack of attention to such “minor” matters.

Conclusion

These proposals are hardly radical, in the sense that they propose putting into practice only that which is self-evident from the best practice in town design for the last two millennia, and which has been consistently advocated (and demonstrated) by respected professionals and amateurs for the last century.

Housing design, as in much other design of the built environment, has been hamstrung by the

inabilities and mutual antipathy of the participating professions, and the reluctance of many volume house builders to embrace changes to established practices. Attitudes are changing, with both the public and the house-owner as the ultimate beneficiaries of a transformation of the quality of the living environment. Such schemes as that at Dickens Heath, Solihull, illustrate the potential of such change, whilst readier public acceptance of new thinking has been conditioned by television house and garden make-over programmes, and its experience of the many imaginative holiday developments abroad.

Summary

1. Regional planning policy bases its whole strategy on concentration of development within the major urban areas (MUAs). To make this attractive to residents the whole quality of their housing environment has to be raised to a degree far beyond that presently offered.
2. Such design quality requires an approach based upon some basic principles of composition – considering housing developments as three-dimensional compositions, relating each building to the whole scene, deriving inspiration from the best examples, old and new, from home and abroad. Design is considered as a process which attractively brings together all the practical functions of a housing scheme.
3. Applying such principles the fundamental qualities of town or country would be accepted and reinforced, and the character of the housing site made a defining factor. The neighbourhood or urban village would be designed to have its own individuality and identity, strengthening residents' bond with their environment and sense of community.
4. Each street would be composed as a “scene” by the endless permutations, variations and contrasts of the shape of its space, architectural relationship of its buildings and the treatment of its details. Greater involvement by highway planners in the resultant overall design of the housing is urged.
5. Enhanced urban housing densities are considered feasible and could offer gains in architectural grouping. This would generally derive from providing for the range of family requirements by a rich mixture of dwelling types and sizes, including apartments for smaller families. The exception would be on smaller sites, where sometimes too rich a mix of house types in one place could undermine the visual coherence that this advice is trying to achieve. Importance of detailing in achieving strategic aims is highlighted.
6. The proposals build upon principles and practices proved attractive over time, which it is hoped will commend themselves to the professional and construction industry participants in the housing design process, and the ultimate consumers – the public.



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www.cprewm.org.uk

For further information contact: cpre.wm@btinternet.com
Or ring 01922 636601

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