





Places for Life

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T: + 44 (0) 29 2045 1964
dcfw.org
[@designcfw](https://twitter.com/designcfw)

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Ministerial Foreword

Great places are at the core of the objectives of the planning system in Wales. Design excellence and sound placemaking are firmly at the heart of Planning Policy Wales 10 and Future Wales, the new National Development Framework that will be published in 2021.



In September this year I launched the Placemaking Wales Charter and Placemaking Guidance developed in partnership between the Welsh Government and the Design Commission for Wales, supported by the collaborative network Placemaking Wales Partnership. The people, organisations, professional bodies and practitioners that helped found the Partnership have committed their practical experience and expertise and are helping to promote the new guidance and implement good placemaking across the country.

Delivering great places that support the environmental, social, economic and cultural sustainability settlements and their inhabitants has a key role to play in delivering the goals of the Wellbeing of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015. Our built and natural environments, clean air, decent homes, good transport, health and education services are the foundation of the quality of life we all need to thrive. There is more to do, plenty of room for improvement and a necessity for acceleration in the face of climate and biodiversity risk.

I am therefore pleased to support Places for Life II from the Design Commission for Wales which offers further encouragement, broadens dialogue and urges pace through the insightful and expert essays from practitioners featured in this volume.

We know collaboration is key to involving and enabling the essential community involvement, understanding and shaping of place, creative problem solving and thoughtful design that is highlighted in Places for Life II. We must not accept placeless and lifeless 'anywhere' developments and whilst I encourage, I also challenge all those working in the built environment to forge creative and ambitious visions for the places we want and need to see created and shaped in Wales - places we can be proud of.

Strategic planning, which recognises the value of good design and sets out from the placemaking perspective upstream and at regional levels, is a critical starting point for the successful delivery of the right development in the right place, connected by sustainable transport and active travel.

Local authorities must work collaboratively to coordinate land use and transport planning at the regional level with their strategic vision. Integrating placemaking at the outset of Local Development Plans is critical to ensuring local interpretation of the principles and responses to the unique characteristics of our cities, towns, villages and landscapes. The Design Commission for Wales has a vital role to play in assisting with this process and I encourage local authorities to engage with them through their bespoke training, client support and design review services.

The Coronavirus COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted just how important the quality of our homes and the supportive connections of our communities are and this is emphasised by many of the contributors to Places for Life II. We must support the health and wellbeing of the population by addressing basic needs such as private outdoor amenity space, good routes that are generous enough to be enjoyed by multiple users on foot or by our own pedal power. If there are to be some positive outcomes from the pandemic, one might be that more of us may have come to know our neighbours and neighbourhoods better than ever before.

But the pandemic has also accelerated the challenges facing our town centres and local high streets. Now more than ever, we need to act creatively and look hard at what can be done to save and strengthen these important places. Part of this will be through supporting local businesses, enabling community interventions, and providing the right transport and active travel connections. Very sadly for many, the worst has already happened in this year of C-19 and so a fresh approach to calculated risk and through creative thinking is exactly what's needed. All around us is the greatest risk of all – that of our changing climate. We have known for years that business as usual is no longer tenable. Every home we build, every place we make, every high street we support must make it easier for us to live in a more sustainable way and work towards zero carbon living if we want to leave a Wales that is a better place for our future generations.

Julie James MS

Minister for Housing and Local Government

Foreword

Distinctiveness and design quality have been significant and consistent commitments in Welsh Government spatial and land use planning from the earliest years of devolution. The touchstone was the Sustainable Development requirement enshrined in the Government of Wales Act and a continuity of commitment to this runs like strata through successive policy development and legislation from the early 2000s to the present day.



In 2020 it aligns with and is integral to our wellbeing legislation and place-focused policy and is at the core of the vision for the national development framework Future Wales. This strategic picture sets the scope of our ambition whilst also providing a framework for action 'on the ground' through the investment we make in the delivery and regeneration of homes, neighbourhood streets and spaces, our towns, villages and communities.

The challenges of regeneration across Wales are more than matched by the need for swift and meaningful progress towards a cleaner, better connected and lower carbon country. The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted the importance of our town and neighbourhood centres. During lock down they provided local access to essential goods and services and it is also clear that people miss the opportunities for social interaction that they provide. Our retail, tourism and hospitality sectors have been hit hard by the impact of the pandemic, prompting the need to look for innovative ways to support these businesses and future diversification. At every stage we have seen the importance of the quality of our homes, work spaces, neighbourhoods and towns. They are important for our mental and physical wellbeing as we adjust to new ways of living and working, but also to enable equality of access to health, education and other public services. Matthew Jones' article emphasises the need for the public and private sectors to collaborate to test new ideas and find solutions. This was why £5.3 million was allocated from the Transforming Towns programme to fund adaptations in town centres to support traders and improve public safety in response to coronavirus.

COVID-19 has prompted rapid evolution of innovation and adjustment for our towns and communities with businesses and the public sector seeking out new ways to deliver services and maintain some sense of vibrancy. We have, in many ways, been released from tired and outdated practice and allowed to rethink and recalibrate. Inevitable change has been accelerated. The articles in Places for Life II not only reflect this but urge us all not to let the opportunity slip.

As the Design Commission's Jen Heal notes in her introduction, this is not about unachievable utopia. Contributors here are practitioners and professionals, actors in the fields of placemaking and regeneration, willing to share their time and expertise acquired in practice and through experience. Combined with the constructive contributions being made through my Town Centre Taskforce, we have not only a call to step up and make the changes necessary to deliver on the promise of our policy, but evidence and experience that it can and is being done.

The opportunity now lies in accelerating action whilst holding fast to our long-term commitment to a culture of quality. Regenerating our towns, villages and rural centres successfully cannot be achieved without the place-understanding advocated by Priit Jürimäe and Alt-Architecture in this volume. It will require us to learn from and draw upon the knowledge, resilience and ingenuity that resides in our rural communities who have adapted, survived and thrived through many challenges in the past.

We cannot be shunted backwards to cookie-cutter suburbia that doesn't have the density to support the life of a neighbourhood. We must consider and be informed by the demographic shift that requires us to rethink intensification, proximity and quality green space through the opportunity offered in the path to net-zero. Similarly, we cannot allow our town centres to languish in the mire of the legacy of single use retail which is now in rapid decline - we must reinvent and reinvigorate our places for trading, for living, for social value, the exchange of ideas and societal cohesion. We must rethink regeneration if we are to achieve places for life.

Hannah Blythyn MS

Deputy Minister for Housing and Local Government

Introduction

Jen Heal
Design Advisor,
Design Commission for Wales

It has been four years since I wrote the introduction to the first **Places for Life**. It followed the Design Commission for Wales conference held in October 2016, that sought to explore the links between the places we create and people's health and wellbeing. The conference and subsequent publication were energised and full of ideas and challenges about how we might create better places for people to live their lives and thrive.



The starting point for the conference then was to address housing and the quality of the places we create to live. However, I was keen to ensure that we didn't only address one issue or one land use at a time because the quality of our living environment is about the whole place – the home, garden, street, neighbourhood and its people. Since the conference progress has been made. Placemaking is now firmly embedded in planning policy through the 2018 edition of *Planning Policy Wales*. This seeks to ensure that a holistic approach is taken to places rather than addressing individual land uses. It places a duty on all those involved in developing or shaping places to embrace the concept of placemaking and a clear link is made between placemaking and wellbeing. This all aligns with the goals of the Wellbeing of Future Generation Act, its goals and the focus on social, environmental, economic and cultural sustainability.

Placemaking as word has become well used (some might say over used), but it is still a good word – it encapsulates everything to do with a place and suggests that it is an ongoing process.

The recent publication of the Placemaking Wales Charter and accompanying Placemaking Guide, developed by DCFW and Welsh Government with input from the Placemaking Wales Partnership, reassert the importance of placemaking and seek to provide a common understanding of all of the considerations that need to be made in developing good places.

However, there is still work to be done and improvements to be made to both the process and end product of the development of our built environment. This second Places for Life publication addresses some of the persistent challenges and remaining gaps that provide the impetus to keep pushing for better places.

Current Context

The articles in this publication were written during the initial height of the COVID-19 pandemic in the spring/summer of 2020. People were either in or just emerging from lockdown and largely working from home which highlighted a range of issues that are picked up in some of the articles. The 'lockdown' period of the pandemic placed a renewed focus on the quality of both our homes and amenity spaces but also the sense of community which may or may not be able to offer support for those in need. Working from home has placed a greater emphasis on the neighbourhood as a place to live, work, home-school and spend our free time.

The focus is now on what we do next – how will our towns and villages recover, what will the future of our residential landscape look like and how can we be ever more responsive to the people and place within which any development takes place?

These articles offer a rich source of ideas, debate and visions for an alternative future. They challenge current practice to do better for people and place. There is a common emphasis on recognising the unique qualities of a location whether that is through the landscape, existing buildings or the community that does or will inhabit it. Indeed, understanding a place is the theme of the first part of this publication.

Understanding a Place

The essays in this section highlight the importance of understanding places and people and how to respond to this. They do not advocate a tokenistic or superficial glance, but a deep-rooted understanding and real care. The dangers of eliminating the past in terms of culture, heritage, community and identity are identified and the role of local people as the experts is emphasised along with the need to use a range of creative ways to engage with them.

Jessica Richmond picks up this latter point in her article *Arts and Place*. She firmly places the focus on people and the need to build relationships in order to understand a place, including the emotional attachments that people have with it. She calls for artists and creative practitioners to be engaged as a normal part of the development process to enrich the process and ensure the community is truly engaged. In Wales¹ and elsewhere across Europe engaging artists in the early stages of development and within design teams has been widespread and sophisticated practice for many years. Now though, there is a renewed understanding of the value of creative enquiry for involvement and inclusion of communities in the shaping of place.

‘Large development sites risk being thin, isolated entities if they are just shaped around car journeys.’ Aled Singleton

Aled Singleton describes a walking methodology that seeks to understand ‘thick’ and ‘thin’ spaces, aspertaining to the memories and connections that people have with a place. He explores the impact that car-centric development has had on our relationship with a place using Caerleon as a case study.

Priit Jürimäe advocates for the retention of existing buildings for heritage value, but also as spaces for new businesses to grow and because of the environmental impact of demolition and redevelopment. He addresses the need for ‘messy’ areas where emerging and creative business can be located, highlighting that placemaking is not about pristine public spaces. He raises the important point that condition surveys, often used as justification for the demolition and redevelopment of buildings, say nothing about their community or economic value which can often belie their physical condition.

Alt-Architecture call for a critical response to site-specific conditions and advocate critical regionalism as a reaction against rootless, ‘anywhere’ architecture. Key to this approach is spending time in a place to understand it personally. The response to this deep understanding then needs to be a critical interpretation rather than superficial copying. They question how a region can benefit from a standard approach when every place has its own identity which needs to be nurtured. A different approach requires different ways of working which often falls between disciplines.

Shaping Places

The second section of the publication moves on to how we might shape places in the future. I welcome the focus in this edition of Places for Life on towns, suburbs and villages which typify much of Wales beyond the few big cities. These places present a number of challenges for providing vibrant, active and mixed communities and facilities but also offer a range of opportunities which can be capitalised on, including those stemming from our collective re-localisation as a result of lockdown and the ongoing necessity to work from home where possible.

Dr Matthew Jones focuses on how towns can adapt after the pandemic and challenges us to be a part of imagining a different future. Whilst recognising that local people know their place best, he stresses the importance of using skills as creative professionals to problem solve and find solutions to the current challenges. Fundamentally town centres need to shift their focus from retail to include a wide range of uses that support living, working, trading and socialising. New ideas need to be generated, tested and risks taken and, while these ideas need to come from locals first, he highlights the need for support and guidance to take ideas forward.

'Rural areas can be laboratories of innovation and a place for gentle radicalism' Sarah Featherstone

Sarah Featherstone on behalf of Velocity, puts forward a place-based vision for rural communities that would see greater social and physical connectivity through active travel and compact development to address both isolation and the climate emergency. The COVID-19 situation has given fresh emphasis to the idea of providing places to live and work and access to facilities in a way that reduces the need to travel. It is a call to reimagine rural development and rethink attitudes to rural development in order to sustain places for the future. For a nation that is largely rural in land mass yet urban and post-industrial in much of its lived experience and culture, these co-existing tensions offer up the context for new creative stimulus to re-think Wales.

'Communal space should be the bedrock, not the leftover scraps.'

Bethan Scorey

Bethan Scorey highlights the importance of neighbourly interaction and shared experience in developing a sense of belonging to a place. She challenges the identikit arrangement of houses and gardens around roads with little of value for residents in the public realm. She identifies that it is in the common or shared spaces where exchanges and interdependencies take place which add richness to the life of a place. Perhaps the COVID-19 pandemic give us the permission or even the impetus to think differently about our spaces and communities. While sharing requires more communication and negotiation, this could actually be good for our wellbeing as it strengthens connections – a shift from the current individualistic trend.

Hoare Lea bring their expertise to a re-think of suburbia and its possible evolution over the next 20 years. With an anticipated shift in future demographic profile of suburbia they identify that 'the new generation of suburbanites wants and needs a different suburban landscape.' There is a call to move away from low density, high car dependence and minimal amenities – features that currently characterise suburbs. They alight on the tension between an obsession with ever increasing 'growth' driving a 'new-build' focussed construction industry, at odds with the knowledge that many of the homes of the future are already built. These shifted suburbanite trends combined with the climate and sustainable development imperatives necessitate suburban intensification, proximity and tranquillity, and quality green space. In the midst of a climate emergency Hoare Lea explore how our places could move towards net carbon zero and question who should coordinate all of these interventions – suburban task force?

'It is the prerogative of suburbia reimagined to define itself by the prosperity and wellbeing of the people who dwell there, not the size of the gardens.' Hoare Lea

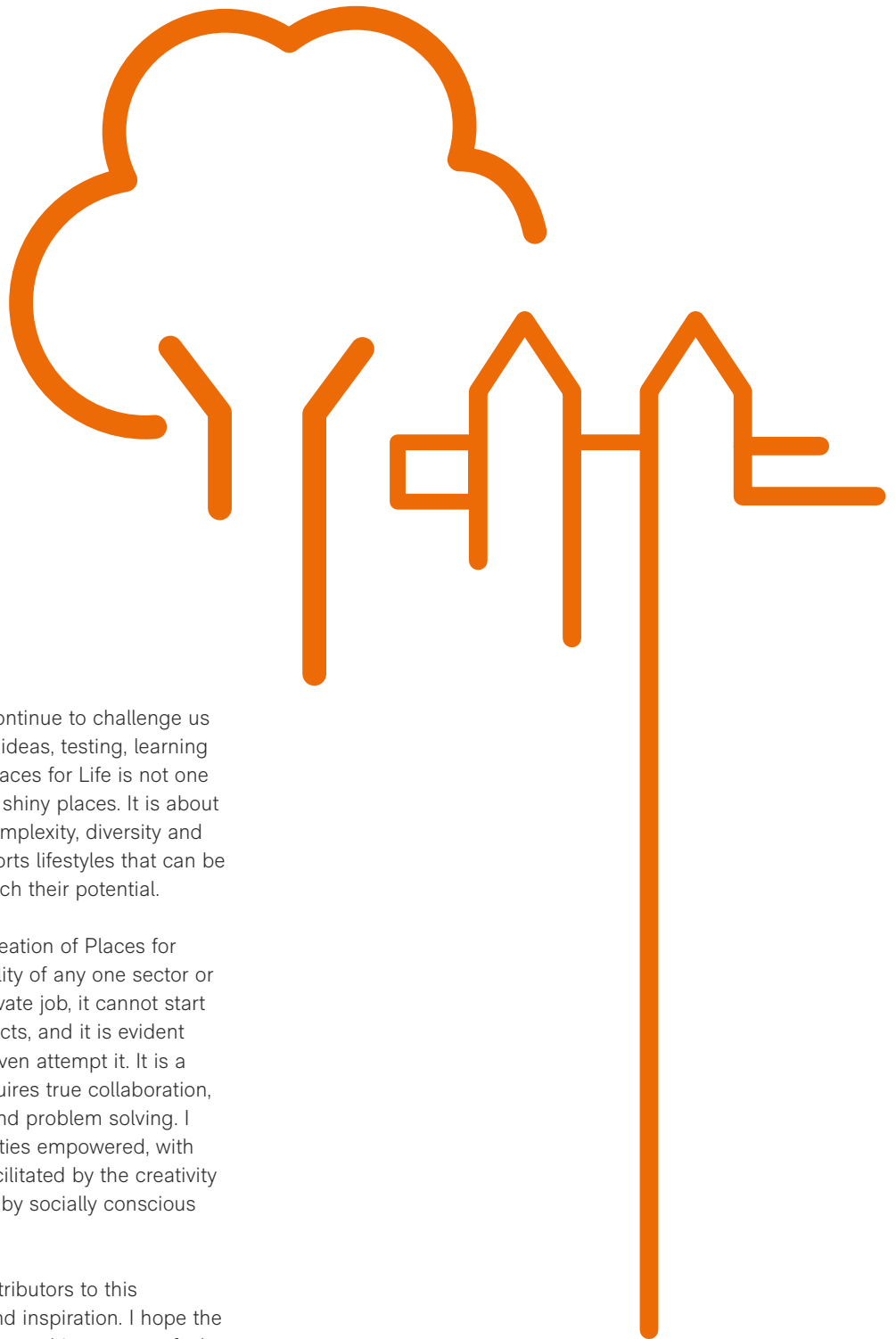
The case study of 150 homes proposed at Gwynfean, Swansea perhaps offers one example of how to do address many of the issues raised. It shows it is important to not just tackle one issue as every aspect of creating a sustainable place needs to be thought about together. The approach to developing the proposals through multi-disciplinary workshops and collaboration indicates that the process is as important as the design. However, the case study also highlights the time and cost challenges of changing the design and delivery of homes. In this case it has been enabled by the Welsh Government's Innovative Housing Programme (IHP), but is there a need for more public support until it becomes mainstream and do we need to reconsider expectations and calculations of cost and value as the way we need to build changes?

'We need developers to build back better, not just build, build, build.'
Robert Chapman

Finally, **Robert Chapman** puts the onus on developers to do better – people want better and people need better for both their health and wellbeing. He identifies a lack of trust in the development industry and the need to build social value into the way places are designed and managed. Allied to the need for better proposals from developers is the need for better resourcing for planning. This was identified in the previous Places for Life publication and remains a challenge to ensure that planning is the proactive, frontline service it needs to be.

When considered together, a number of common themes come through the articles in this addition of Places for Life, most notably:

- The significance of distinctiveness and identity – there is no 'one-size fits all' solution.
- The ongoing challenge of moving away from car dependency – much of what is envisaged is difficult to achieve with high levels of car ownership and our places could be much richer with lower levels and real mobility choice.
- The need for time in the design and development process to understand a place and its people and respond critically and creatively.
- The importance of involving and supporting local people whether that be through Place Plans or other mechanisms.
- The need for planning to be better resourced to take on some of these challenges and provide necessary leadership.
- The role of creative thinking in engaging and interpreting, testing, trying, and problem solving.



Conclusion

The aim of this publication is to continue to challenge us collectively to keep exploring new ideas, testing, learning and doing better. The 'vision' of Places for Life is not one of utopia – it is not about pristine, shiny places. It is about accommodating life in all of its complexity, diversity and messiness but in a way that supports lifestyles that can be healthy and enables people to reach their potential.

This complexity means that the creation of Places for Life cannot be the sole responsibility of any one sector or profession. It is not a public or private job, it cannot start and finish with planners or architects, and it is evident that, to date, few developers will even attempt it. It is a collective responsibility which requires true collaboration, true engagement, true creativity and problem solving. I see places for life being communities empowered, with support from the public sector, facilitated by the creativity of the design world and delivered by socially conscious developers.

I would like to thank all of the contributors to this publication for their time, ideas, and inspiration. I hope the discussion and debate about how to achieve some of what is set out here can continue.

Jen Heal

Design Advisor, Design Commission for Wales.

Notes:

- 1 Organisations, strategies and practice include CBAT Arts & Regeneration Agency; Cywaith Cymru; Studio Response, Addo, Cardiff Bay Arts Trust and Arts Council Wales Art, People & Places.

One.

Part 1 Understanding a Place

Arts and Place: The role of arts-based practice
in fostering well-being and regeneration in
communities in the UK.

Jess Richmond

Learning to walk (again) and engage with places.

Aled Singleton

Harnessing existing buildings in placemaking

Priit Jürimäe

Reading and re-writing place:
a response to landscape

Rhian Thomas + Amanda Spence



Arts and Place:

The role of arts-based practice in fostering well-being and regeneration in communities in the UK.

By Jess Richmond, urban designer, planner, and creative practitioner

Portmeirion, Penrhynedeudraeth, Gwynedd, North Wales





Another Place, Anthony Gormley.
Crosby Beach, Merseyside, England

Engaging place

'Most people instinctively know a great place when they see one, but often find it hard to describe exactly what makes it special!'

Placemaking is about creating great places to live, work, visit and spend time. The values and qualities that we seek are what make places attractive and successful and encourage us to experience and spend time in them. It is through the values that we attach to a place, and our own experience of place that we create meaning and memories.

Our experience of place will vary greatly depending on who we are and where and how we live: whether in a village, town or city; suburban or urban areas; as resident or worker; old or young; and, most profoundly, whether we live in places of prosperity or poverty. Simultaneously, our everyday engagement with the places in which we live, work and play will influence the lives we lead, the opportunities available to us, our personal and communal happiness, our identity, and sense of belonging. This experience of place is fundamental to our physical and mental health and sense of wellbeing.² So how do we extract this information when we try to understand a place?

Emotional attachments to a place are rarely seen on city plans or development strategies highlighting the need for better engagement to help truly understand a place. This involves working alongside people and their communities to listen to their stories, memories, and experience of place to help inform the design process. And, in doing so help shape great places.



Hay Festival



Interactive workshop



Place engagement

Engaging people

'People are as important as places in regeneration, particularly where the physical transformation of neighbourhoods is required'.³ Working with communities to help regenerate them and the active role that art and creative practitioners can have in this engagement process is really important. It is about building relationships initially and using different approaches to engage with people. Research over the past 10 years has highlighted how art and creative practitioners are able to introduce 'enquiry, delight and responsiveness to initiatives that can sometimes threaten to overwhelm the very communities that they are intended to reach',⁴ however, many of these examples go above and beyond the statutory requirement for public and stakeholder engagement today. So why is something so important often overlooked?

'When', 'how' and 'how much' to engage is critical to regeneration projects today'.⁵ Consultation fatigue, or over consultation can limit feedback and the future involvement of community groups in the shaping of the environment around them. When this occurs, it risks the individual needs of the community not being met by the development and a lack of community ownership. It is therefore about striking the right balance and encouraging meaningful engagement with representatives of the whole community so that the wider regeneration benefits can be realised.

The 2016 UN-Habitat World Cities Report called for the greater participation of citizens in the development of sustainable, inclusive, safe and resilient cities. In the UK this ambition has been pursued under the Localism Act

2011 in England and in Wales The Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015. The Localism Act emphasises the shift towards local autonomy and community ownership, coupled with a scaling back of central responsibility in planning and urban development, and a community's ability to exercise control over its built environment through the development of Place Plans. Both Acts identify a key role in the engagement of people and their capacity to build resilience in the face of uncertain futures.

How often do designers and planners hope for more meaningful engagement in a project? To have the time, resources, and budget to truly understand a place and its people? This is not referring to the number of completed feedback leaflets, or the opportunities to view exhibition material and virtual exhibitions. This means creatively engaging with people who live, work and spend time in an area (as well as future user groups) from the outset of a project to actively listen, see and understand a place, and experience it through their senses.



Stakeholder engagement



Town walks and mind maps, Folkestone Urban Room



Love at First Sight art installation, Aberdeen

Engaging creative minds

The role of arts in placemaking has been promoted nationally by The Manifesto for Public Arts since 2015. It defines public arts as 'any creative cultural activity taking place in a public context - visual art, performance, procession, music, carnival, digital art, spoken word, temporary installation, pyrotechnics, and much else - often including local participation and always responding to a sense of place.'⁶

Part of an 'Arts & Place' initiative is to challenge general perceptions of arts as an 'ornamental extra' and highlight its role in the re-imagining and regeneration of spaces.⁷ Ixia, the public art think tank, suggests 'the appointment of artists at the inception of development projects'⁸ in its understanding of good practice in commissioning artists. Until recently artists and creative practitioners have been involved at a much later stage in the development process, restricting the opportunity to add value as facilitators, mediators or creative consultants.

The value of arts-based practice in placemaking and regeneration and the findings of how impact is measured can be contested. The difficulty of comparison is 'the fact that many of the benefits we associate with the arts, like increased creativity or feelings of well-being, are 'intangible' and therefore difficult to measure.'⁹ By exploring and showcasing creative strategies to community



Top right: The Patternistas, Penylan Pantry shop window, Cardiff



Social enterprise, Granby Workshops

engagement and how these have transformed the built environment and strengthened communities at the same time, we are able to see the value of creativity as an engagement tool, which can help us engage better. In this way, creative practitioners can:

1. Engage, stimulate, break down barriers and generate debate by using creative methods to improve the quality and quantity of local engagement.
2. Inform and communicate by using their skills to help present and explain using a variety of different approaches.
3. Refresh and generate new perspectives by the ability to think differently and offering an alternative perspective.
4. Enliven and enrich by using creative consultation methods that deliver qualitative responses.
5. Design and visualise by using skills to help improve and professionalise the appearance of the documentation produced.
6. Test ideas by creating temporary events, visual arts commissions or helping developing designs.
7. Document and evaluate by having the capacity to record, document and interpret results in an engaging way.¹⁰

Promoting art and well-being

The use of arts-based practice and its role in engaging communities in placemaking is explored through the following examples. The case studies vary in scale, with each one identifying unique ways that creative practitioners have influenced and responded to regeneration projects and highlight the role art and arts-based practice has to play in fostering well-being and regeneration across the UK. The role of arts-based practice illustrates how socially engaged and participatory arts projects can be used to encourage physical and social regeneration, particularly in terms of the WHO five ways to well-being.¹¹ They emphasise the role that art can play as a tool for engaging, stimulating and generating debate, enlivening and enriching qualitative responses through creative workshops, and opening up discussions and interpreting knowledge. In using arts-based practice to generate creative methods of communication and engagement, the quality and quantity of local consultation is improved, demonstrating both the importance of and positive outputs from a participatory perspective.



EveryOne EveryDay engagement project



Field of Hearts, Queens Square Bristol

‘They make people feel welcome, happy and connected to neighbours from all walks of life; improve levels of health and well-being; increase learning and provide new pathways to work and self-employment ... as well as helping to make neighbourhoods kinder to the planet by creating lots of opportunities to grow, share, repair and recycle.’

Case studies

Participatory City

A charity established for the benefit of the people living and working in Barking and Dagenham through an ambitious five-year programme. The projects were launched in 2017 and build on the imaginative ‘hands on’ projects that people have been creating over the last few years in the neighbourhoods. It focuses on practical projects which make everyday life better for everyone. Every One Every Day is working with residents and local organisations to create a network of 250 projects across the area. The projects include sharing knowledge, spaces, and resources, for families to work and play together, for bulk cooking, food growing, tree planting, for trading, making and repairing, for growing community businesses. The projects are designed for people to work together on an equal footing and are also social and enjoyable, helping to create lots of mutual benefits for people taking part, and working with the creativity and energy that already exists in the area.

‘They make people feel welcome, happy and connected to neighbours from all walks of life; improve levels of health and well-being; increase learning and provide new pathways to work and self-employment ... as well as helping to make neighbourhoods kinder to the planet by creating lots of opportunities to grow, share, repair and recycle.’¹²

Folkestone Urban Room

Sited in the Old Tourist Information Centre in Folkestone it ‘offers a place for discussion, talks, debates, inquiry, and presentations for residents and visitors alike who wish to contribute to the future of Folkestone’¹³ An ‘Urban Analysis’ was undertaken of the town in 2017 creating a narrative for place and change across the town. The purpose was to provide people who live in or visit Folkestone with an understanding of why the town looks the way it does, and tools for thinking about how the town could be changed.

A network of urban rooms exists across the country following the Farrell Review.¹⁴ ‘The purpose of an Urban Room is to foster meaningful connections between people and place, by using creative methods of engagement to encourage active participation in the future of our buildings, streets and neighbourhoods’¹⁵ The **Croydon Urban Room** was shortlisted for the RTPI Planning Awards 2020 for pioneering a new form of transparent civic engagement. Highlighting the potential for council-led engagement to be truly innovative and meaningful to the public it serves.¹⁶ Another successful example is **Blackburn is Open** which, after 11 months of discussion and hard work developed a 12 point plan to continue the regeneration of the town centre.¹⁷

In-between, Addo

A research project run by Newcastle University, which looked to link the Fine Art department with the wider cultural sector through events, projects and generating debate. The specific aims of the project were 'to generate new understanding through critical analysis of the role that visual arts have played and might play in the regeneration of market towns with a view to influencing policy and informing best practice'.¹⁸ This creative network brought together an international, interdisciplinary body of researchers to critically consider the potential of the interaction of arts, policy and cultural infrastructure in the regeneration of three market towns: Dumfries, Hexham and Pontypool. The research focussed on the feasibility of encouraging alternative arts-based practices in each location to enable market towns to affirm a distinctiveness and identity for a sustainable future. The study focussed on the themes of 'People, Place and Idea' and through workshop participation and artist engagement it concluded with ways arts and culture should contribute to the regeneration and future role of each town.¹⁹

Granby Four Streets, Assemble

An urban regeneration project in Liverpool used community engagement with a focus on art and design to tackle dereliction. The project has been praised for its bottom-up approach to regeneration and creative engagement. Along with winning the Turner Prize in 2015 it was awarded at the 2016 Urbanism Awards.²⁰ Over the past decade local residents have been involved in cleaning and planting their streets, painting empty houses and organising a monthly market, after years battling plans for demolition by the council. Creative practitioners, Assemble worked with Granby Four Streets Community Land Trust to refurbish housing and public spaces, and set up a local enterprise making furniture.

'I hope other places will be encouraged to grasp the opportunity for community-led development'.²¹

Love Easton

Set up by Bristol City Council's Urban Design Task Force in a deprived, yet highly lively and diverse part of the city. The aim was to find innovative ways to involve residents in local decision making on planning applications through their area. The project worked with Master's Architecture students from Sheffield University to develop a strategic document summarising residents' views, to which developers would have to adhere. Consultation methods included the setting up of a pop-up community cafe and food events to aid discussion and design workshops where residents were encouraged to bring their ideas to be realised by architects and designers. Through positive engagement the area has been transformed into a vibrant and desirable part of the city.



From top:
Pop up venue, Blackburn is Open
Community engagement, Croydon Urban Room
House Project, Granby 4 Streets

'Getting the topic right is fundamental, as the topic is what creates a relationship ... The topic must be engaging and delivered in an engaging way'.



The town is the venue, Huntly

The town is the venue, Deveron Arts

'Getting the topic right is fundamental, as the topic is what creates a relationship ... The topic must be engaging and delivered in an engaging way'.²²

Based in the rural market town of Huntly in Scotland it aims to connect artists, communities, and place through creative, critical work. The website cites 'we are committed to the social wellbeing of our town and inhabit, explore, map and activate the place through artist driven projects'.²³ Since 1995 the town has engaged with local communities and their clubs, choirs, shops, schools, churches, bars and discos. The project draws inspiration from Patrick Geddes, who viewed society as a bio-diverse interconnected system. By responding to the many interests and needs of all age groups, sub-cultures, and demographics in their community the town is actively listening and engaging place.

Out of Place, Cardiff

A series of community themed workshops over a two-year period explored ideas, generated discussion, and gathered memories of the local area while linking to local events, public spaces and festivals in Roath, Cardiff. Arts-based practice was used to engage the audience, celebrate ideas, and explore feelings associated with belonging, connections, and attachments to place. An open-air exhibition engaged and encouraged participation for a three-week period with all users of the Roath Park. The project acted as a memory archive of the park, visualising the memories and celebrating people's connections to it. The installation created an experience of place displaying objects in a variety of ways to encourage interaction and participation and raise awareness of the changes planned to the local environment. Creative engagement encouraged active participation and enabled greater awareness of the understanding of place and the role of art in fostering community well-being.



Other key narratives connected to the use of arts-based practice include its role in informing, presenting, and communicating ideas. This is particularly evident for Out of Place open air exhibition²⁴ that made physical objects to be displayed, interacted with, observed, and reminisce memories of the park. It encouraged people to stop and take notice of the environment around them, and the changes planned to take place. Creativity brings a variety of approaches to community engagement which is further illustrated by the visual impact of Tented City in Bristol²⁵ which is seen as a marker of changing places, and Granby Workshops²⁶ and the creation of a successful street market and social enterprise to support the local community. The case studies demonstrate how art can be used as a facilitation and engagement tool to open up discussion, raise awareness and actively engage with communities. Deveron Arts' role as a key stakeholder of the town to carry out a rebranding of the town, intended in part as an artistic exercise investigating 'what is important to local identity, and to make Huntly more attractive to tourists and investment, boosting the local economy'.²⁷ To get the most out of engaging places, quality, creativity and hard work should be at the forefront of all activity and creative practitioners should be engaged early in the development process.

As a checklist, some key questions to consider in the development of a project include:

Does your engagement ...

- Involve creative practitioners, makers, or crafts people?
- Help improve the profile and perception of the area?
- Provide inspiration and innovation?
- Improve skills and development?
- Support local needs?
- Create links to local communities?
- Enable partnership working and collaboration?
- Promote inclusivity?

From top:

- Community workshop, Out of Place
- Open air exhibition, Made in Roath festival
- Out of Place art installation
- Tented City, Bristol

Conclusion

Like many communities, engagement is about building trust and a relationship to help gain an understanding of a place, and both elements can take a large amount of investment in terms of time and money. Neither of these can happen quickly and the full impacts are often difficult to quantify and measure first-hand. However, this overview has shown that adopting a creative approach can bring many benefits and create opportunities to influence and strengthen a place, fostering well-being and community regeneration. Creative methods and the forming of an arts engagement plan need to feed into, and form part of a project brief to ensure they are woven into the engagement strategy to effectively contribute to changing environments.

Many current policy documents suggest that engagement should go beyond the statutory minimum for consultation and this highlights the opportunity to investigate whether a cost can be attached to the role of creative engagement and what initiatives and grants could be available to ensure there is a more prominent role for arts-based practice in understanding and shaping places. We should celebrate the positive role creative practitioners adopt in fostering well-being and community regeneration, as 'arbiters of truth'²⁸ artisans or dynamic engagers encouraging the coming together of people to 'offer sustained critical reflection'.²⁹ There is a need to engage artists and creative practitioners as the norm in the development process and how without them many developments are missing 'creative lateral thinkers' to help 'shift the mindset of developers',³⁰ planners, policy makers and local leaders, and the tools to truly understand and shape a place.

About the author

Jess is an urban designer, chartered town planner and creative practitioner based in Cardiff with extensive experience working throughout the UK. Her professional practice spans masterplanning, regeneration, design guidance and creative engagement working across all aspects of placemaking. Jess works with partners, developers, local authorities and community groups delivering advice on city-wide, town centre and neighbourhood projects.

Through her research she has investigated the role of art in fostering well-being and regeneration in communities, which she applies to her work. Jess supports a number of local community organisations through on-going voluntary work, and is happiest exploring new and familiar streets and places – drawn by the relationship of uses, people, public spaces, art and architecture.

Image credits:

- 1 Portmeirion village ©Jess Richmond
- 2 Another Place, Anthony Gormley ©Jess Richmond
- 3 Hay Festival_©Jess Richmond
- 4 Love at First Sight art installation, Aberdeen ©Morag Myerscough
- 4a Patternista, Penylan Pantry shop window ©Jess Richmond
- 5 Interactive workshop ©Generation Place
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- 9 Social enterprise, Granby Workshops ©Assemble
- 10 EveryOne EveryDay engagement project ©Participatory City
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- 16a Community workshop, Out of Place, Cardiff ©Jess Richmond
- 16b Open air exhibition, Out of Place, Made in Roath festival ©Jess Richmond
- 16c Out of Place art installation ©Jess Richmond
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Learning to walk (again) and engage with places

By Aled Singleton,
Swansea University

This essay discusses and presents a walking methodology that architects, planners, designers and the general public could use to re-investigate mostly suburban places built in the post-war era.

Caerleon is presented as a case study, drawn from my 2019 PhD fieldwork for the Centre of Innovative Ageing at Swansea University, research to better understand relationships between the ageing population and neighbourhood life. The case study complements existing research on how walking helps the individual to connect with their deeper relationships with everyday spaces like the house and the street. Specifically, I go beyond existing theory to present a way of deep mapping a place by using walking interviews with individuals and two public promenades. To start we ask why the pedestrian perspective has perhaps been neglected.

How everyday walking has been neglected

The reasons why we don't take time to walk our local streets and neighbourhoods can be found all around us: low-density suburban housing estates and a built environment dominated by the car. This shift in urban form has happened in living memory: for example, it is only since 1970 that more than half of UK households have owned a car. More importantly the fabric of urban Britain has been changing: approximately 6.7 million new houses were built in Britain from the mid-1950s to the mid-1970s; the majority of which were located in new towns, edges of small towns, and new suburbs around existing cities.

Although many new properties accommodated families of the post-war *baby boomer* population bulge, a significant number replaced older terraced properties in industrial towns and the inner-city: nearly 1.1 million dwellings were cleared in England and Wales between 1954 and 1974. These new environments had a particularly big impact for young adults in the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s – using the car for shopping, leisure activities and commuting long distance to work. Perhaps also they unconsciously shaped their everyday lives around motor vehicles.

Inner-city decline had slowed considerably by the 1980s and – interestingly – growth in car use levelled out from the mid-1990s. Indeed, large British cities are much more likely to be populated by younger people; Paul Watt¹ writes about *gentrification* displacing older residents from larger cities. So why does it matter if people move around; break and form connections with places? A review of place attachment research by Hidalgo and Hernandez² found that life-long psychological connections to geographical space are made in adolescence and early adulthood.

Sensing space

Putting the social aspects to one side, many geographers note how certain sites gain qualities and atmospheres over time. Edward Casey writes that space *thickens* with more doing and making; also that space *thins* with less activity. Walking allows us to sense what Casey calls *thick* and *thin* space – concepts used throughout this essay. For example, in 2010 older people took *Rescue Geography* walks through inner-city Birmingham neighbourhoods where only the street layouts remained from fifty years earlier.³

Being in these spaces triggered emotional responses to long-demolished communal spaces such as pubs, shops and factories. Effectively these spaces remained *thick* for this small number of older ex-residents, but *thin* for nearly everybody else. In another case, it was found that young people sense *thickness* in spaces where they skateboard and hang out. The value of walking with people is allowing them to reveal subjective experience.

Post-war planning and economic changes mean that British residential streets are generally separate from shops, factories and employment sites. In Wales, approximately 64% of dwellings were built after 1945.⁴ The Caerleon case study has an interesting pre-war to post-war split: nearly four fifths of houses are on estates from the 1950s onwards. For the Caerleon study I developed a walking methodology to explore seemingly prosaic spaces and find the thick qualities.

The value of walking with people is allowing them to reveal subjective experience.

Potential for walking interviews

Walking research techniques range from the scientific to the low tech. At the researcher-led end, experiments can use wearable electroencephalography (EEG) sensors to analyse brain activity. A large EEG study in Edinburgh with 95 participants⁵ made interesting conclusions about how *urban green* and *urban quiet* spaces cause less 'arousal, frustration, and engagement' than *urban busy* spaces. Though promising, such experiments are resource-heavy and – thus far – explain little about why and how the environment stimulates such brain activity.

The low tech end of the scale is a one-to-one scenario where the interviewee decides on routes through streets and neighbourhoods important to their biography and everyday life. The interviewer asks questions as they *go-along* and records the conversation using an audio-recording device. Most smart phones are surprisingly good with sound; short films can help to capture detailed features; and walks can be easily GPS-mapped. The narrative is framed by stories which relate to features such as streets, parks and houses. In many ways this suits an architect, planner or designer who may be uncomfortable seeking too many personal details. From an hour-long walk there were fascinating accounts about topics that I would never have considered asking about – more of which later. However, the downside to the *go-along* is that details of life, whether it was being a teenager in 1960s or a teenager in the present day, may not make sense to the interviewer.

Figure 1 - Walking tour, November 2019



A way to gain meaning from these stories is to complement the walking interviews with public walking tours (Fig. 1). For my project, two public promenades followed a pre-determined route. On a practical level, a fixed line gave people certainty and allowed them access to facilities such as toilets and public transport. Moreover, the walking tour had potential to be highly creative and engaging – especially by incorporating some intriguing practice from psychogeography. To that end I worked with a performance artist to make *site-specific* dramatic interventions which explored stories in thought-provoking and playful ways.

Psychogeography

Psychogeographical practice pursues the deeper psychological connections to geography. For example, 1950s and 1960s pioneers The Situationists – which included artists and architects – developed a walking method around group tours and playful games⁶ to explore ‘the precise laws and specific effects’ of the geographical environment. Of note, they had a political mission to value *thick* urban space and stop creeping suburbanisation. Although history shows that The Situationists’ political mission failed, their desire to experience space with the body and deeper psyche has resonated with many people. We now explore how more recent interpretations of psychogeography are relevant for today’s urban challenges.

Since the 1990s it has been writers and academics, more than design professionals, who have taken up psychogeography. For example, Iain Sinclair walked the M25 around London and followed poetry by John Clare; Sinclair’s books reveal how perambulators open their senses to the detail on the ground. Moreover, routes shaped by motorways deploy The Situationists’ principle of following something external to ourselves; to confront our unconscious bias and not look for what we want to see. Academic Tina Richardson argues that these transparent approaches are important as we try to understand the

Figure 2: Marega plays with stories about spaces, July 2019



‘Psychogeography is defined as the study of the precise laws and specific effects of the geographical environment, consciously organized or not, on the emotions and behaviour of individuals.’

narrative of a given place. American writer Rebecca Solnit offers further advice: that working with artists can help us lose our conscious selves, but not get lost.⁷ I therefore followed Solnit’s advice and worked with performance artist Marega Palser. Marega interpreted material from my walking interviews to make the accounts playful, thought-provoking and also political (Fig. 2).

My PhD research was also inspired by the Arts Council of Wales’ £3m *Ideas: People: Places* programme (2015-2019) where artists worked with design professionals and provided many new and thoughtful approaches to regeneration and place-based work.⁸

The Caerleon Case Study

Caerleon is a settlement of just under 8,000 people built around a village centre containing Norman, Mediaeval, Georgian and Victorian properties and the visible archaeological remains of a Roman fortress. Until 2017 there was a significant campus of the University of South Wales in Caerleon. Caerleon has the highest proportion of people aged over 65 in the Newport City Council area.

On a personal level, I spent my childhood and adolescence here. My parents bought our family house in 1977 and my Dad lived there until he died in June 2018. Later that year a family friend explained that Caerleon’s incidence of older people would make the place a good case study for my PhD research on ageing and neighbourhoods. Following advice from The Situationists I would need to look beyond what I already knew. My interviews therefore centred on life before I was born in 1978.

I undertook walking interviews and two public walking events, the results of which are presented below. The accounts are structured around one walking route of six stages (Fig. 3). A key point is that space connects people with multiple times – such as the *Rescue Geography* example from Birmingham. Although we move back and forward in time the walk develops the underlying story of how suburban Caerleon was shaped in the post-war era.

To shape the route of two public walking tours in Caerleon I used clues from the text of Arthur Machen’s novel *The Hill of Dreams*. Machen was born in Caerleon in 1863 and the hill in the latter novel was largely inspired by the local area.

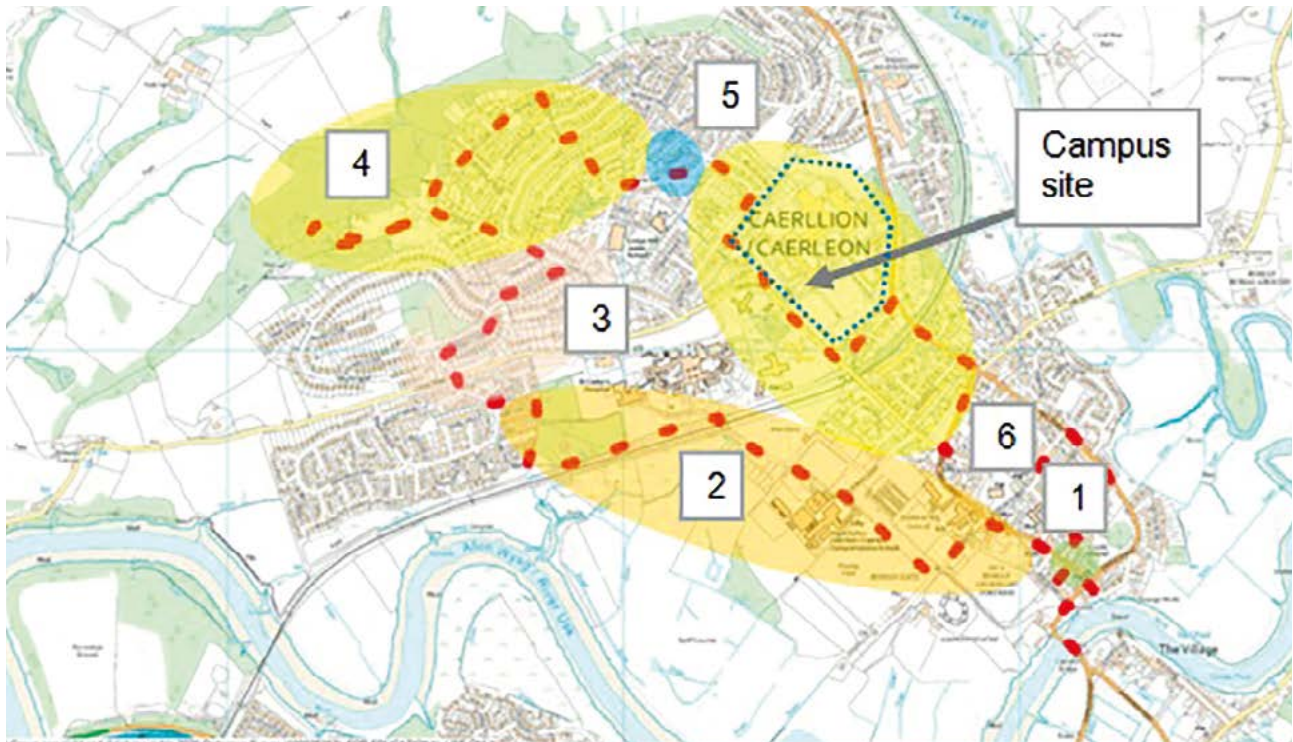


Figure 3: Walking route in red and sections numbered © Crown copyright and database rights 2020 Ordnance Survey (100025252)

Stages One to Four: Following Arthur Machen's text

Stages One to Four walked from Arthur Machen's birthplace on Caerleon High to the Lodge Hill fort. High Street contains Victorian and Georgian buildings and some from the medieval era. Some buildings have been used for the same purpose for at least fifty years: a post office with red post box, two pubs, and the Priory Hotel. However, we learned from interviewees that the bank, grocery and hardware stores had gone; replaced by cafes, hairdressers, eateries and a gift shop. A significant change was the William Hill bookmakers closing in 2019. The owners proposed a change of use to a bar serving gin and prosecco.

In Stage Two we joined a group of 30 people who came to a Caerleon Literature Festival event hosted by myself and Marega on a sunny Sunday morning in July 2019. As we started to walk Marega interpreted stories shared by previous interviews - using dance and other playful activities. For example, she recreated the scene of a young woman in the late 1960s as she got off a bus and ran between gas-lit lamp posts on a dark winter night. The young woman had recently moved to a new housing estate and the bus route did not go that far. Marega's actions captured the nervousness of a newly-built (arguably *thin*) place where people don't yet know each other well and there is no natural surveillance.

In Stage Three the group started to climb the hill from the housing estate. Marega invited people to make a shrine for a bus stop which had recently been taken away. This

element was explicitly political: the road is very steep and most residents are now entirely dependent on their cars. We then took the only cut-through path which links to a large privately-built housing estate. One interviewee said that those who bought a freehold property here half a century back were 'giving up now, for then.' What he meant was that breaking with the prevailing culture of renting a Council house meant a cut back on holidays and nights out. It was only in the early 1970s that owner occupation was available for the majority in Britain.

In Stage Four we reached Lodge Hill Fort and wondered what may have inspired Machen to write *The Hill of Dreams*. Reading out some lines of text we sensed how the novel's main character had one foot in the ever-expanding London of the 1890s (a place of trams and steam engines) and another re-playing his adolescence wandering around the countryside near to Caerleon. Machen's novel is no work of science, but it helps us appreciate how everyday space links us to past experience. As such I ask a question which is perhaps outside the scope of this essay: could the older generations who grew up on terraced streets explore space very differently to the post-millennial generations who rely on the sat nav?

The exploratory part of the July tour ended near the 1960s council-built shopping precinct on Lodge Hill. People had responded imaginatively to Marega's performance, offering detail about life on the housing estates which became a focus for the next round of interviews.



Figure 4: Representing construction in the 1960s, November 2019

Stages Five and Six: The Story of Post-war Caerleon

Stage Five was a return to Lodge Hill; Marega and I teamed up again for a second event with new material to share. The weather on that Saturday morning in November 2019 was rainy, so we spend an hour inside the former post office, now the Community Hub run by Caerleon-based social enterprise Village Services. This second gathering was sponsored by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) Festival of Social Sciences - giving resource to employ a film maker.

Marega put together a short but simple performance which took people back to the days when construction vehicles sped through local streets to help make a massive new steelworks on the edge of Newport (Fig. 4). This sparked many more stories from past and present Caerleon residents. We discovered that many families came to Caerleon in the 1960s from other parts of south Wales, such as Ebbw Vale and Beaufort. One man who came in the early 1960s said that communities were 'blown apart' when people moved down from the valleys. People started to form new habits, such as driving cars and going to the supermarket, as estates like Lodge Hill had few communal facilities.

In Stage Six we left the Community Hub and walked 1.3km to the centre of Caerleon. Chris Thomas, from Caerleon Civic Society, led for a while. He discussed social housing and how council tenants had the *right to buy* their properties from the late 1970. There were interesting stories about repairing the structural weaknesses of concrete-framed *Cornish* houses from the late 1950s. One lifelong resident explained how the shape of front gates revealed

when certain houses had been sold off by the council. We then walked around a corner, took a short cutting past a hedge and some other former social housing.

Chris stopped the group to reflect on the live planning debate which concerned the former Caerleon Campus site. The planning application that was submitted for over 300 properties was rejected on grounds including air pollution and a lack of active travel. Both of these issues are explicitly related to living in places dominated by the car.

Towards the end of our walking tour we arrived at a row of brick-built shops from the late nineteenth century. We were guided by Nigel, who had spent his teenage years living nearby in the 1970s. He talked us through tales of buying sweets and running errands for his mother; pointing to the former grocery stores, a sweet shop, a transport cafe and a butcher's. From Nigel's stories we learned how new habits in the 1970s *thinned* the local shopping offer and bolstered the supermarket: the chest freezer reduced the frequency of trips to nearby shops and the village baker stopped delivering to the door.

Our guided walk ended at Caerleon Common. Visitors for the day shared some interesting perspectives. One man said that visiting the estates took him back to his youth in a similar place near Birmingham during the 1970s. He reflected how 'kids were all thrown in together'; perhaps *thickening* that place. Another person said she had made friends for a morning as the group walked around and learned about the place.

Conclusion: Walking reveals both the detail and the bigger picture

The ongoing COVID-19 pandemic has forced habits in office working and much more to change; everyone could be spending much more time living and shopping in their local neighbourhoods. In the future, the walking perspective can bring more to urban design than just planning for health or modal shifts to active travel. When we slow down our experience, we can appreciate how communal space is shaped and where cut-through alleyways exist or not. We also sense how large development sites - such as the former Caerleon Campus – risk being *thin*, isolated entities if they are just shaped around car journeys.

I believe that a nuanced walking methodology could help to scope and establish new social spaces within neighbourhoods. The walking interview uses smart phone technology and the interview questions relate to the knowledge base of designers, planners and architects. By using some psychogeographic concepts the public walking tours find meaning from the individual walking interviews. Every place will have a story which can guide a public walk.

The collaboration with artist Marega Palser challenged the way that public events uncover relationships with the urban environment. On a community level, working with Village Services and Caerleon Literature Festival introduced many local people and their valuable accounts. Being part of the ESRC Festival of Social Sciences programme helped to reach the wider public. In research terms, Professor Andrea Tales, Director of the Centre for Innovative Ageing, commented that this type of walking methodology can 'inform and be incorporated into socially friendly and interactive urban designs; particularly important factors in the reduction of loneliness.'

About the author

From an early age I have loved travel and geography; sensing how languages and cultures connect and diverge. Fortunately I have worked in place-focused jobs. For ten years I managed regeneration projects at Bridgend Council, mostly in the valleys and latterly around Porthcawl. From 2016 I co-ordinated *Finding Maindee* in Newport, where being part of the Arts Council of Wales' *Ideas: People: Places* programme taught me how artists understand and explore places. I have since used some of these approaches in my PhD research. My favourite holidays are walking trips lasting a few days and with pub stops thrown in!

All photos (c) Jo Haycock.

Research and 3-minute film <https://vimeo.com/373090583> funded through Swansea University and UKRI through the ESRC. The complete walking route is available as a digital map. More info [@aledsingleton](mailto:aledsingleton@gmail.com) or aledsingleton@gmail.com

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Harnessing existing buildings in placemaking

Text and illustrations by Priit Jürimäe

Having lived, studied and worked in Cardiff for more than a decade, the city has really shaped me as an architect. I have witnessed various transformations taking place – new developments have brought fresh energy, but in doing so they rub up against the existing built environment, competing for space. Sometimes, this results in a symbiotic relationship between old and modern. In other cases, the existing gives way to the new, resulting in substantial changes to the community, culture and economy of the area. From the point of view of placemaking, what are the benefits of reusing existing buildings? On the other hand, what are the associated challenges and how can these be overcome? This article explores these questions with the support of four case studies located in South Wales.

The role of buildings in securing a cultural legacy

Across the UK, a link between heritage and wellbeing clearly exists, although it is *activities* rather than *assets* that contribute to wellbeing.¹ Using heritage in placemaking is also at the heart of the Wellbeing of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015, one of its goals being a Wales of vibrant culture.² Heritage is more than merely buildings and landscapes; it includes the less tangible – memories, stories and traditions – which are anchored in and intertwined with the physical and spatial notions. The value of physical heritage in placemaking is keeping a place's history available and legible for future generations – known as *bequest value*. Development activities can either reinforce or undermine it. For example, retrofitting and refurbishing are generally not considered controversial as both conserve and enhance existing places, whereas demolition can be unpopular and stoke opposition.³

Whilst listed buildings and conservation areas are given significance and enjoy a degree of protection, it is important to note that the everyday, seemingly unexceptional buildings can also be vital to the *genius loci*. Even a place with no registered assets can have distinctive qualities. Modest historical buildings often possess generous elements worthy of celebration – high ceilings,

intricate detailing, large windows. The layers of historic fabric infuse a place with character which can be lacking in the new and therefore attract businesses and people who would not be interested in a less distinctive building (see the Goodsheds case study below as an example).⁴

Environmental impact

There is also a strong environmental argument for keeping existing buildings. Creating steel, cement and bricks is energy-intensive and contributes to the high carbon emissions for new construction. Building activities also create a lot of waste: construction, demolition and excavation generated around 62% of total UK waste in 2016 (much of this is recovered, albeit downcycled into less valuable products).⁵ Carl Elefante has rightly said that “the greenest building is one that is already built”.⁶ This is where locally focussed placemaking can help address the global environmental and climate concerns: rehabilitating existing buildings is increasingly seen as part of the solution in reducing waste and carbon emissions as well as limiting urban sprawl.⁷

Socioeconomic benefits

Older and smaller buildings play a role in the vitality and economy of the city. Jane Jacobs wrote as early as 1961, “Cities need old buildings so badly it is probably impossible for vigorous streets and districts to grow without them”. She insisted that the high overheads associated with new spaces are prohibitive and that new ideas such as start-ups and creative businesses need old buildings.⁸ Recent evidence confirms her observations – a US study found that older, smaller buildings house significantly greater concentration of creative jobs per unit of commercial floor area.⁹ The creative economy thrives in areas with a mix of older buildings which provide affordable and adaptable accommodation. ‘Messy’ areas with a diversity of building types and ages allow for a heterogeneous urban environment, controlling gentrification by keeping desirable areas accessible for all and therefore contributing to a more ‘just’ city.

Goodsheds

Location:

Barry

Date built:

1880s

Original use:

Locomotive repairs

Heritage status:

None

A new mixed-use scheme known as Goodsheds is emerging in Barry's Innovation Quarter which showcases several of the benefits that regeneration can bring. The project includes renovation of the Gwalia Buildings (former goods shed and associated offices) as well as building a new shipping container-inspired addition. Goodsheds is led by Loft Co, the developer behind Cardiff's Tramshed and the Jennings Building in Porthcawl. The nearby Pumphouse, a restored Grade II listed building with a restaurant, gym, coffee shop and live/work units, was also developed by Loft Co. Opened in 2016, the Pumphouse has acted as a catalyst for the Innovation Quarter and doubtless facilitated the setting up of Goodsheds.

The success of Loft Co's previous developments can be attributed to a number of traits that characterise their projects. Firstly, the mix of uses and 24/7 activity cycle align with the 'eyes on the street' and community-led principles that Jane Jacobs spearheaded, attracting creative businesses and residents. In addition, the flexible, loose-fit spaces such as warehouses, factories or offices have become perfect subjects for redevelopment as they do not dictate how they should be used but still offer a patina of history. Lastly, the projects are often located in well-connected or up-and-coming areas. For example, whilst the town of Barry has deprivation, it is found in Vale of Glamorgan, one of the more affluent counties in Wales with great links to Cardiff, making it an attractive place to invest.





Lido Ponty, National Lido of Wales

Location:
Pontypridd

Date built:
1927

Original use:
Lido

Heritage status:
Grade II listed

The Lido, largest of its kind in Wales, is situated within Ynysangharad War Memorial Park, adjacent to Pontypridd town centre. By the 1980s, the Lido had fallen into disrepair which led to its eventual closing in 1991. The building was restored in 2015 after a review of other successful lidos in the UK, as well as several public events and consultation exercises to gather community feedback. The restored facility became an important community building and attracted more than 70,000 visitors annually. The community-focussed process leading to this success is noteworthy.

In early 2020, the Lido suffered extensive damage due to flooding. This, coupled with the on-going COVID-19 pandemic, has caused the facility to close, plunging it into uncertainty yet again. Even though the project was clearly a success, the significant costs of repair could mean its value to the community is overlooked, especially in light of current shifting priorities. These difficulties reveal some of the challenges to the resilience of existing projects, such as reconciling the long-term community value with the short-term financial outlay.



Barriers and preconceptions

Despite the popularity and benefits of reuse, there are a number of challenges concerning existing buildings. One of the main obstacles can be their derelict condition which complicates regeneration. If a structure has stood empty for decades, it becomes detached from the local economy and loses its productive role in the community; this process can prove difficult to reverse (as demonstrated in the YMCA, Merthyr case study below).

One of the reasons buildings fall out of use relates to changes in the surrounding urban grain that may lead to isolation. In other cases, the architectural form can be restrictive and unsuitable for the potential new uses, for example very compartmentalised or inflexible structures. The condition of a property that has fallen out of use can deteriorate rapidly, especially once the windows and roof are no longer weathertight. Consequently, the commercial viability of renovation can become an issue. Listed status is no guarantee that enough funding can be secured from heritage bodies – competition is tough as there are over 30,000 listed buildings in Wales alone and almost 21% of those are considered 'vulnerable' or 'at risk'.¹⁰ Even if the fabric seems to be in good order, working with older buildings involves taking on some uncertainty. Hidden issues with structural stability or presence of hazardous

Listed status is no guarantee that enough funding can be secured from heritage bodies – competition is tough as there are over 30,000 listed buildings in Wales alone and almost 21% of those are considered 'vulnerable' or 'at risk'.

materials can be costly to resolve and unexpected problems may emerge mid-work, affecting both budget and programme. In comparison, risks associated with new construction are usually more predictable.

Secondly, adaptive reuse projects can require specialist, time-consuming labour and costlier traditional materials like lime-based mortars, renders and plasters. Combining new architectural elements with the old requires conciliation between the different building philosophies such as approaches to structural movement and breathability. Increasing the density whilst keeping existing buildings can be tricky (as discussed in the Laundry Quarter case study below). Whereas modern construction methods and materials are widespread, thorough understanding of traditional techniques and necessary skillsets are diminishing.

Public policy accounts for the third challenge. The housing market is skewed towards new builds, as the Help To Buy scheme is only available on new homes. Current VAT rules do not encourage refurbishments, making this option even less financially attractive for developers. In considering major renovation of a building with little architectural merit, it may be deemed more cost-effective to demolish and start from scratch, thereby saving up to 20% standard VAT on materials and labour.

Finally, there are matters concerning local governance. The buildings can lack adequate protection in the planning process if they are not listed or in a conservation area. Despite the enthusiasm for history and heritage, such assets often remain an untapped resource by the local authorities. Furthermore, heritage is sometimes primarily conceived as part of the outward-facing, tourism-focused offer, distancing it from its local roots and therefore placemaking.¹¹

Laundry Quarter

Location:
Cardiff

Date built:
1860s

Original use:
Laundry, dry cleaning,
garages

Heritage status:
None

The name of Portabella's proposed Laundry Quarter development in Cardiff refers to the historical Vaughan's Laundry. Most recently, the site hosted a number of creative businesses such as Printhaus, in unique synergy with the nearby Chapter Arts Centre.

In 2006, a planning application for a development of 22 houses and 35 flats was rejected, but the Laundry Quarter proposal with a reduced number of units gained approval in 2020. Since then, the existing collection of buildings has been demolished in readiness for construction to begin. Laundry Quarter is located on the edge of Pontcanna and Canton, desirable areas of the city where there is considerable interest to redevelop non-residential buildings to meet the demand for living space. The danger is that local creative economy is put under pressure and as a result, the sense of place and distinctiveness is negatively impacted.

The condition survey for existing on-site buildings, accompanying the planning application, identifies the need for considerable modernisation but recommends demolition and building anew as a more cost-effective solution, deeming that the buildings lack architectural or historic merit. However, the survey is silent on their importance for creative economy and local community. Even though the proposed development provides nine commercial units, it will not be able to match the diversity of the former 30-something businesses; there is also a question about affordability for any future tenants. The project represents the difficulty of conciliating existing uses on site within a new development. A comment on the planning application highlighted the loss of community amenities because of the displacement of existing businesses – but it would have arguably been difficult to keep these in operation throughout construction. In terms of urban design, the proposed development refers to the 'random' layout of the previous structures and maintains the existing thoroughfare, although the positive effect of these moves is limited due to the reduced community use.





YMCA

Location:
Merthyr Tydfil

Date built:
1911

Original use:
YMCA accommodation,
café, lecture theatre,
billiard room, gym

Heritage status:
Grade II listed

The YMCA building was designed by Ivor Jones and Percy Thomas and hence forms an important part of Wales's architectural history. It fell into disrepair after being abandoned in the late 20th century and has since survived two applications for demolition. The attempts to bring it back to life with a new use have been sporadic. Davies Sutton Architects led the initial emergency structural works and stabilisation which were completed in 2014, but securing funding for a full overhaul has proved a challenge.

The YMCA has had to battle for survival in the context of limited funding and many other heritage projects in Merthyr Tydfil. In the last decade, a number of community-focussed plans have gone ahead. Canolfan Soar facility opened its doors in 2011, converted from a Grade II listed chapel. In 2014, the Grade II* listed Old Town Hall building was redeveloped to become Redhouse arts and creative industries centre.

The location of the building is also somewhat problematic. Whilst YMCA is located on the cusp of the town centre, it is cut off from it by a busy road, sitting in an area of lower density, less urban in character. It is on the northern edge of the town centre whilst the bigger, newer developments have focussed on the outskirts to the south, in Rhydycar.

As a society, we need to become better at embracing the 'imperfect' and 'incomplete' character, harnessing empty spaces for temporary uses in the absence of longer-term plans to keep buildings from deterioration.

Opportunities for improvement

As we can see, the potential benefits of reusing old buildings can often be outweighed by the complexities and challenges. How can we overcome these to make the reuse option more attractive? Research shows that places where local communities can proactively contribute to their environment tend to score higher on the Heritage Index (see the Lido Ponty case study for a community-focused project).¹² A potential solution for generating higher levels of engagement could be Neighbourhood Plans, or Place Plans in Wales, giving locals a chance to shape their surroundings in a more direct way.

As a society, we need to become better at embracing the 'imperfect' and 'incomplete' character, harnessing empty spaces for temporary uses in the absence of longer-term plans to keep buildings from deterioration. From the perspective of local authorities, it is important to consider that the effects of new development do not further jeopardise already at-risk areas and that new projects contribute to a coherent, joined-up, long-term vision.

The focus on short-term gains is not necessarily working in favour of reuse, so it is worthwhile remembering the message from Susan Emmett in the first Places for Life publication – that greater investments upfront can garner higher returns later.¹³ To tip the balance in favour of reuse and restoration, it needs to become a more financially viable option. RetroFirst, a new campaign championing reuse in the built environment has identified three thought-provoking strategies¹⁴:

- Cutting the standard VAT rate currently charged for refurbishment projects to zero – in line with the already zero-rated new build homes.
- Introduce new clauses into planning guidance and building regulations to promote reuse of existing buildings.
- Insist that publicly funded projects look to retrofit as the first solution.

Alongside this, the construction world needs to be better prepared to take on adaptive reuse projects. Education and training for industry professionals should focus on traditional techniques and renovation as much as designing new buildings.¹⁵ An improved understanding will help us embrace the uncertain aspects of working with existing fabric and accept to give up an element of control over detail.

Implementing some of the above measures will no doubt encourage reuse, but whether there will be a sea change in the industry is to be seen – especially as the focus remains on minimising risk and ever-shorter timescales. Change is a constant parameter of the built environment and not all buildings can be kept. However, their legacy can still inform new development in positive ways. Crucially, the new buildings of today are the heritage of tomorrow, so adaptability to changing needs and conditions must be built into their design from the start to safeguard against obsolescence.

About the author

Priit is an architect interested in the interface between people, landscape, buildings and infrastructure. As a member of Design Circle, he enjoys exploring these linkages, having helped organise the Metro Urban Density event in 2016 which investigated the potential of the South Wales Metro. His fascination with heritage as a vessel of regeneration stems from studies at the Welsh School of Architecture. After graduating, he was a member of the campaign to find a future for Cardiff's Coal Exchange. He is working at Rio Architects, involved in a number of projects which deal with sensitive urban settings.

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Reading and re-writing place: a response to landscape

By Rhian Thomas + Amanda Spence, Alt-Architecture

Introduction

Creating good places demands an informed and critical response to place and context. Only through a considered response to landscape can we make places which are locally distinct, use resources responsibly, take full advantage of the opportunities offered by the site, overcome the challenges of topography and climate and embrace the spirit of a place. Our studio is founded on this approach and the principle that we must first understand and interpret, at various scales and various levels, the contexts and places in which we work. This article explains the background to this approach and its significance.

Our approach has been shaped from an early stage in our architectural careers through our experiences of visiting and learning from the building culture in rural regions such as Graubünden in Switzerland and Vorarlberg in Austria. Here, we observed architecture which was unashamedly contemporary in its appearance and construction, yet seemed to be completely at home in the landscape, as if it was always meant to be there.

A desire to understand and emulate what we had found on our travels led us to further explore the work of the architects who operated there and the idea of 'Critical Regionalism' which they adopt. This is an approach to making places which we believe is appropriate to parallel in our work in Wales.

Places for Life 2 **Understanding a Place**



Image 1: Learning from building culture on European study visits. Haus am Sturcheurwald: Vorarlberg, Bernardo Bader Architects

In *A Critical History of Modern Architecture*, Kenneth Frampton, an architect and historian who has written extensively on the subject of Critical Regionalism, explains that;

*'Regionalist architects consider the individual place conditions of a locality as having significance upon the design. A response to a location's topography and other site-specific conditions such as subtle local changes in light and climate is recognised in design terms. The tendency is for buildings to be designed to respond in themselves to the conditions imposed by the site, rather than to succumb to the ease of providing a mechanical system, which would be typical of modern architecture of its time'*¹

This critical response to place and landscape is the antithesis of typical volume house building or commercial development, where standard house types are set out in standard arrangements over a site which has been made as level and flat as possible, resulting in the 'could be anywhere' developments which are found in abundance all over the UK. Critical Regionalism is a reaction against this rootless architecture.

As Florian Musso highlights in his essay, *Simply Good*, 'Conscious concessions to regional typicality usually involve picking up on historical manifestations, without being able to incorporate the sense of the form into the imitation.'² The approach we set out below is not about senselessly copying the traditional features, forms and materials of the local vernacular in an attempt to make new places 'fit in' to the landscape, because 'a poorly understood copy of old buildings, without clarification as to the living styles and construction forms of the present, destroys the spirit of architecture.'³ The response needs to be deeper than superficial appearance for new building to really 'belong' to a landscape.

We firmly believe that there is no one-size-fits-all solution to designing new places. Each specific landscape has its own unique qualities - its own topography, geology, micro-climate, history, cultures and imprints of human activity - which call for a unique, place-specific study and response. It does not make sense to have Welsh style, because a landscape in Snowdonia is very different to a landscape in the south Wales valleys, for example.

We also discourage taking a romanticised, nostalgic approach to building in a landscape, which is a danger if it is considered superficially, as a picturesque image, without really understanding it. This can lead to a stance where any contemporary development is seen as detrimental to the natural beauty of the landscape; whereas in reality every landscape is a constantly changing, complex entity,

shaped by both natural and human influences. Properly understanding and interpreting landscape on a variety of levels, beyond the visual and superficial, is the first step in a critical design process that leads to architecture which is both contemporary and truly rooted in place.

*'Do not build in a picturesque manner. Leave such effects to the walls, the mountains and the sun. A person who dresses to be picturesque is not picturesque but looks like an oaf. The Farm labourer does not dress to be picturesque. But he is. Build as well as you can.'*⁴

Adolf Loos, *Rules for those who Build in the Mountains*

Reading

Site analysis, if done at all, is often presented as a technical operation, using OS maps and representations of place sourced from different media. With the internet providing easy access to aerial images and climatic data, it is all too common that architectural proposals are evolved and even constructed without the designer having stepped foot onto the site.

A Google map may offer some limited information to which climatic data can be superimposed, but this level of information is not enough to generate an in-depth understanding and critical response to the site and its specific set of environmental conditions.

Whereas an understanding of the science of climatic and environmental factors is essential to support the evolution of passive design strategies; sensory and experiential factors should be considered, as the conditions of site also have an impact on experience:

*'It is common for architecture in the realms of regionalism to identify environmental phenomena such as changes in temperature, illumination, air movement, sounds and even aromas as all being able to stimulate the body and to provide a sensory experience of architecture. Critical regionalism recognises that the environment should be encountered first hand, rather than being perceived through information based media, which is all too common in the modern world.'*⁵

We have developed techniques for reading and representing landscapes and settlements at macro and micro scales which look beyond the technical and physical representation of a place. Our approach to site analysis aims to explore landscapes through experience, craft and culture as well as through more orthodox methods of measuring and recording.

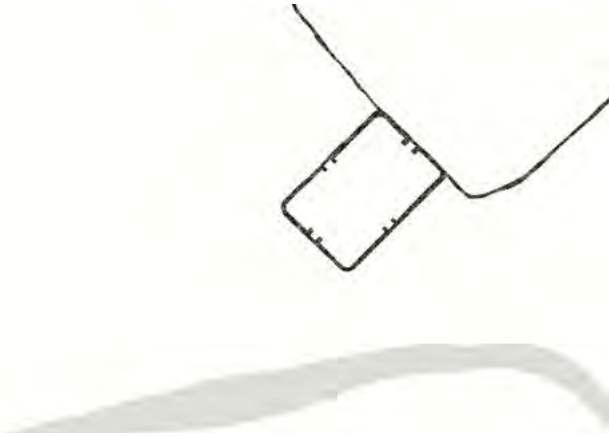


Image 2:
Settlement Morphology: Carmarthen, ALT-Architecture

Image 3: Deep mapping study:
Literary geography of Vale of Ewyas, ALT-Architecture



Field work or deep mapping techniques are used to engender relationships with site. This approach places a conscious emphasis on the act of research, encompassing a number of fields of investigation including anthropology, history, ecology, climate, economics, sociology, and chronology.

The relationship between anthropologists and artists reveals the potential to explore an exciting yet undiscovered intellectual territory, which inhabits the 'place in between'⁶ disciplines. The concept of the 'ethnographic turn' in contemporary art practice was introduced through the influential paper 'The Artist as Ethnographer?' written by Hal Foster in the late twentieth century. In parallel to this there was evidence of 'significant shifts in both the theory and practice of cartography' and 'the definition of the map itself transformed the role of mapping within geography, while maps and map making became a focus for important contemporary connections between cultural geography and various art practices.'⁷

Exploring 'site' through fieldwork methodologies and mapping techniques outside of established ways of working benefits our approach and practice. For us, the 'charged spaces between orderly and established ways of working'⁸ are the most interesting and fruitful, as within this space, opportunities for innovation reside.

This integrated and trans-disciplinary practice, enables us to produce a multi-layered reading of sites and, therefore, to critically engage with the spatial, temporal, cultural, historical and environmental characteristics of a landscape.

One aspect of this is interpreting the nature of landscape in terms of its physical characteristics – inscription, patterning, urban grain, morphology and typology and spatial ordering. Through analysing a region in this disciplined and systematic way, as an archaeologist may do, the events over geographical and human timescales which have shaped the contemporary condition are revealed, and clues to inspire the further transformation of the building ground are uncovered.



Image 4: Study of Skirrid mountain: patterns of boundaries and enclosures, ALT-Architecture



Image 5: Fieldwork sketch: composition of built form, hill town, Croatia, ALT-Architecture



Image 6: Process model to understand topography, existing enclosure and built form: Wye Valley, ALT-Architecture

Our research also relies on perception and intuitive responses, and how to record this. Landscapes are visited and walked over and over again. A site can feel completely different in morning light compared to afternoon light, in summer compared to winter. We try to use creativity and not factual reference to explore ways of understanding.

The objective is 'to gain an insider's knowledge of place and landscape, as opposed to a knowledge acquired by mediated representations which can only provide an outsider's perspective.'⁹

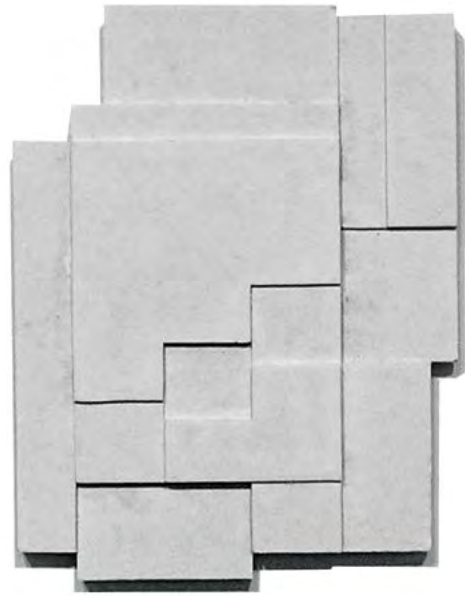


Image 7: Cast model: geometry and composition of constructed ground, ALT-Architecture

Re-writing

Fieldwork or deep mapping is not an end in itself; the next stage is to interrogate the landscape analysis, and to translate the data into a narrative for an architectural proposition. This poses the question: how can we evolve a conceptual framework which forms a basis for the design of a project which is appropriately scaled, responds to the current and future needs of a locality and culture and takes a critical attitude to landscape?

Our approach is to be speculative, creative and imaginative about architectural propositions, whilst also questioning and re-inventing identity and cultural notions of time.

It is possible to derive order and rules for a spatial framework for design from studying and understanding the structure of the landscape. These rules are related to compositional geometry, scale, proportion and interval, order and spatial continuity, and can be extracted from the underlying rationale of the existing landscape and vernacular typologies discovered in the research.

Based on these analogous criteria, urban and landscape patterns and spatial arrangements of street and square, or building and enclosure, although re-cast in a new light, become logical reinventions of tradition. This approach enables us to create places which are formally and spatially ordered through historically and analytically informed geometries, and are therefore expressive of regional and cultural conditions. In this way, it is the uniqueness of the landscape and the cultural appropriation of space rather than a prescribed use of form or style that informs our design process.

This idea of 'analogy' is not to copy. The intention of critical regionalism is not to provide a nostalgic interpretation of the vernacular style of the locality, but to identify and extract elements of the local vernacular and re-interpret them in a contemporary manner. In this way, the architecture is contemporary, yet is not reductive of its regional identity.¹⁰

Assessment of landscape character during the analysis stage will have established whether existing landscape or settlement elements, important to the regional condition and locale, offer compositional rules to respond to. For example, if the context has a language of field boundaries which are hedged or walled, these come with a legible geometry, pattern and scale related to the plots they enclose. This could begin to offer dimensional and geometrical rules for enclosure, boundaries and edges, both to the site itself, and any division of plots or groupings of buildings within a larger development.

Consideration should be given to the retention of any existing landscape elements because they can provide privacy and screening, and a desirable sense of place and character to the proposed development. As well as retaining existing boundaries, the landscape strategy could propose additional native hedgerows or walls to provide a framework of domestic boundaries separating each plot. The design language of new walls and hedgerow boundaries should read as new elements and be distinct from the historical elements.

Typically, new development, whether in rural or urban settlement, is characterised by cul-de-sac roads. However, access and infrastructure should also be considered in relation to the scale, geometry, proportion and interval of the local context. Consideration should also be given to routes and relationship to future developments in order to avoid alien street patterns and isolated plots.

The spatial framework that the route pattern and road hierarchy establishes has a big impact on the overall planning and composition of new development, and there are alternatives to the pattern book cul-de-sac and scattergun building approach typical of 'could be anywhere' development in the UK. The routes and spatial ordering of local historic settlement patterns can offer clues for a new framework for appropriation of space which is regionally rooted.

Alternative infrastructural layouts may instead consider, for example, a 'pastoral open court' approach which makes reference to the arrangement of farmsteads in the locality. In this approach, the proposed layout would arrange development plots of various scales around a series of arrival courtyards. A different approach to layout would be demanded if the site was in a post-industrial landscape, for example. The point is that understanding the landscape through site analysis offers ways in which to respond

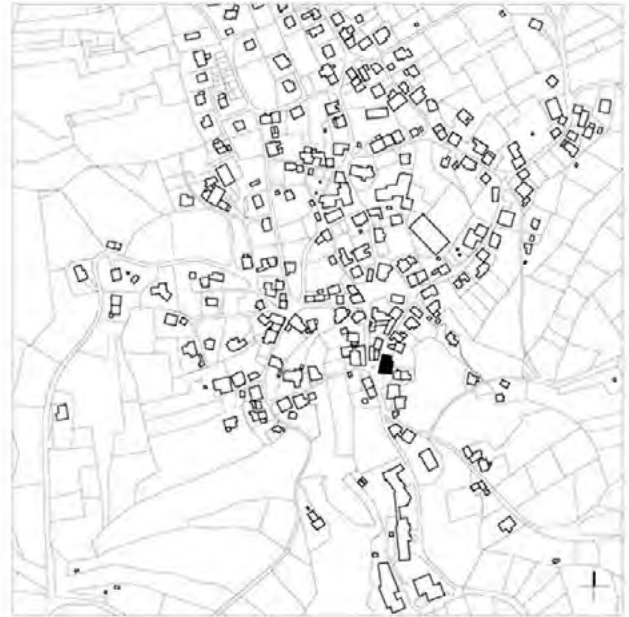


Image 8: OLGIATI Bardill Studio: Scharans, Switzerland, Valerio Olgiati
On study visits to Switzerland we have learned how regional architects create analogous places. Integration of contemporary architecture in traditional Swiss village



to context and re-interpret ideas from the vernacular in a contemporary way, so that new development has a relationship to context and local distinctiveness, rather than the placeless 'could be anywhere' approach which is all too common. These examples are only to illustrate a critical design process, they are not intended to provide repeatable solutions - these must be evolved on a site-by-site basis.

Responding to what has been learned from analysis of the site is also important from a sustainability point of view. If the topography and climate have been understood, the designer can employ passive design strategies to reduce the development's energy demand and carbon emissions. A carefully sited, oriented and composed development will make use of the natural resources from the sun, wind, earth and sky. The demand for mechanical heating, cooling and electric lighting is then reduced, meaning that complex high-tech building services are not required.

Topography and the typology of buildings in the region give clues to appropriate relationships to ground. Through vernacular building, people developed a deep knowledge of the landscape in which they lived and worked; and this was reflected in the way they built, including how buildings related to the ground, whether it is flat or sloping.

*'The sensitivity for materials and structure is repeated in the building and the way in which it is placed. Built into the dynamic of landscape forms, the buildings seem to have grown together with the land from whose raw materials they were built. As geometric forms they illustrate a simple interrelationship between their parts, the scale of their functions is natural and obvious, they relate to a clearly defined axes and show subtle differences in their detailing.'*¹¹

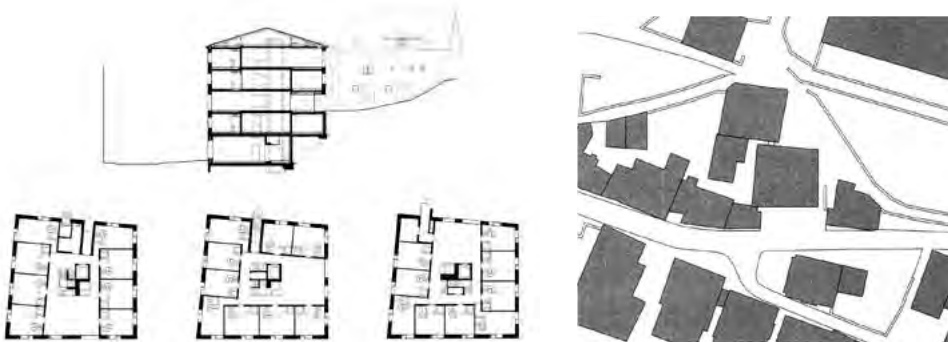
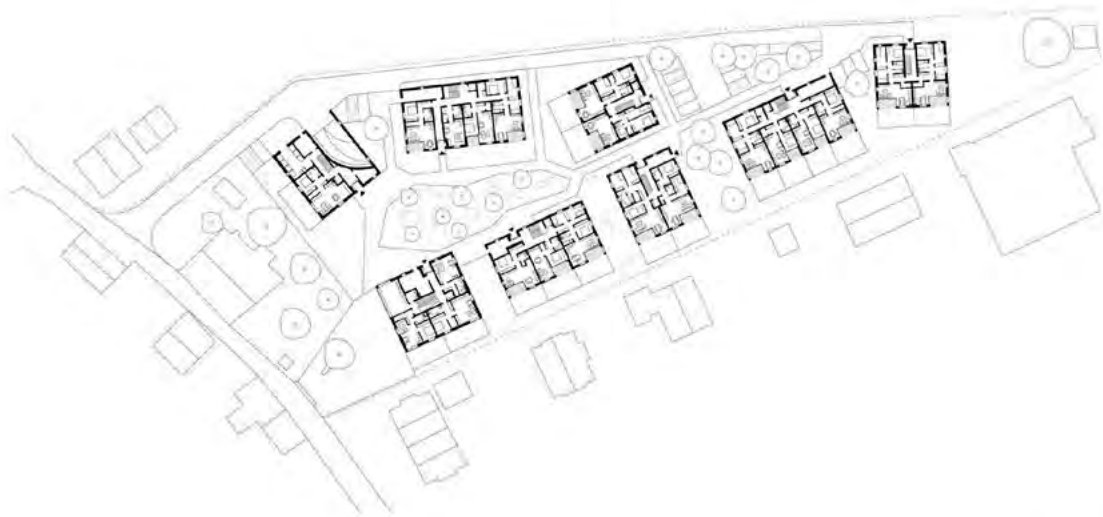


Image 9: CAMINADA Mädcheninternat Kloster Disentis: Switzerland, Gion Antoni Caminada
Visiting works by Gion Caminada has strengthened our understating of relating building to ground.





Relationship to ground as a result of topography has historically had an influence on the plan form and composition of settlements. Steep valley sides have resulted in linear formations of terraces arranged either along the contour or stepping up the hillside. On flatter ground, arrangements can take many different forms and might be more dependent on the cultural requirements of the locality.

In new mass development, composed of pattern book layouts, little consideration is usually given to the lie of the land, and they are planned as if the site were entirely flat. This results in the ground needing to be levelled during construction. This misses opportunities for views, passive solar gains and a rational form and scale derived from a more considered response to topography, as well as contributing to the slow deterioration of regional identity.

Employing a framework derived from understanding and responding to a landscape is also beneficial in integrating new development into the existing fabric of settlements through order, form and spatial organisation.

For example, in rural farming areas, analysis of local farmsteads might enable us to identify a tradition and character in the composition of dwellings and their out buildings. This observation can inform the design of new development which relates to existing farmsteads in its geometry and layout, and makes a positive contribution to the locality. Proposals may take on 'constellation' type plans which originate from traditional villages where houses are grouped, yet independent of each other. In this way, several buildings can be arranged in such a way that they are legible as a single entity, whilst each structure still possesses its individual and different character.

Image 10: FELD72 Maierhof Housing
Development: Vorarlberg, Feld72

This new residential development in rural settlement in Vorarlberg, Austria is an example of a constellation plan composition derived from an understanding of the composition of traditional local farmsteads.



Interpreting the geometry, compositions and scale, proportion and interval, order and spatial continuity, and re-casting them in a new light, leads to analogous spaces - spatial relationships which are analogous to those within existing settlements of the region. This enables communities to identify with the new buildings or spaces, because similar feelings will be evoked.

Perhaps this is what analogous architecture is all about - the search for familiar emotions, engendered by realist architecture, which strikes a chord with us and makes us try to understand what we are actually feeling.¹²

To commercially-minded developers, it is simple and economical to deliver generalised layouts to various localities around the UK, but who profits from this way of doing things? How does the region benefit? What effect does this approach have on regional identity and cultural diversity?

We advocate a design approach which ensures that new buildings are not conceived in isolation of context and with which people cannot identify. Creating a sense of place and belonging requires an understanding and critical response to the site and landscape, especially in terms of geometry, scale and materials. To summarise, we have outlined four key steps to understanding and responding to landscape - and it is not possible to get to the final step without completing the first three - :

to formulate and test an approach to fieldwork: The spatial, temporal, historical, cultural and environmental concerns of sites are experienced and recorded through fieldwork and deep mapping practices,

to critically record and analyse the fieldwork:

to interrogate the research and translate it into a narrative for an architectural proposition.

to design a new place that is honest and experienced, and which is ordered formally and spatially through historical and analytically informed geometries, expressive of regional and cultural conditions.

Only through a thorough understanding and interpretation of the landscape can new development address culture and heritage, have a critical attitude to landscape and locality, and be formulated not from the perspective of nostalgia and preservation through replicating the existing, but through the acceptance that landscapes and places have to be adaptable and responsive to change.

About the authors

ALT-Architecture's ethos is to create buildings and places which are coherently simple, elegantly composed, progressive and imaginative, intrinsically sustainable and, most importantly, embrace the spirit of place.

Founded by Rhian Thomas and Amanda Spence, ALT-Architecture builds on our collective 28 years of experience designing delightful and functional spaces for people to live, to learn and to work. We call Cardiff our home but much of our work is across Wales and beyond.

Our alternative approach to practice explores the edge of architecture, where it meets the disciplines of art, landscape and theory. This intentionally places us away from the middle of the road and challenges preconceptions of value in architecture.

We pursue contemporary projects across a diverse range of type, scale and budget, from installation, to building, to landscape and urbanism. Our work is always underpinned by a critical response to site and context and an ambition to 'build simply'.

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- 1: Bernardo Bader perches larch-clad home over concrete plinth in Austrian mountains.
Lizzie Fison 10 April 2017
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TWO.

Part 2 Shaping a Place

Creating Thriving Towns:
What is the future for Wales' towns
in the aftermath of the pandemic?
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Creating Thriving Towns: What is the future for Wales' towns in the aftermath of the pandemic?

By Dr Matthew Jones,
Birmingham School of Architecture & Design
and Coombs Jones Architects & Makers

Towns are a vital part of everyday life for many people in Wales. Bustling market towns, commuter burbs, seaside towns, picturesque tourist attractions, post-industrial towns: 40% of the population lives in these small and distinctive places.¹ They are integral to the fabric of the country and act as a focus for living, employment, services and leisure. Each has its own history shaped by a unique constellation of forces and many local people are incredibly proud of their town. But, while a vital component of the Welsh landscape, over the past few decades they have been repeatedly buffeted by wave after wave of complex problems. The rise of online shopping, the growth of out of town retail, convenience culture, increasing personal mobility and the closure of services such as banks, libraries, post offices and schools have posed questions about what our town centres are for. Broader societal challenges such as the climate and biodiversity crisis, demographic change, the legacy of austerity and technological disruption will be played out in our towns and have potential to exacerbate existing inequalities. While some towns will adapt to survive, others face uncertainty or decline.

Although the long-term impact of the COVID-19 pandemic remains unknown, it has the potential to compound and accelerate the challenges many towns face. Lockdown and restrictions on movement shut down town centres, increased online retail's market share and dramatically impacted the hospitality and tourism sectors on which many towns depend.² It is likely that we will continue to see the closure of many restaurants, pubs, cafes and shops as the long-term impact of the pandemic becomes clear. Almost 50% of retailers are at risk of failure, including many of our well-known national brands.³ The crisis has revealed further inequalities between home owners and tenants, the employed, self-employed and gig workers, between old and young, and between the vulnerable and healthy.⁴ The long-term economic, social and political impact will be felt in many of our already fragile towns centres.

A time for change?

It is easy to look at the raft of challenges towns face and feel disheartened or a sense of inertia. But things can change, and they can change quickly. While the damage the pandemic has caused to individuals, businesses and communities cannot be underestimated, there are some positive outcomes emerging from this sudden change to our lives. The imposed lockdown restrictions have forced people to think and act more locally, rediscovering their immediate surroundings in ways they have not before. Communities adapted rapidly to the impact of lockdown by setting up online activities and conversations; collecting and distributing food for those in greatest need; or sharing shopping with neighbours. Daily walks or exercise in local parks and green spaces have taken on a new meaning. More people are working flexibly (or are furloughed) at home, are commuting less and spending more time with their families and in their communities. This shift may be prolonged; life might remain more local while the prospect of travelling remains daunting and the virtual becomes increasingly dominant.⁵ A recent survey revealed 40% of people are feeling a stronger sense of local community and 39% are more in touch with friends and family as a result of the pandemic.⁶ With 85% of people wanting to see at least some of these changes they have experienced during the pandemic continue afterwards,⁷ local places and town centres could reap the benefits.

New understandings of living, working and leisure offer the opportunity to explore what our towns are for and how they can be reimagined with local people at their heart. The pandemic could prove to be the shock our town centres need, a once in a lifetime opportunity to redefine our social values and capitalise on an attitude of change. As we shift from crisis management to long term recovery there is an opportunity to radically rethink what our town centres are for and how they can be reimagined to survive and thrive. Perhaps, as Bill Grimsey describes, the pandemic has "*paved the way for a post-retail landscape*

to emerge.”⁸ A broader focus on “health, education, culture, housing, leisure, art and crafts, along with some shops”⁹ could provide the foundation for town centres as places to be rather than places to buy.¹⁰ But what could this look like, and how can we bring our imagination and creativity to bear on the challenge?

Imagining alternative futures

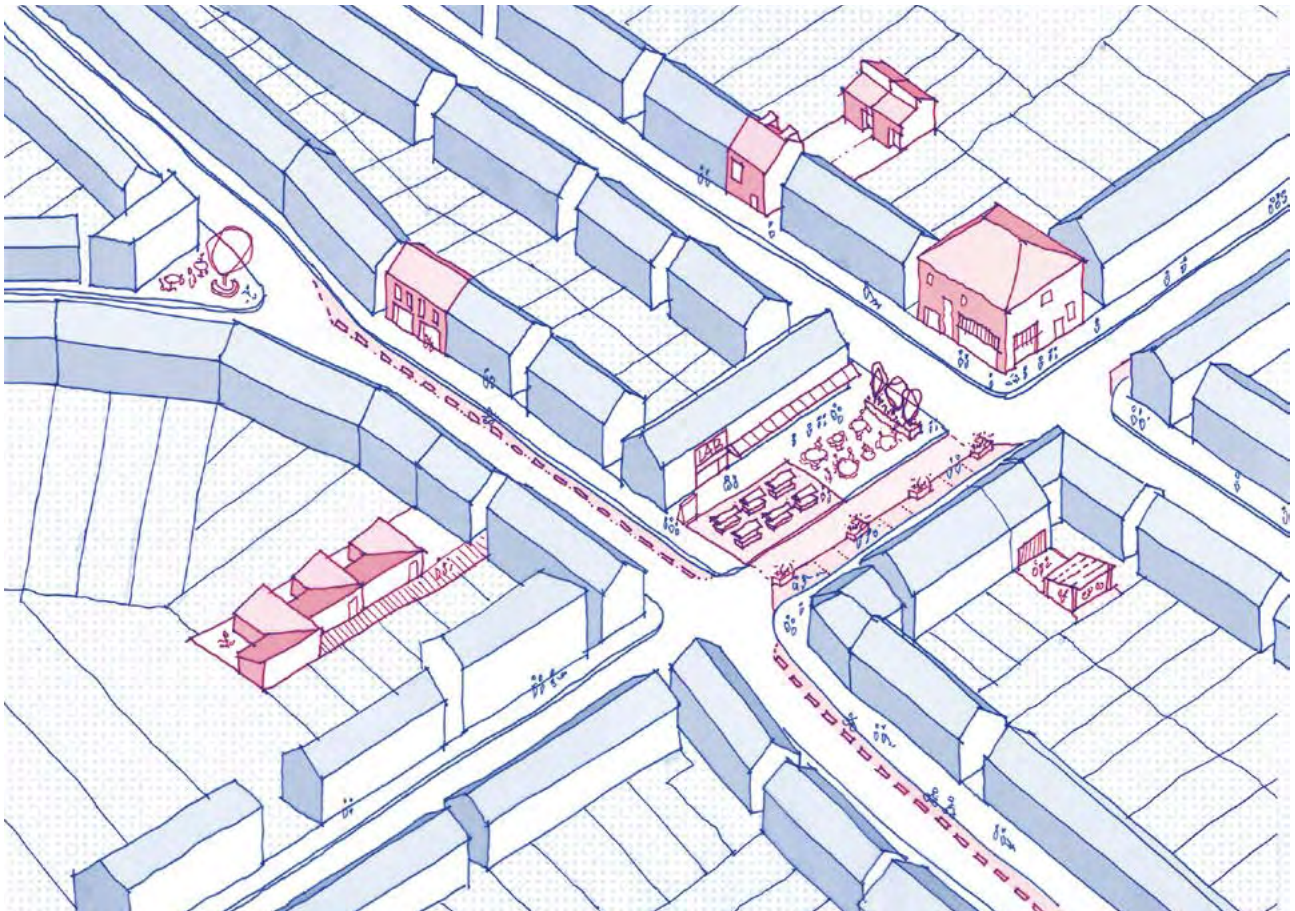
In our town, things did eventually turn out alright. The initial shock of the pandemic virtually shut the town down, but it brought us closer together. People helped each other out, going to the shops for those who couldn't leave their homes, distributing food parcels, the weekly clapping... we found out more about the people around us than we had for a long time. As we emerged from the lockdown and the town started to open up, people started to ask questions about the future. Food, energy, work, homes... what initially started as a small group meeting occasionally grew to include many of the community leaders and groups. The council helped us open a 'Lab' on the high street for the community to share ideas and discuss what our town centre was for. It evolved in the past so why not again now?

We thought hard about those who had suffered most: elderly people in care homes or isolated alone, the young... we worked with our local housing association to explore how we could integrate different groups into the town centre. Some small sites were identified- garages and back land plots mostly- and small clusters of homes were built, first for downsizers and then affordable homes specifically for young people. We identified a boarded-up guest house on the high street and applied for community ownership. We'd seen in Germany the idea of multigenerational meeting houses; with the support of local organisations we opened a community-run centre with a nursery, meeting room and social care to offer mutual support to all ages.

We had a few empty shops before but more after. Many businesses just didn't open up again, particularly the chain stores. Those that recovered quickest were the specialist shops, the shops that did what they did best. A community-led business renovated an empty building, creating three flats and new spaces for local independents; a zero-waste shop opened there too.

The pattern of working from home gradually reduced but it did continue as our digital infrastructure improved. People

Figure 1: The 'Future Town'



still felt isolated from colleagues working on their kitchen tables though. Our local business group came up with the idea of creating a shared workspace in the town centre where people could come and work together. With our local authority's support it was a roaring success. It led to other spin-offs: a community-run workshop and a business start-up centre have been vital in getting people new skills and into work, particularly in the booming green and retrofit industries. Other businesses thought hard about what they do and became more entrepreneurial. A local café worked with an artist to create a covered outdoor space in their yard for film showings, events and activities. Another group set up a cooperative with local farmers to buy and distribute fresh produce supported by a pedal powered delivery service around town.

Temporary pavement expansions, planters and cycle lanes were installed during the pandemic. Some of the parking on the square was relocated to allow seating to spill out on to the pavement. The town council helped fund new awnings so people could sit out in all seasons, we have rugs on the chairs during winter. The square felt like the heart of the town again and a monthly market started. The temporary street installations just didn't get removed. We tapped into funding to extend the short-term measures to make walking and cycling to the school and health centre on the edge of town safer. These routes were lined with edible plants and fruit trees planted by the pupils. Over time people moved around town differently.

I wouldn't say what we have done is perfect; there are still constant challenges. But it's a start. I think we have come a long way.

From words to action

This is not a story about a real place and how it has changed. It is likely to be very different to the story others would tell about their towns. But, while a work of fiction, each of the projects is based on real life examples.¹¹ As Rob Hopkins, founder of the Transition Towns movement describes in 'From What is to What If', such stories are essential to overcome 'wicked problems' such as the impact of the pandemic, climate change and biodiversity loss, inequality and the collapse of retail:

*"We live in a time bereft of such stories - stories of what life could look like if we were able to find a way over the next twenty years to be bold, brilliant and decisive, to act in proportion to the challenges we are facing and to aim for a future we actually feel good about."*¹²

I believe that as built environment professionals we have a vital role in telling these stories. In 'Transforming Towns: Designing for Smaller Communities', I argued that increasing political interest in smaller communities makes this an ideal time for designers to lead the way in considering the future of town centres.¹³ There is considerable opportunity

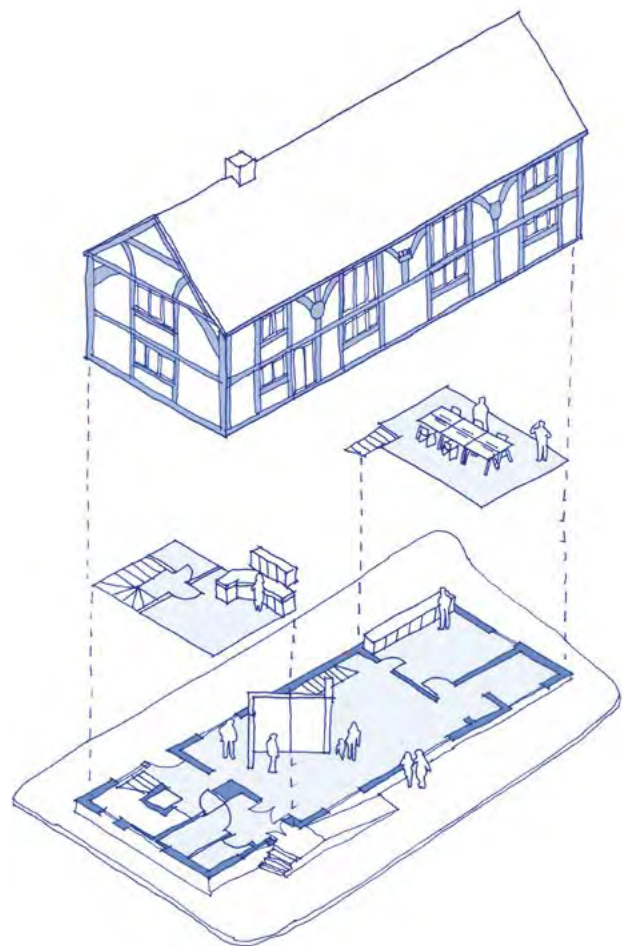


Figure 2: The Old Courthouse, Ruthin: The community asset transfer of a closed bank to create a community hub in the town centre

to apply our ingenuity, creativity, imagination, collaborative skills and problem solving to take the lead in shaping the future of these sensitive environments.

Much of the strategic framework needed to support this shift already exists. In committing local authorities to improving social, economic, cultural and environmental well-being, the Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act can be its foundation. In the wake of the pandemic, more than 80% of people believe health and wellbeing should be prioritised over economic growth.¹⁴ The town-centre-first approach embedded in Welsh Government's Transforming Towns initiative proposes locating public services in town centres, reusing vacant buildings and sites and enhancing landscape to increase town centre footfall.¹⁵ Alongside these strategic policies, the development of 'Place Plans' led by local communities creates opportunities for local people to influence the future of their places, producing place-specific visions, managing services and building small developments. Local people know their places best and are well placed to make policy specific to the opportunities and challenges faced by individual communities.¹⁶ Together, these policies create

an environment in which transformation can happen but to capitalise on the desire for change we need to act. As Bill Grimsey describes, *“for those communities and towns that have not already started building plans to transform their place, they need to start now.”*¹⁷

There are examples of places using imagination to take the future into their own hands. Over the past decade Ruthin Town Council have developed a vision to guide the future development of the North Wales market town.¹⁸ Founded on extensive public engagement which culminated in Ruthin Future Week, a now annual week of public engagement events and activities, the plan sought to identify priorities based on an evidence-based approach to design. The resulting town plan proposed a series of small-scale, affordable interventions creating maximum impact from minimum means, combined with longer-term transformational projects requiring more complex funding and delivery. In 2018, the plan was revisited in response to changes in policy, the consolidation of council assets and vacancy of important buildings. The updated framework aimed to create a compact, walkable town with new homes for first time

buyers and the elderly in town to encourage all ages to live well in the town centre. Community support and a creative vision has enabled the town council to pursue significant projects such as the community asset transfer and refurbishment of the Old Court House into a community hub combining an event space, co-working and tourist information and a successful bid to host the North Wales Velodrome. Since the pandemic, a temporary one-way system to create wider pavements and increase accessibility has been proposed, measures initially outlined in the plan. Close collaboration has allowed the town council to take the lead in imagining the future of their town, founded on evidence-based design. As Gavin Harris, Mayor of Ruthin describes:

*“Since its inception in 2010, the Ruthin Future initiative has played an increasingly important role in the strategic development of Ruthin Town Council’s projects and ambitions. Whilst we don’t have the resources or administrative capacity to deliver all projects at the same time, each incremental improvement builds into the plan and brings added value to other connected initiatives.”*¹⁹

Figure 3: Pavement widening and planters proposed as part of Ruthin’s response to the pandemic.



A way forward?

*"If we wait for governments, it will be too late. If we act as individuals, it will be too little. But if we act as communities, it might just be enough, and it might just be in time."*²⁰

We are at a moment of profound change. As we move from recovery to transformation, a shift is needed away from retail to a broader vision of town centres as the focus of their community with civic functions at their heart. They are familiar and often historic places that could be rejuvenated by new ideas on how to live, work, trade and socialise, enabled by changing technologies and contemporary thinking. Bringing together a wide range of uses and activities in a town-centre-first approach can create vibrant, multi-layered places rich in social interaction. Public life can be supported by adapting squares, streets and parks, expanding and connecting active travel routes and integrating green space in new development. Space is needed to test out new ideas and take risks. These could be temporary prototypes, meanwhile use of vacant property, incremental actions, small scale acupuncture or larger transformations, but all need to be underpinned by constant reflection on *'what the town centre is for'*.²¹

Any change needs to be 'local first' and created in collaboration with local people, groups and anchor institutions. These organisations know their places best and are invested in their long-term future. While Place Plans offer one route toward future planning led by local people, we need to develop a wider array of tools and practices to meaningfully include the breadth of local voices. Alongside more traditional developer-led redevelopment, alternative approaches such as community wealth building, co-operatives and local entrepreneurship offer opportunities to place control with local people. Local initiatives need encouragement and nurturing. Communities cannot be expected to deliver long-term change alone; they need support and guidance. Sharing ideas, working together and effective leadership are vital in keeping good intentions going. Local authorities and town councils can support this by acting as enablers, open to creative opportunities such as community asset transfer and short-term use of premises.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, creativity and imagination are vital in crafting, sustaining and implementing long-term visions for our town centres. Thriving towns for all are possible: now is the time to bring our creativity and ingenuity to bear on the challenge.

About the author

Matthew is an architect, associate professor at Birmingham School of Architecture & Design and a partner at Coombs Jones Architects & Makers. His research, teaching and practice explores the role of design, community engagement and participatory place making in positively transforming towns and small communities. He is the author of *'Transforming Towns: Designing for Smaller Communities'*, published by RIBA Publishing in 2020, and community-led planning toolkits for the Brecon Beacons National Park Authority and Conwy CBC. He has developed community-led workshops, artistic residencies and place-led strategies for communities across Wales and the South West.

Notes

- 1 Michael Woods, 'Market Towns in Rural Wales: a Differentiated Geography' in Paul Milbourne, *Rural Wales in the Twenty-First Century – Society Economy Environment*, Cardiff: University of Wales Press, p.151.
- 2 This has particularly affected coastal towns; in places such as Aberystwyth, Llandudno and Porthcawl over 40% of the workforce is employed in sectors most affected by lockdown. See *The Centre for Towns, The Effect of the COVID-19 Pandemic on our Towns and Cities*. <https://www.centrefortowns.org/reports/covid-19-and-our-towns> (accessed 07 August 2020) p.16.
- 3 Bill Grimsey et al (2020), *Build Back Better: Grimsey Review COVID-19 Supplement for Town Centres* <http://www.vanishinghighstreet.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/Grimsey-Covid-19-Supplement-June-2020.pdf> (accessed 30 July 2020).
- 4 Julian Dobson, *A Critical Hope is the Foundation to Build Back Better* <http://urbanpollinators.co.uk/?p=2683> (accessed 10 Aug 2020).
- 5 Long Crisis Network (2020), *Our COVID Future: The Long Crisis Scenarios*, London: Local Trust, https://localtrust.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/Our-COVID-future_The-Long-Crisis-scenarios.pdf (accessed 08 August 2020)
- 6 RSA, *Brits see cleaner air, stronger social bonds and changing food habits in lockdown*, <https://www.thersa.org/about-us/media/2019/brits-see-cleaner-air-stronger-social-bonds-and-changing-food-habits-amid-lockdown> (accessed 08 August 2020).
- 7 RSA, *ibid.*
- 8 Bill Grimsey et al, *ibid.*
- 9 Bill Grimsey et al, *ibid.*
- 10 Julian Dobson (2015), *How to Save our Town Centres: A Radical Agenda for the Future of High Streets*, Bristol: Policy Press.
- 11 A high street lab, workshop and studio, CoLab Dudley, runs from a shop on Dudley High Street; Mehrgenerationenhauser (multigenerational houses) are a government supported initiative found across Germany; low carbon downsizing homes and homes for the young have been built in Abergavenny and Chepstow respectively, run by Monmouthshire Housing Association; three flats and three shops including a zero-waste shop have been created in the renovated Corn Exchange in Crickhowell; business hubs are found across Wales, eg: Carmarthen, Newtown, and IndyCube co-working spaces; the café with a covered yard for events is Fennelly's in Callan, Ireland; food co-operatives operate in Capel Dyserth and Aberporth; e-cargo bikes have been used to deliver food in Lewisham; temporary street adaptations are occurring across the UK; Incredible Edible have created edible spaces around Todmorden and Mini-Holland in Waltham Forest has boosted walking and cycling rates through green active travel routes.
- 12 Rob Hopkins (2019), *From What Is to What If: Unleashing the Power of Imagination to Create the Future we Want*. London: Chelsea Green Publishing, p.4.
- 13 Matthew Jones (2020), *Transforming Towns: Designing for Smaller Communities*, London: RIBA Publishing.
- 14 Simon Youel, *New Polling: Only 12% Want UK to Prioritise Economic Growth Over Wellbeing* <https://positivemoney.org/2020/05/new-polling-only-12-want-uk-to-prioritise-economic-growth-over-wellbeing/> (accessed 15 August 2020).
- 15 Welsh Government: *Transforming Towns: Support to improve town centres* <https://gov.wales/support-improve-town-centres> (accessed 15 August 2020).
- 16 Matthew Jones & Amanda Spence (2019), 'Planning for Well-being: A critical perspective on embedding well-being in community-led planning processes in Wales', in Jones, Rice & Meraz, *Designing for Health: Home City Society*, Delaware: Vernon Press, 2020.
- 17 Bill Grimsey et al, *ibid.* p.10.
- 18 Ruthin Future has been developed by Ruthin Town Council working with the author at Design Research Unit Wales and Coombs Jones Architects and Makers
- 19 Gavin Harris quoted in Matthew Jones (2020), *Transforming Towns: Designing for Smaller Communities*, London: RIBA Publishing, p.139.
- 20 Rob Hopkins, *ibid.* p.6.
- 21 Dan Hill, 'What is the High Street For?' In Mayor of London (2019), *High Streets: Adaptive Strategies*, London: GLA, p.30. https://www.london.gov.uk/sites/default/files/ggbd_high_streets_adaptive_strategies_web_compressed_0.pdf (accessed 12 August 2020).



Image 1: VeloCity's vision for growing villages differently

VeloCity – a place-based vision for rural communities

By Sarah Featherstone, Architect and director of Featherstone Young and member of VeloCity

“The biggest problem in the world is isolation and disconnectedness - socially and physically.”

This is a quote from George Monbiot a few years ago but seems more poignant now in light of the COVID crisis. It's against this context and climate emergency that VeloCity, an award-winning, all-female multidisciplinary team of architects, planners, urbanists and engineers, are pioneering fresh thinking in how we sustain our rural communities.

Wales is a predominantly rural country and isolation is a big issue particularly amongst the farming and elderly communities. Our place-based vision is a holistic, multi-layered, long-term strategy that tackles disconnectedness and addresses some of the most critical issues facing the countryside today, including: loss of biodiversity, social and health inequality, lack of connectivity and declining community facilities such as schools, shops and pubs. An ambition that closely aligns with the themes of Places for Life and the seven goals of the Well-being of Future Generations Act, particularly creating cohesive communities that are attractive, viable, safe and well-connected.

Increasingly the housing crisis is placing huge pressure on building in the countryside but with solutions that only concentrate on extending towns, urban centres and new

developments along roads. Growth in villages has been constrained and little thinking has been given to how we support and reinvigorate them. As land round towns is becoming less and less sustainable we need to radically change planning policies and behavioural patterns to bring about bold and progressive strategies that plan for the future of the countryside and create sustainable places supported by new movement infrastructure.

The ideas VeloCity has been developing over the past 3 years look at one way to tackle some of these issues and our focus has been to work with existing villages. They are rural settlements that already have a strong sense of place and by linking them as clusters through a fine grain network of cycling and walking routes, they can collectively grow and support the community facilities they have lost and be less reliant on the car. To achieve the paradigm shifts necessary to sustain the environment, we need to embrace new radical thinking. We refer to our vision as 'gentle radicalism', and if there is anything positive coming out of the current pandemic, it is the opportunity to see that this kind of radical change is possible and that change is already being played out. This piece introduces a number of emerging opportunities which align with the 5 principles set out in the VeloCity manifesto.

VeloCity's 5 principles:

1. **Connected not isolated**

Linking rural communities with shared resources to benefit all

Our strategy creates an integrated network of bridleways and cycle routes to connect isolated settlements in clusters so that collectively they can grow and support local shops, pubs and schools and reduce the need for car travel. COVID-19 has already shown how communities can pull together and provide support for each other and for local supply chains and we have also seen how digital platforms can provide new ways for social gathering which for rural communities is an essential lifeline to building stronger communities.

2. **People over cars**

Creating more sustainable movement networks

In our vision cycling and walking becomes the new normal and, combined with transport sharing options and local delivery initiatives that use electric bikes and vehicles, we can reduce dependency on the private car. The COVID-19 lockdown has seen an increase in people walking and cycling as part of their daily lockdown exercise, which not only provides physical health benefits but also highlights that more compact and walkable spaces can decrease the physical isolation created by dispersed car-orientated planning. Furthermore the decrease in car use and air travel has demonstrated that our over reliance on the most unsustainable and polluting forms of transport can be changed.

3. **Compact not sprawl**

Keeping the special character of our villages

Now more than ever we need to be light footed and agile when creating new homes. Fears that high density living has helped spread the virus can not be a reason to avoid densification - far bigger threats such as population growth have contributed to this pandemic. Low density sprawl is particularly prevalent in rural areas and if we are to respond to the environment and climate crisis we need to stop this kind of growth and build more compactly to avoid loss of natural habitat.

4. **Opportunity over decline**

Providing new places to live and work

Before the virus we already saw trends towards flexible working with an estimated 20-25% of the workforce comprising home-workers, many living in the countryside. This will likely accelerate following the pandemic and as the farming industry is forced to diversify, the pressure to create new places to work and share resources grows.

5. **Resilient not fragile**

Promoting sustainable environments, health and well-being

Post COVID-19 we need to create a more balanced eco-system that doesn't prioritise economics and GDP over social and environmental value. We need a much fairer distribution where resilience will become key over efficiency – the Welsh government's Well-being of Future Generations Act is one good policymaking strategy that is leading the way. This could be the end of economic growth as we know it - the Scottish government and Glasgow are deleting 'growth' and replacing with 'thrive', Oslo Architecture Triennale's theme was Degrowth and Amsterdam have introduced doughnut economics as its post COVID-19 plan.

Wales is a predominantly rural country and isolation is a big issue particularly amongst the farming and elderly communities.

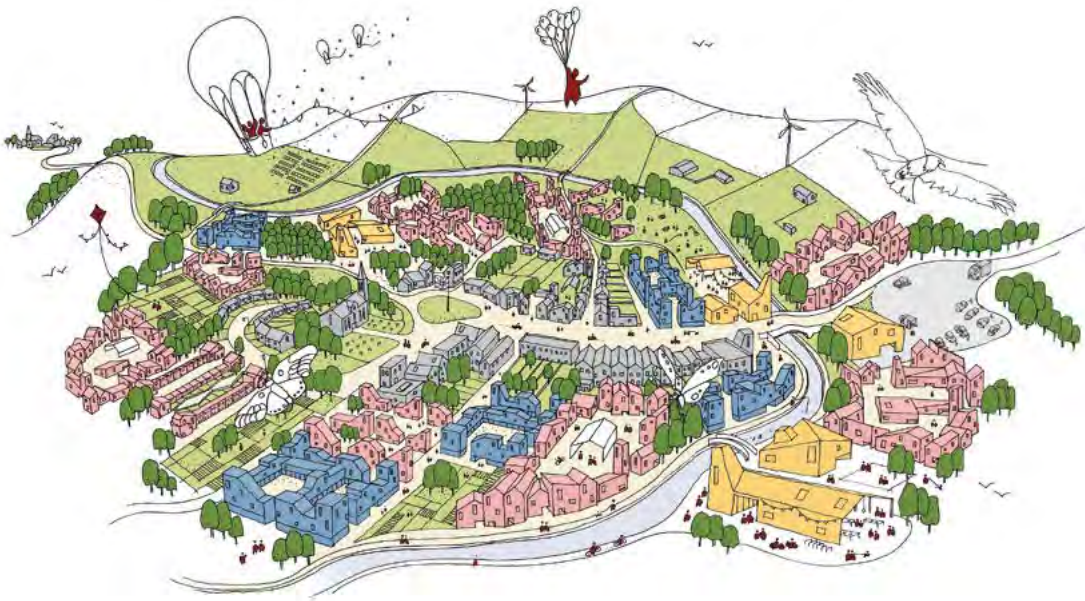


Image 2: VeloCity reimagined village

So why the countryside?

Around 85% of Welsh land is rural, 'used for agriculture or forestry or is common land but less than 35% of population live there.' 2008 National Statistics for Wales, in their 2008 report, A Statistical Focus on Rural Wales.

Often some of the most desirable and protected places in the UK, villages are also at the same time seeing significant poverty, lack of jobs, aging populations and housing stock, lack of investment and lack of accessibility and a lack of housing diversity and a NIMBYism approach to any new development. Yet the village and village life has much to offer people in terms of community, access to the countryside and quality of life and this is where we should focus our attention - reinvigorating villages so they can thrive again and become more sustainable places.

The VeloCity concept grows existing villages as a cluster with new homes built to a higher density (50+dph) within each village so as to reach an optimum size that supports and brings back the community facilities they have lost. These types of homes are less land hungry with less space given to roads and car-parking and housing forming terraces not unlike the traditional workers cottages found in these villages. This is a strategy that puts a stop to the current development we see happening in villages, small scale low density sprawl that follows roads out of villages forming hard edges with the existing community and surrounding countryside. These forms of development mimic approaches to town and suburban housing developments which are seemingly at odds with the character of a village and with time sees villages conjoining and losing their individual identity.

The potential to unlock land for new housing within villages offers a more sustainable alternative which keeps villages distinct and walkable and protects the surrounding countryside, but in order to implement this planning and transport policies must be turned on their head. We need to demonstrate that what are currently seen as unsuitable locations can actually accommodate future growth. This means not only lifting policies protecting heritage and environmental locations it also involves reviewing policies on site allocation.

Calls to the government from the likes of The Campaign for the Protection of Rural Wales (CPRW) and Shelter Cymru to put in place mechanisms that provide more affordable housing, reflects the urgency of where and what kind of new housing should be built. CPRW have growing concerns that as house prices are soaring very few affordable homes are being built. "This crisis is causing a bigger problem: hasty planning is causing villages to sprawl and green areas to vanish under concrete. Even worse, just 2,210 out of 6,170 homes built in Wales in 2015 were affordable."

People over cars - a case for slow green travel

One of the greatest challenges facing both countryside and urban areas is climate change and our ever increasing reliance on car travel is a big contributor.

Vehicles contribute to 80% of air pollution breaches and 34% of greenhouse gas emissions. The Welsh government's Active Travel Act set up in 2013 is a step in the right direction to promoting walking and cycling as an

alternative green form of travel for local journeys, but more can be done.

To reinvigorate rural settlements one of the key issues we need to tackle is re-calibrating the movement network and making people in the countryside less reliant on cars. For travel to work, electric bikes or combined multi modal journeys with folding electric bikes and public transport can be easy and convenient. Options for the school run could include the bike bus or electric cargo bikes with facilities to carry children and shopping. For the older person, the use of electric buggies and electric vehicles are a good option, and electric vehicles can also be used for local waste collection and deliveries.

The remote, picturesque village of Dent in the Yorkshire Dales provides some clues as to how this might happen as we found out when our VeloCity team visited it as part of our research. Set high up in a valley it provides for a predominantly farming community but with a growing seasonal tourist economy, not dissimilar to some of the villages we have researched around the Brecon Beacons, discussed in more detail below.



Image 3: Dent in Yorkshire Dales

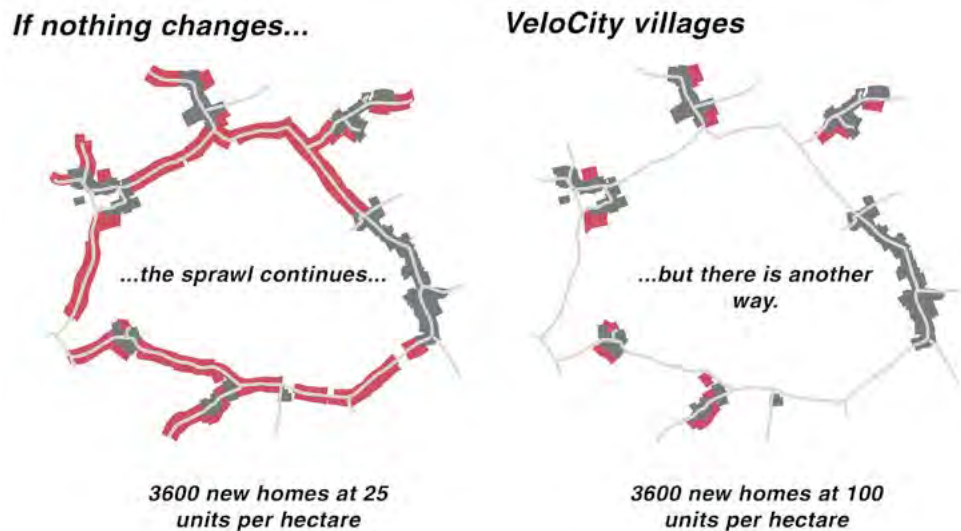
Dent is fortunate to have its own train station (highest mainline station in England) and unbeknown to us was visited by Ian Nairn, architectural critic, in the '70s as part of his BBC series Across Britain. In his programme he applauds many of the same qualities that we witnessed – a very dense, compact village with a strong community spirit, people cycling electric cargo bikes and cars parked on the outside of the village. Apparently the villagers themselves were so keen to keep the village car-free that they built a grasscrete field for car parking on the edge of the village that blends with the surrounding landscape. Car share schemes are also in place as many of the residents are young with low incomes and unable to afford running a car. What is also interesting about Dent is its built to a very high density comprising small terraced workers cottages on narrow cobbled streets and yet people consider it to be a charming and picturesque place which attracts many visitors during the tourist seasons.

Compact not Sprawl – connected clusters

A village brings different characteristics to that of a town – compactness, walkability and immediate access to surrounding countryside. There has been much focus on developing towns and urban centres in the countryside, such as the inspirational Shape My Town initiative and recently published Transforming Towns by Matthew Jones, but less so on rural villages and smaller settlements. It's easier to disincentivise car use in a town where the services people need are closer to hand, the greater challenge is to do this for people living in villages.

VeloCity's strategy to reinstate the old historic bridleways and footpaths as new cycling and walking networks, offers safe and healthy travel option which not only eases the pressure on existing overstretched infrastructure it is also cheap to put in place and reduces upfront costs compared to any greenfield development.

Image 4:
Compact not sprawl



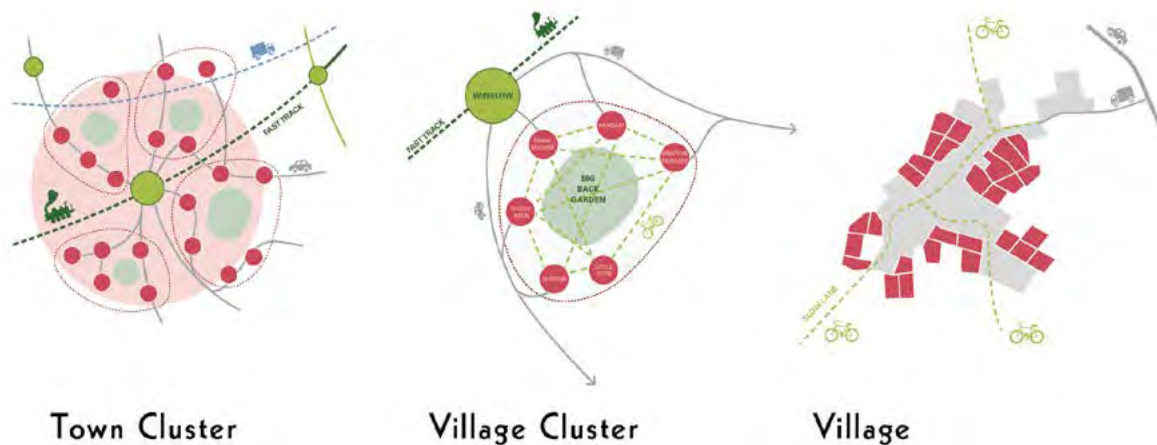


Image 5: VeloCity scaleability

The thinking recognizes that existing villages can better support the services they need collectively rather than on their own, and in doing so are able to retain their own distinct and individual characters. A VeloCity 'village cluster' is naturally formed of 5-7 villages all within 1-2 miles of each other and the village cluster may be one of 5 or 6 clusters forming larger 'town clusters' all within a 7 mile cycling distance of a train station, (the furthest distance people are likely to feel comfortable cycling). The strategy will with time see the clusters become virtually car-free as public transport and cycling and walking become the main form of movement with vehicular movement kept to the edges. These village clusters share similar principles to that of the Garden Village movement, the difference being one is concentrated around a single new village whilst the other is made up of a series of dispersed villages, which we refer to as Villages in a Garden.

The topography of the countryside hugely shapes the way people move and the way settlements grow. VeloCity's initial case study was focused on village clusters in the Oxford - Cambridge corridor where the landscape is gently undulating with settlement patterns of villages grouped by circular/radial routes. However the geography of Wales is different with nearly 30% of the land over 300 metres above sea level. Villages in the upland areas tend to be located in a more linear pattern along valley floors with higher ridges separating them from villages in neighbouring valleys. We have studied the valley settlements north of the Brecon Beacons which run down towards the towns of Brecon, Sennybridge and Crickhowell. Whilst the furthest village at the head of each valley is typically within 7-8 miles of a town making it possible to cycle to bus or train stations and reach workplaces further afield – the challenges here are a little different as the circular cluster is replaced with a linear one. However the physical barriers - steep river valleys and high ridges - that can increase isolation can also be potential opportunities.



Image 5a: The Ysgir cluster linked to Brecon

We can see a number of ways the VeloCity clustering strategy could be applied: the road on one side of the valley becomes the dedicated car-free route connecting villages by cycling and walking whilst the other side is used for bus and service deliveries; the reinstatement of old footbridges and fords could link both sides, these crossing points can become places to pause and meet neighbours, collect deliveries, change modes of transport – community interchange hubs. A modern day ford or bridge may even be combined with environmental measures such as flood control or micro hydro power plants.

The ridges and higher ground are where much of the remaining common land is today and rather than being remote and inaccessible we could see a number of farm diversification projects come forward making these places more productive and attractive to the local community and visitors alike. More tree planting has immediate common benefits for flood protection and biodiversity. And

The COVID crisis has shown us that now more than ever we are in a place to make change - and that we can make that change quickly.



Image 6: Oxfordshire clusters

examples of farm diversification already happening in the Beacons area, include the Farmers' lavender farm which has transformed a sheep farm up in the Mynydd Epynt in to a thriving business and visitor attraction, and similarly another sheep farm nearby which is growing fields of daffodils to extract a chemical used to treat Alzheimer's disease. Furthermore if food production is concentrated in the valleys closer to the villages then the higher ground could benefit from re-nurturing having endured centuries of sheep farming which has led to deforestation, soil erosion and loss of wildlife habitats.

Undoubtedly the VeloCity strategy has flexibility and can be adapted to suit a wide range of landscape and settlement patterns across the Welsh and English countryside. It already has traction with the local authorities in Oxfordshire who have encouraged the proposal to be submitted to the Oxfordshire Plan 2050 as an opportunity to do things differently and play a key part in creating a sustainable future across the county.

Climate change – we must do things differently

"We are the first generation to know we are destroying the planet and the last one that can do anything about it."
Tanya Steele Chief Executive of the World Wildlife Fund

It does not take a crystal ball to see that over reliance on the car is not a siloed issue and the type of environment we build – from housing through to public spaces and infrastructure – will also have a big impact on climate change and determine everything from air quality to mental health and productivity. Whilst the COVID pandemic has brought great tragedy and highlighted huge social inequalities, arguably Climate Emergency has a far more devastating long-term impact with the potential to wipe out the whole of mankind and species.

The COVID crisis has shown us that now more than ever we are in a place to make change - and that we can make that change quickly. We have seen it - changes to how we travel, change to farming practices, change to work habits, change to the way we support our families and community, change to our health and housing provision, change to the way we protect our environment and how collectively we can bring forth these changes.

But meaningful change requires time to pause and rethink. The UK government's recent post-COVID strategies, Project Speed and Build Build Build, feel too quick and will just give momentum to do things the way they have always been done - we will likely end up seeing more carbon-generating projects with many built on new roads. We need to slow down, make time to evolve a long-term strategy and ask what kind of delivery and planning mechanisms can enable change and what kind of housing do we want to build for future generations?

Naomi Klein captures this in a recent interview saying, *"when you slow down you can feel things... From its very beginning, the virus has forced us to think about interdependencies and relationships... I think that being forced to think in more interconnected ways may have softened more of us and shown us not to think they are somebody else's issue."*

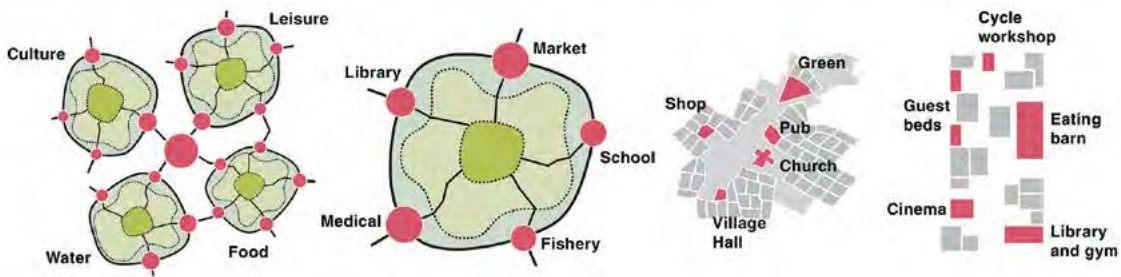


Image 7: Collective action & a sharing economy

Collective action and a sharing economy

This softness and shift to greater interdependencies chimes with the collective, sharing culture that runs across all scales of the VeloCity proposal. On the big scale it is about understanding the social and economic issues effecting community life – the critical mass needed to support everyday services and the application of collective, sharing principles that abolish ‘not in my back yard’ mentality. At the small scale it is an opportunity for communities to take control and reclaim village life.

“It has been the collective action embodied in public services provided by the state that is seeing us through the (COVID) crisis ...We must ensure our new society is founded on a participative democracy blossoming within our communities but also within the economy and at work.”
 John McDonnell, MP April 2020

The pandemic has given us the opportunity to see that the kind of radical change we need to save the planet is feasible. Less aviation, less car use, less commuting, less pollution, more working from home, more sustainable transport, more localism, more responsible agriculture, are all beneficial to our environment. It has also shown that significant behavioural and societal change can happen - and happen very quickly.

Instead of these stagnated and outdated attitudes to rural development, it is possible that if we can make changes to planning and transport structures, create better quality housing, shift negative perceptions and take advantage of modern-day technological advancements, we will then be able to realise a different way to approach growth in the countryside. As such, far from being parochial backwaters, rural areas can be laboratories of innovation and a place for gentle radicalism.



About the authors

VeloCity is an all-female, multidisciplinary team, presenting a strategic vision for the countryside that looks at how we can grow villages differently by disincentivising car use and making radical change to planning policies. The team includes: architect Sarah Featherstone of Featherstone Young; strategist Kay Hughes of Khaa; architect Petro Marko of Marko & Placemakers; architect Annalie Riches of Mikhail Riches; planner Jennifer Ross of Tibbalds; and engineer Judith Sykes of Expedition Engineering.

Sarah Featherstone is an architect and co-Director of Featherstone Young, a practice with expertise in place-making and social engagement. Her projects include Ty Pawb (Everybody's House), a new model for an arts venue in Wrexham and a community centre and boxing club at Grenfell Tower as part of the BBC's DIY SOS. Her practice has won awards which include the National Eisteddfod Gold Medal and the AJ Retrofit Overall Winner for Ty Pawb and a RIBA award for Ty Hedfan, a new house in Wales. Sarah teaches at Cardiff University and Central St Martins, UAL and is on various local authority Design Review panels.

Image 8: VeloCity's Future Village Cluster



Community and Privacy in a Place for Life

By Bethan Scorey

Where places for life are concerned, relationships are key. Building houses is just the beginning of developing a place, followed by years of residents building a sense of belonging to that place and a community. Modern houses have been standardised to meet suburban ideals and unprecedented levels of efficiency and comfort for occupants, to the extent that duplicate estates are appearing across the country. If you know you can move elsewhere to an identical house, then surely location and what is on your doorstep ultimately determines whether you want to stay. Creating a built environment which encourages neighbourly interaction and shared experiences will only accelerate this process of belonging, yet so many modern developments stall it.

Emphasis on the economic value of new build houses, how many rooms they have, whether they are detached or semi-detached, and whether they have a garage and a modern kitchen, has diverted the attention of developers *and* buyers to the private inner world of the house and away from the quality of the public realm surrounding it. The result is a diluted sense of place, where 'communal' space is reduced to roads and pavements intercepted by driveways, as illustrated in Figure 1. Not only are houses planned in relation to infrastructure, but new developments are often *scaled* to the car in motion rather than human dimensions, with breaks between houses and turning bays at every corner consuming land at an alarming rate. Houses in such developments are usually designed independently, each surrounded by a private garden and orientated in relation to the road, displaying very little relationship to one another other than shared power

cables. Viewed collectively, they present an amorphous physical landscape comprised of parcels of land arranged like a collage. Granted, there is ample outdoor space, but creating such piecemeal private gardens contributes nothing to the sense of community or relationship building. Another effect of uniformity is social stratification, where all houses in a block are occupied by residents from the same socio-economic background.

When communal space *is* included in housing developments, it often consists of children's parks, patches of grass, and other stock items dotted around in the gaps between houses. While these insertions may break the monotony in *plan*, in reality they don't provide a visual break nor any escape from the urban environment. Despite being the common ground between neighbours, they are separated from the houses by roads and pavements, creating pockets of anonymous, floating communal space which belongs to everyone but also no one in particular. In the absence of communal space and the opportunity to connect with neighbours, people will look elsewhere for a sense of belonging and community, online for example. The sophistication of the technology in our homes today allows us to simultaneously settle in our living rooms *and* escape our surroundings, by watching television or talking to a friend on the other side of the world. Advances in transportation have also enlarged our world radius: it seems the further we reach, the less relevant our square mile feels, to the extent that people can live in complete anonymity in a block of flats or a row of houses. Used to moving around freely and ambushed by the COVID-19 lockdown, everyone suddenly found themselves anchored

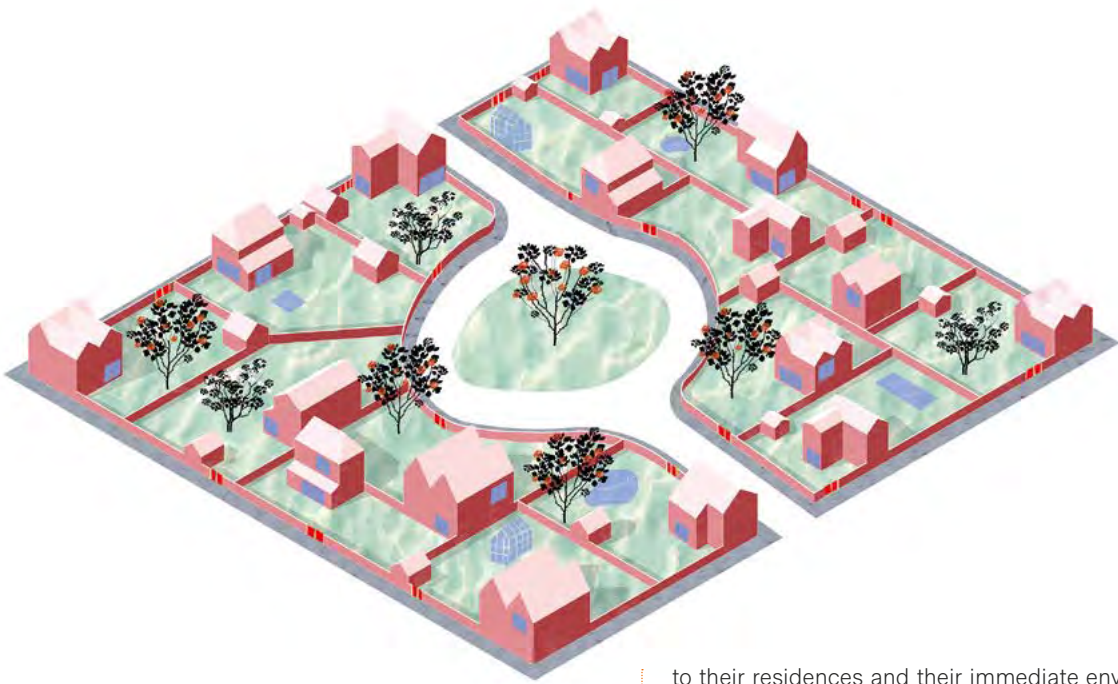


Figure 1: A hypothetical residential block which demonstrates the type of suburban built environment ill equipped to support the creation of lasting communities.

to their residences and their immediate environment. The street parties, community groups and sing-alongs that ensued are proof that many neighbours *want* to congregate, and that they will assemble in the road, on their drives, or in their doorways, where no better alternative is provided. **Communal space should be the bedrock of new housing developments, not the leftover scraps.** It can provide a core around which houses can be arranged and residents can orbit, meeting as equals without an owner/visitor or pedestrian/driver dynamic; as stated in *Suburban Nation*, 'there is a significant difference between running into someone while strolling down a street and running into someone while driving a car'.¹

Figure 2: Image of The Triangle in Merthyr and Long Row adjacent.



Exploring forms to support community

'The Triangle' was an infamous settlement of iron workers' housing in the Pentrebach area of Merthyr Tydfil, completed in 1851 but sadly demolished by 1977. Shown in Figure 2, it is an excellent historic example of houses arranged around a communal space. Like other iron companies and speculative builders at the time, the Plymouth Iron Company no doubt wanted to squeeze as many houses as possible on the allocated plot, fifty-four in this case. Analysis of the plan reveals that the chosen site was constrained by a street to the north, by a canal feeder to the south, and by a brook which defined its western perimeter, creating a triangular plot. The general shape of the settlement was therefore predetermined, however the decision by the company to arrange the rows around a shared central court rather than in parallel rows with individual gardens, like Long Row adjacent, was unusual. It showed an enlightened approach, possibly influenced by the principles of Georgian planning for the upper classes, which popularised rows arranged in geometric shapes around a gated park. The perimeter of the settlement was defined absolutely by the orientation of the rows, and it is interesting to note that houses at the corners of the settlement were skewed and elongated in plan to uphold the triangular shape.

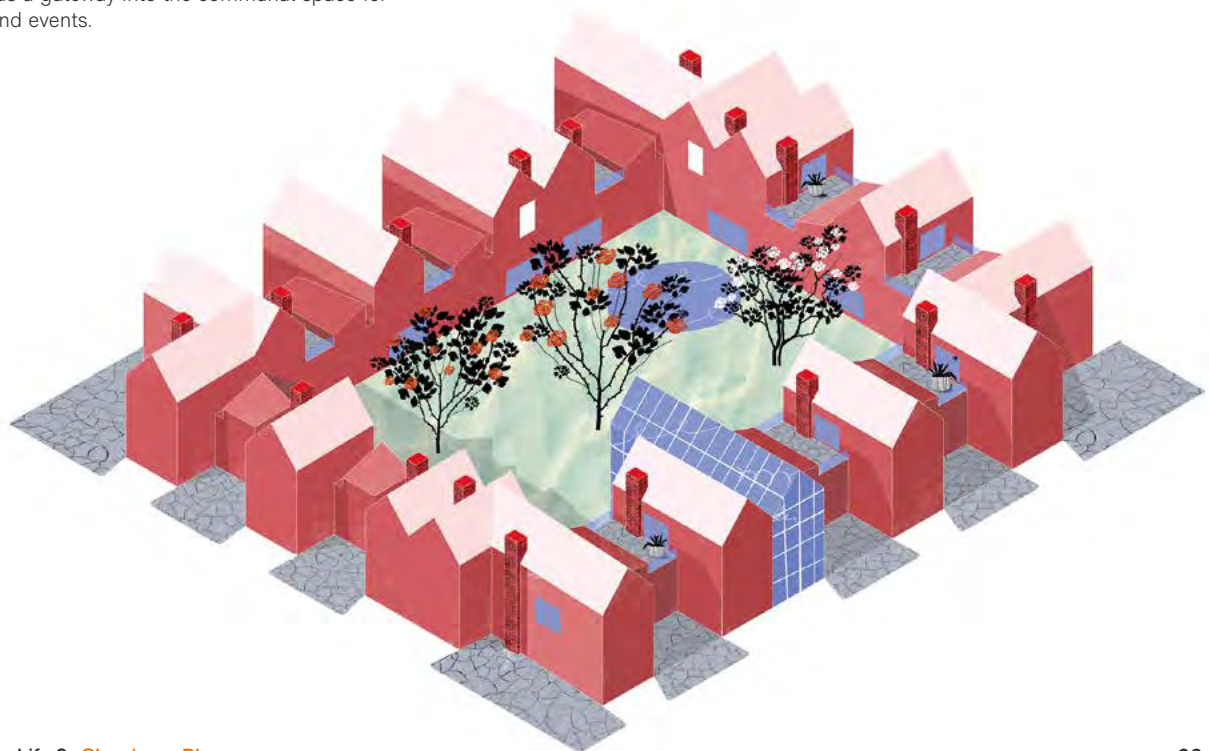
The central court created by the formation of rows in The Triangle provided a focus for the community, something which was absent in settlements with parallel rows, and a large communal space for congregation and recreation complete with a communal water pump. Life in the settlement revolved around this space, as all of the houses faced inwards, while their rear elevations were extremely plain. In the absence of private gardens, each house was provided with a small forecourt, essentially a buffer between private and public space, which provided somewhere for residents to store fuel and other household items and to withdraw physically from the street or court to a position where they could still chat to neighbours passing by or watch their children playing. I am reminded of many a summer spent at my grandparents' caravan in Pembrokeshire as a child, where neighbourly bonds were formed quickly and easily. At a caravan site, the open, communal space flows so freely between units and up to people's front doors and the lack of enclosed private space is refreshing; anyone wishing to retreat need only build themselves a raised veranda, a semi-private area which they are free to personalise.

A community like this is anything but static, it's a network of exchanges and interdependencies which is constantly shifting and densifying. The built environment acts as the skeleton of a community and should express this

architecturally, with buildings relating to one another and to communal space as at The Triangle. Consider our hypothetical residential block in Figure 1 and how the detached houses might be rearranged and unified to create a continuous row around the perimeter of the block, as in Figure 3. Like a fortified village or a medieval town wall, the physical continuity between houses expresses total unity, as does the consistent material palette and architectural treatment. The houses essentially become a boundary, an inhabited wall which defines the space at its core. Before you make a 'place for life', you have to make the *place*. In form, the houses are unbroken and convey a sense of completeness and therefore permanence: the whole is a sum of multiple parts, and each is crucial to maintain the circuit, immediately creating a sense of shared ownership. In Figure A, each house had a private, enclosed garden, fenced off despite the fact that the gardens have compatible land uses, whereas in Figure C, residents share a communal garden. This model achieves a much higher density on a far smaller plot, but also provides residents with access to a much larger semi-private outdoor space. Services can be confined to the perimeter, leaving the communal space free of traffic and infrastructure, and allowing for planting and landscaping.

The composition of the block creates a feeling of enclosure and a distinction between the outside world

Figure 3: A hypothetical residential block planned to create a shared space at its core and private roof terraces and yards for residents. The glazed building is an example of a shared indoor space which could also act as a gateway into the communal space for visitors and events.



and the inner world, each with a very different quality and pace. The shared space essentially becomes an outdoor room which provides residents with a counterweight to the urban environment beyond and a sense of security. Free from roads and cars, it is scaled to *people*, and creates a compression that is socially constructive, where conversations and interactions between neighbours will happen organically. We tend to think of 'open space' as infinite, but by creating a sense of enclosure we can create intimate outdoor spaces too. There is so much scaling up in the urban environment, from business parks and shopping malls to city hopping motorways, that enclosed outdoor spaces which put a limit on the landscape can come as a relief, like a kind of 'urban acupuncture'.² They bring people back to their immediate surroundings, as does the act of crossing a threshold, and as discussed earlier this is the key to creating enduring communities and places for life. There is a strong history of enclosure in the Welsh landscape, from Celtic hillforts to medieval castles, from the 'llan' to the tradition of encroaching on land with a 'tŷ unnos', and I propose that we should welcome the re-introduction of enclosed outdoor spaces into our urban environment.

The beauty of the enclosed shared space is that it provides an arena for the community to assemble where the space is defined but the programme is not. Landscaping could

include lawns, patios, trees, meadows and ponds, and the space will change with the natural rhythms of the seasons and the weather. Uses for the space could include sports, games, picnics, and barbeques and residents could create allotments, compost heaps, bike racks and wood stores to claim it as their own. Should residents choose not to occupy it with anything in particular, then the emptiness would still provide a break from the excesses of urban life. But there's no reason why shared space should be exclusively outdoors: a modest shared hall with basic facilities would provide residents with a useful indoor space for activities such as exercise classes, holiday celebrations, various clubs and birthday parties, and provide a focal point within the shared space. Such a facility would allow residents from different generations, religions, and ethnicities to meet as equals and create a healthy, diverse, *living* community. A building which is part of the enclosure could open up to both the inner and outer worlds and act as a gateway between the two, allowing residents to invite the wider community into the settlement as joint hosts.

It is important to invite others into the community, but it is equally important that individuals and families are given the opportunity to withdraw from the community into their homes, moving freely between communal and private space as they desire. The way that individual

Figure 4: The same principles of community planning applied to a block of terraced housing.



houses open up into the shared space will be crucial in this respect, and designers could employ buffer areas and adjustable fixtures like folding doors to help ease between the shared and private spaces, or a change in materials to distinguish between them. Residents should be able to maintain autonomy within the community by having a private entrance and a private outdoor space provided in the form of a courtyard, balcony, or roof terrace. Figure 3 demonstrates how houses could incorporate a yard on the street for parking cars and disposing of household refuse, and to ensure that individual houses can be identified by visitors. Each unit would essentially have two active entrances, one facing the street and another opening into the communal space.

Figure 4 explores how this model could be applied to an existing block of terrace houses, if residents were prepared to give up half of their private garden in exchange for access to a much larger shared space. Many blocks of terraces share only a rear access lane, which is often gated, seldom used, and unsuitable for children to play. A shared field instead of the lane would still allow vehicular access if necessary and maximise its potential as a place where residents can meet and socialise in the safety of an enclosed space. Moreover, residents could still maintain a garden large enough for an outdoor seating area, a shed, and personal gardening projects.

There are parallels between this model and co-housing schemes, which encourage communal living, meals, and even childcare. Residents have mutual ownership of the settlement and are usually involved in the design process. Once such a scheme is occupied, it is governed with a non-hierarchical system where residents collectively manage the maintenance, finance, and organisation of the community, and are required to accept equal responsibility and sometimes a set amount of community hours. While the model discussed in this piece harnesses the *spirit* of co-housing, its structure is quite different, as it would be created by a speculative developer and designed by an architect, and residents would buy and rent individual houses with shared ownership of the communal space. Engagement with neighbours and the community would be entirely optional, but it is assumed that this type of residential setting would attract people who wish to immerse themselves in a community-orientated lifestyle. As the houses are occupied, there would need to be some co-ordination and negotiation between neighbours about

whether to manage the communal spaces collectively, perhaps by electing a community leader or creating a booking system where residents can reserve the hall for private use. They would also need to establish whether to maintain the communal spaces themselves, perhaps by paying into a fund to buy equipment and appointing a caretaker among residents, or whether to pay a maintenance fee and employ someone external. It is possible that conflict could arise from having shared ownership over communal spaces and living in such close proximity to others, but disagreements and compromises are a natural part of building and maintaining a healthy, stable community. If we want to achieve a cultural shift from the individualistic society that we currently live in, then re-learning to co-habit and contribute will be imperative. As demonstrated, upgrading the status of shared space within housing developments and changing the way we plan new ones gives residents the best opportunity to invest in their neighbourhood and form longstanding communities. It is inevitable in the twenty-first century that some people will continue to move around, but once these communities have been established, in theory they can be slotted in and out of by people as they come and go or even come back. Perhaps when we refer to a 'place for life', rather than picturing an individual or a family staying in one house for life, we should envisage a community sustained for generations and lifetimes.

About the author:

Bethan Scorey is an early-career building historian from Cardiff and she has just completed an MSt in Building History at the University of Cambridge. She will shortly be joining the Institute for the Study of Welsh Estates as a PhD student, where her research project will focus on the architectural and landscape history of St Fagans Castle and Estate, home to St Fagans Museum where Bethan works as a museum assistant. Although Bethan's work now focuses on architectural history, her undergraduate degree was in architecture and design and she has worked as an architectural assistant and is still very interested in contemporary design and planning, especially in Wales, and in creating images and diagrams to demonstrate ideas.

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Notes:

- 1 Andres Duany, Elizabeth Plater-Zyberk, and Jeff Speck, *Suburban Nation* (New York: North Point Press, 2000), p.63
- 2 Rob Aben and Saskia De Wit, *The Enclosed Garden* (Rotterdam: 010 Publishers, 1999), p.244

Future of suburbs

By Diana Sanchez and Tom Wigg

Introduction

The approach to designing cities and towns has been evaluated and scrutinised from a variety of perspectives over the past decades, leading to a better understanding of the value of people-centric design and the integration of technology in both the design processes and operation of urban developments. We have seen urban areas flourish in the last 20 years, leading to increasing demand for city living.

Meanwhile, suburbia has avoided the lens and, as a consequence, the attitudes to suburban design have seen little evolution. But it is in these areas where a large proportion of UK population lives.

So, while inner cities have undergone a widespread revitalisation, suburbs have frequently been left behind. With house prices often rising faster in inner city areas, the most affordable homes are more frequently found in suburbs.

This article aims to provide a perspective on how suburbia might evolve over the next 20 years, considering the myriad social, economic, political, and environmental factors. We want to rethink how UK suburbs should be conceived, designed and experienced.

We will explore how demographic and social changes are shaping a new type of demand, where walkability, affordability, flexibility and fundamentally sustainability, are the pillars which underpin people's decision on where to live. Ultimately, we seek to understand what a future-proof suburb would look like and the key features determining the change.

It's time for a suburban renaissance

The UK's suburbs are significant to so many of us; be it living there, or visiting friends or family that do, only a slim minority have no experience of the suburban context.

But how do we classify a suburb? There is no common definition, but generally suburbs are characterised as low-density residential areas, covering everything from the established and evermore populous hinterland surrounding city centres to the dedicated, new-build satellites of major employment metropolises.

The suburban population represents about 55% of the total population of England and Wales¹. In terms of age structure, the proportion of the suburban population under 24 years old is 26 percent, while 23 percent are over 65 years old². The other half falls within the working age (25 to 65 years old). Interestingly, overall, the quality of life in suburbia tends to be higher than in the rest of the country. In fact, according to the Index of Multiple Deprivation³ almost 80% of suburban areas rank within the less deprived areas in the country and almost 30% are within the 10% least deprived.

Whilst suburbia tends to suffer less from deprivation, it can be victim to a lack of character caused by its homogeneity, a fluctuating commuter economy as people travel to larger conurbations to work, and a lack of inward reinvestment leading to dilapidation.

However, with COVID-19 turning the professional world on its head, leaving city centres desolate and making people acutely aware of how their homes and the spaces nearby foster their health, wellbeing, and ability to work effectively, the suburban renaissance may be accelerating.

People will demand more and travel less, making the quality of their local environment more important than ever before in deciding where to reside.

What is changing?

Our national commitment to net zero carbon, demographic and social changes – including an increased awareness of health, wellbeing and sustainability – alongside novel construction approaches and methods, are reshaping people's preferences on what future housing and suburban neighbourhoods should look like and how they will be delivered.

Suburban social mix

Although suburban areas have traditionally been inhabited by a population defined as affluent, white, and British, recent times have seen a movement of people with different ethnicities and varied socio-economic backgrounds from city centres to the suburbs.

In particular, we're seeing this around big cities (Leeds, Birmingham, Nottingham and Leicester) where all minority groups are drifting out of the inner city. As a result, the traditional profile of the suburban dweller is likely to change, with more diverse people living in these areas. This has the potential to open different housing markets and models in suburban settings.

So far, suburbs have been designed to respond to a traditional model that is largely shaped by a single demographic profile. Yet the new generation of suburbanites wants and needs a different suburban landscape.

Indeed, peoples' housing preferences are changing, favouring smaller accommodation, shared spaces, and a balance between lively and healthy living. This is largely driven by the affordability of smaller homes, as well as the increased awareness of the importance of social interaction for mental wellbeing⁴.

If the design of new suburbs can respond to the changing demographic and accommodate the priorities of these new populations, then life in suburbia will be redefined.

Increased awareness of health and wellbeing

Suburban areas are often perceived to offer a healthier environment, largely due to reduced exposure to noise and air pollution and increased access to green areas, compared to city centres.

In the last couple of years this has been examined at both consumer and policy level, as a response to the increasing awareness of the impact of the built environment on wellbeing. Particular attention has been paid to the impact that the form and design of neighbourhoods has on social cohesion and mental and physical health of residents. Interestingly, evidence suggests that people's health and wellbeing is higher in inner cities than in suburbia, with the latter having greater rates of obesity and lower rates of exercise. A study⁵ analysing 22 British cities and towns showed that suburban areas (with densities below 18 dph) with poorly designed neighbourhoods near motorways, where driving is the primary mode of travel, had greater rates of obesity and lower rates of exercise compared to people living in city centres. Walking and the possibility for social interaction were identified as the main determinants.

Any strategic suburban development must therefore look at ways to maximise health and wellbeing.

Enabling physical mobility is the key to social mobility: a healthy society is active and suburbia must be designed to facilitate this.

A different suburban model

Thanks to this changing demographic, with new needs and desires, landowners, developers and planners will need to rethink their approach to suburban design.

Historically, suburbs have not had an explicit policy, one that tackles their specific context and needs. Suburbs were left to define themselves, and the consequence has been a continuation of the late twentieth century model of dispersion and sprawl; low density, high car dependence, and minimal amenities representing the defining features of UK suburbs.

For landowners and planners looking to deliver housing in suburbia, there are numerous factors which require consideration to ensure the result is desirable for suburban dwellers, and as a consequence, economically viable.

The grain, character, density and structure that suburbs should adopt depends on their specific context – the location, level of integration with the wider region, population profile and size. Models such as 'cells', which promote self-sufficient neighbourhood units; 'clusters', a group of interlocking neighbourhoods; or 'linear townships' that link neighbourhoods along a high street spine, are some models that have been studied and recognised as good practice.

The changing housing system

With house prices now an average of seven times a person's income⁶, homeownership is slipping out of reach for many. For the first time in a century the relative size of the owner-occupied sector has declined and the private rented sector has increased⁷. This is causing the housing system to change significantly.

The decline in social renting and homeownership, and the rise in private renting is likely to become more pronounced over the next few decades. The proportion of private renters in England is forecast to rise by around 90% by 2040, seeing one in five people renting, compared to one in six today.

While inner cities have undergone a transformation resulting in rapidly increasing property prices, suburbs have frequently been left behind and have experienced 'de-gentrification'.

Trends suggest that future suburbia would benefit from being denser with a more varied range of housing types, such as flats and taller townhouses, along with the conventional detached and semi-detached properties.

Novel construction methods

The UK public perception of prefabricated homes has historically been of high volume and low quality. Consequently, the UK has not seen the revolution in offsite manufactured homes which other European, Asian and North American countries have experienced. However, many of the well-known names in UK construction and housebuilding are investing heavily in their offsite capabilities for a number of reasons.

Fewer than 150,000 of the required 250,000 homes are constructed each year in the UK⁸, but manufacturing offsite has the potential to curb this trend by delivering housing projects in half the time of comparable brick-by-brick schemes.

If the claims of speedier construction, improved thermal performance, lower cost, reduced embodied carbon and waste, and a quicker, less disruptive construction process can be realised at the larger scales, it seems inevitable that the housebuilding industry will fully adopt offsite and modular construction. However, significant investment and development of the process is still needed.

The success of recent smaller schemes has excited a market and caused the injection of high volumes of capital into research and development of modern methods of construction. However, whilst the proof of concept has succeeded, housebuilders will need to see return on their investment to avoid them reverting back to a traditional bricks-and-mortar approach.

With house prices now an average of seven times a person's income, homeownership is slipping out of reach for many.

80% of homes and buildings which will exist in 2050 have already been built; this means the onus is on new developments to pave the way for a decarbonised built environment.

Net zero carbon

The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) concluded in 2019 that for us to limit global warming to mitigate its most catastrophic consequences, global greenhouse gas emissions need to reduce to net zero by 2050⁹. In response, the UK's Committee on Climate Change published their own 'Net Zero' report¹⁰, with the government ratifying the target on 27th June 2019, meaning the UK has a legally-binding obligation to reach net zero emissions by 2050¹¹.

Following suit, Wales and 298 District, County, Unitary & Metropolitan Councils in the UK have now declared a Climate Emergency¹² and it is inevitable that local policy and expectations for new development will begin catching up with the rhetoric.

80% of homes and buildings which will exist in 2050 have already been built¹³; this means the onus is on new developments to pave the way for a decarbonised built environment. Whilst new suburban developments may not be net zero carbon on Day 1, the design and strategic responses must enable net zero operation in future.

The energy landscape is vast and complex with tangible, cross-sector collaboration essential to driving whole system progress towards net zero. National Grid note in their Future Energy Scenarios (FES) 2020 report that decarbonising heat requires urgent action, with the average home heating requirement needing to reduce by up to 75% by 2050¹⁴.

New homes will deploy improved building fabric and principles of passive design to reduce demand in the first instance. By utilising low or zero carbon heat sources, the emissions associated with heating and cooling can be further reduced. Using electricity to meet these demands leverages the decarbonising electricity grid, with a carbon intensity less than two thirds that of natural gas today, projected to reduce to net zero by the mid 2030s. Development must remain flexible to other emerging technologies, such as hydrogen, responding to the most

appropriate solution at the time of construction, ensuring strategies are forward-looking and futureproof.

FES 2020 also notes the importance of engaging consumers with energy markets to ensure homes, buildings, and vehicles can respond to a grid supplied by an increasing proportion of unpredictable sources such as wind and solar. Whilst reducing overall demand contributes to this, equally important is shifting demand away from times of peak demand. These are also the times when electricity is highest carbon and highest cost.¹⁵ As a result, any demand which is avoided during these times helps reduce the CO₂ emissions whilst contributing to grid resilience and reducing energy bills for consumers in a future where the price of electricity is no longer flat i.e. varies based on the time of use.

In combination with solar PV generation on the roof, an efficient electric heating system, and an electric vehicle with a battery parked outside, smart systems and appliances will enable a level of energy autonomy for the average homeowner. **This will allow them to become prosumers, generating, storing, buying and selling energy with their neighbours for the benefit of the grid, climate, and people; the arguably overdue democratisation of energy.**

We envisage suburbs as a viable and vibrant alternative to city centre living.

Our future suburbs: walkable, affordable, flexible and sustainable.

We envisage suburbs as a viable and vibrant alternative to city centre living. They will no longer be dormitory towns but instead our future suburbs will be designed as autonomous satellite settlements with places to live, work, learn, and play within the local community.

In order to respond to demographic, social, economic and environmental changes and challenges, suburban intensification needs to prevail above urban expansion when seeking the provision of new housing to meet the UK's need.

As a result, the development of new towns should be determined by a novel and distinctive suburban pattern with mobility, proximity, and connectivity defining the suburban experience. In other words, walkable suburbs developed as mixed-used places providing a good network of amenities and facilities to enable self-sufficient neighbourhoods.

The key characteristics of this future suburbia are as follows:

- 1. A truly affordable alternative to city-living**
A variety of typologies and tenures – from family-sized townhouses and mews, to small apartment blocks – which respond to the socioeconomic and demographic profile of the local community. Genuinely affordable properties for both rent and sale avoid people being 'locked in' to an expensive rental cycle which prevents them from being able to save for and ultimately afford a home of their own.
- 2. Proximity and tranquillity**
Keeping suburbs true to their roots and differentiating between suburban and urban neighbourhoods is key to provide the identity that will reinforce a desire for suburban living. This requires a placemaking approach that puts proximity and tranquillity at the core of suburban design. A mixed-use local centre becomes a

neighbourhood hub – the beating heart of the community – providing a range of facilities and services. Flexible and collaborative workspaces become the expectation in the post-COVID landscape, with the typical commuter economy of suburbia replaced by a more stable customer base which supports local businesses. An approach which integrates the strategies for urban planning, landscaping, and ecology to prioritise access to peaceful green spaces (and routes between them and key facilities) supports a happy, healthy population and connects people with nature on a daily basis. These elements combined create cohesive neighbourhoods that foster sociability, prosperity, and wellbeing, promoting inward investment and civic pride.

- 3. Public green space**
Moving away from the traditional expectation of vast homes and private gardens, suburban houses will tend to be smaller and denser, and the size of private gardens will be reduced or be absent altogether. This allows for a more generous provision of high-quality open space provided as a public amenity rather than a private facility – facilitating social interaction and emulating city living. Genuinely multi-functional green spaces maximise value for the local community and ecosystems, facilitating biodiversity and putting people back in touch with nature.
- 4. Multi-modal connectivity and active travel**
Car ownership is not an expectation for intensified suburban living. The higher (but commensurate) densities provide the critical mass to enable provision of extensive public transport links as well a broader range of local amenities and job prospects, internalising trips by reducing the need to travel outside of the community. Active travel is facilitated through a network of dedicated, legible, inviting, safe, and well-maintained walking and

cycling routes. Fundamental to this transition is a move away from car-centric approaches to urban design, which sees streetscapes defined no longer by their need to accommodate vehicles, but by their role in connecting neighbourhoods in such a way that car-dependency is a forgotten hallmark of suburban living. This has benefits to resident health – through greater levels of exercise and better air quality – and wellbeing, by encouraging people to leave the solitude of their cars and engage with the community around them, whilst reducing transport-related greenhouse gas emissions.

5. Diverse identity and a flexible response

The demographic profile of suburbs will resemble that of urban areas, with households of all ages and a diverse range of ethnicities and socioeconomic profiles represented. With this comes a greater cultural diversity and more complex social needs. Building homes and spaces to be flexible to a broad range of people and facilitate the changing needs of an ageing population, suburbia will be resilient. Building in flexibility, whilst also seeking to maximise social value through appropriate consultation to understand the specific needs and priorities of the local community, will ensure a place thrives for decades after the first home is occupied.

6. Fit for the future

Designing homes, buildings, and the spaces in between to mitigate their contribution to and be resilient to the consequences of climate change is key to delivering sustainability. Comfortable homes which are cheap to run, with efficient low carbon heating systems, helps both people and planet. In addition, ensuring a development is ready for the warmer, drier summers and wetter winters of the future climate, whilst considering the environmental impact of the materials used to construct it, will be key to delivering sustainability across its whole lifecycle.

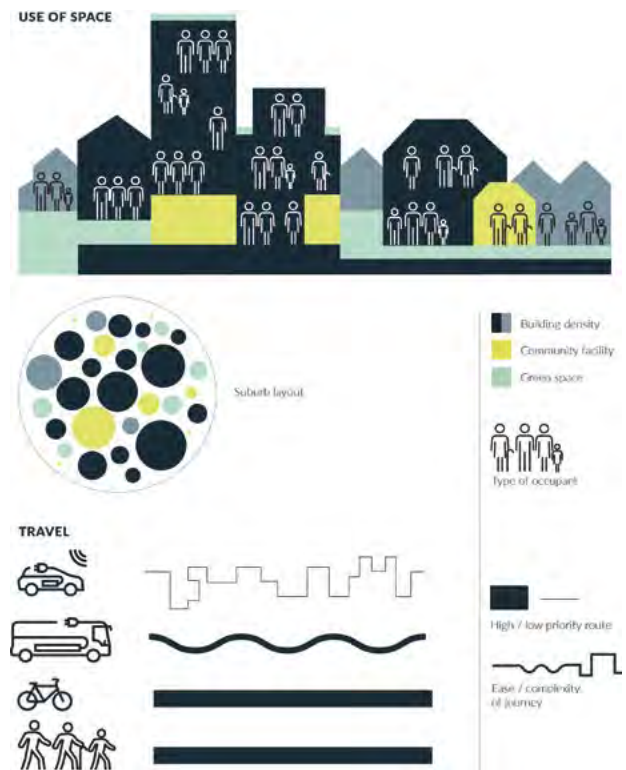


Figure 1: Graphic showing the characteristics of intensified suburbia.

Realising the vision

When deciding where to live, people are often driven by a list of personal priorities – a big garden, proximity to a good school, quiet roads. But there is no guarantee that living somewhere that fulfils those priorities will lead to a good quality of life. The design of new development should be outcomes-focussed, and it is the prerogative of suburbia reimagined to define itself by the prosperity and wellbeing of the people who dwell there, not the size of the gardens.

There is no doubt that many of these things people look for when choosing a new home are ubiquitous components of a happy life. Thus, the ingredients for better living are largely the same for urban and suburban areas; what changes is the recipe. Indeed, there is an urgent need to define and lead an agenda – the recipe – that will ensure a suburban renaissance.

Emulating the purpose, expertise, influence and profile of the acclaimed Urban Task Force led by Richard Rogers should be a government priority, ensuring that the national majority living in suburbs share in the consequent prosperity realised by novel approaches to urban planning in cities.

The current pandemic is testament to how quickly expectations can change, and this report seeks not to define a 'magic bullet' to see suburbs flourish as city centres have over the past decades.

Although this responsibility lies with no single party, there are bodies in existence today that have the knowledge and expertise to play a more active role in shaping future approaches to suburban design and development. With support from national and local government, organisations such as the Royal Town Planning Institute in collaboration with academic institutions could be pivotal in setting a cohesive vision for future suburbia.

The private sector also has a role to play, leveraging knowledge of design, delivery, and viability from a commercial standpoint. Projects such as *Supurbia*¹⁷, led by HTA, have been critical in promoting suburban intensification as a means to increase the speed, scale, and quality of housing provision in London's suburbs.

With the scale of housebuilding needed to tackle the housing crisis, novel mechanisms for delivery are needed to ensure both the quantity and quality of new communities. The master developer model has gained traction in recent years and is key to delivering strategic-scale housing in a suburban context, as it ensures that the aspirations of a development-wide framework are met when individual phases, parcels, and homes are brought forward.

Ultimately, aligning the public, academic, and private sectors behind a common vision for suburbia is vital and such is the power of initiatives such as the Placemaking Wales Charter¹⁶. The Charter is a mechanism for organisations to commit "...to support the development of high-quality places across Wales for the benefit of communities."

The current pandemic is testament to how quickly expectations can change, and this report seeks not to define a 'magic bullet' to see suburbs flourish as city centres have over the past decades. Instead it intends to highlight the importance of suburbia in our nationwide approaches to urban planning and design and the key trends which are influencing the shape of communities-to-be.

We must also recognise that any change to the de facto approach to suburban development – however flawed

its outcomes have proven to be – is likely to be met by resistance. The question cannot be solely "how do we design a better suburban development?" but instead must consider how we create a suburban model which respects suburbia's unique identity and sees wholehearted buy in from planners and communities alike.

About the authors:

Hoare Lea is an award-winning consultancy with a creative team of engineers, designers, technical specialists and strategists. We are experts in delivering successful outcomes for clients looking to embed sustainability across a wide portfolio of projects in the built environment. We are engineers of human experiences.

Diana Sanchez, Senior Associate – ESG Lead

I am the ESG Lead across the sustainability Group and am a passionate strategist with over 14 years' experience driving value creation for business innovation and growth.

By demonstrating value across the five capitals of sustainability, I help to craft effective frameworks aligning financial, social and environmental objectives to generate lasting positive impact in the built environment. Recently, I have worked for multiple strategic land portfolios in the UK, shaping pioneering sustainability and corporate responsibility strategies and approaches.

Tom Wigg, Senior Sustainability Consultant + BREEAM Communities Assessor

Coming from a background in physics, I have a particular interest in the UK energy landscape and the built environment's role within it to realise a net zero carbon future. Now with four years' experience providing full spectrum sustainability and energy services on a range of developments, I work primarily on our strategic-scale projects, developing sustainability strategies to deliver communities which work for people and planet. Creating places fit for the future which enable all people to lead healthy, comfortable, prosperous and, ultimately, happy lives is my ambition.

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Gwynfaen

By Rob Wheaton

Gwynfaen will start on site in January 2021, but it is already clear that the development demonstrates an approach to placemaking and creating sustainable communities that will set the standard for future residential developments in Wales. By responding to the challenge set by the Government's 'Better Homes, Better Places, Better World' report, Gwynfaen aims to create a new community in Swansea based on placemaking inspired by context and the possibilities of a landscape led approach; whilst also committing fully to homes designed to minimise carbon in use and construction. Gwynfaen will offer low carbon homes for all members of the community in a truly mixed tenure environment, and by doing so at a large scale, will disrupt the housing market for the better.

Origins

Coastal and Pobl are Housing Associations based in South Wales. Both are major developers of affordable homes, collectively providing over 20,000 homes for social rent; and each has previously demonstrated an ambition for good sustainable design, placemaking, and regeneration providing mixed-tenure communities.

In 2017 Coastal and Pobl decided to collaborate to develop a parcel of Welsh Government and City and Council of Swansea owned land to the west of Swansea. The site, known as 'Gwynfaen', secured outline planning consent in 2010 and was allocated in the Local Development Plan for 225 new homes, a portion of which had been completed by others leaving approximately 150 homes remaining. The site's location close to the Loughor Estuary, overlooking the Gower and with good access to amenities and the countryside represented an excellent opportunity to create a special place inspired by this rural setting.



Figure 1:
Photographs of the site and mapping of key view points



Figure 2: Integrated SuDS/GI leads a masterplan approach focused on greening the development and drawing people into the landscape

Vision

The Clients established a vision for Gwynfaen as a place with an overtly rural character, responding to the site's inherent characteristics including topography, natural features, orientation and views. The Clients also wanted to draw inspiration from the surrounding context, not necessarily the streets nearby, but from villages surrounding the Loughor Estuary which had developed organically over time. These settlements exhibited a character derived from the use of local materials in response to climate, topography, and tradition. Avoiding the banality of many recent suburban housing solutions driven by commercial motives, poor space standards, and designed around the car, Gwynfaen would have a more varied density, more greenspace, walkable connections to the surrounding countryside and a contemporary architecture inspired by its rural context.

The original vision was broadened when the decision was taken in 2018 that all the new homes across all tenures at Gwynfaen would be designed to be highly energy efficient by achieving a minimum Standard Assessment Procedure (SAP) rating of 96 and an Energy Performance Certificate (EPC) rating of A. SAP is the government's national calculation methodology for the energy efficiency assessment of newly constructed (new build) dwellings. The Welsh Government, through its Innovative Housing Programme (IHP), wanted to see even more ambition and innovation for the third round of funding. Gwynfaen represented an opportunity to upscale Coastal and Pobl's experience of off-site manufacturing,

fabric first and renewable technologies and to explore creating sustainable communities centred on a more environmentally responsible lifestyle.

The vision crystallised around three themes central to the Well Being of Future Generations Act - Place, Carbon and Energy. Gwynfaen would offer homes for all members of the community in a place designed to connect homes with the outdoors, built from locally sourced low carbon materials, and through renewable technologies the future residents would have the opportunity to lead affordable 'combustion free' lifestyles.

Placemaking

The design team identified that the vision for the site was a real opportunity to deliver something progressive, to truly influence the way development is designed, delivered and lived in.

The design approach was led by opportunities and constraints mapping collected as part of the preparation stages, carried forward into the iterative process. Collaborating with the clients – undertaking workshops to distil priorities and sketch out design solutions - the team set about designing a fully integrated new rural community. A key part of this involved linking three potential points of access and delivering permeability and connectedness rather than focussing on 'privacy' and 'enclosure' which are often the drivers of new schemes.



Figure 3: Early sketches showing the emergent masterplan

The challenge was to design a modern development which reflected the historic building patterns and character of the region's organically grown villages while avoiding 'pastiche'. The team studied a number of precedents from the region, exploring their density, road layouts and evolution. They then ran a fictional exercise, modelling the 'historic' growth of the Gwynfaen site around the confluence of the three access points – imagining a village grown from a single building at this intersection which then led to further houses and farmsteads densely clustered around this focus and the emergence of a village green at a location with framed, elevated views to the Loughor Estuary. From here the village begins to spread and grow with house types and densities varying as you move away from the 'historic core' but with a continued focus on the sense of place and the value of those views and connections to the countryside beyond the site. This modelling exercise, the workshops which informed it, and the resultant initial concept still underpin the final scheme. The Community Hub and Green at the heart of the site provide an anchor point for local residents to meet, engage, relax and play. The Green offers a naturalistic external environment from where the views over the



Figure 4: A narrative developed influenced by patterns of existing Gower settlement

Loughor Estuary can be appreciated, framed along carefully oriented streets, assisting legibility and the understanding of the site's location within the wider landscape. The Community Hub building offers a flexible indoor environment with the potential to support multiple uses.

The advent of SuDS Approval Bodies (SABs) and the requirement for SAB approval to be secured alongside planning consent was taken as an opportunity to add character and biodiversity to the site. A palette of SuDS solutions was developed with a focus on keeping water at the surface within naturalistic, flora rich features which add to the streetscape and allow residents to understand the functioning of the site drainage whilst engaging them with nature.

Inevitably, there were challenges— creating a place with the characteristics of an historic village while simultaneously accommodating 21st century needs such as refuse access and SuDS does not come easily and numerous technical obstacles had to be overcome. This was only achieved through the collaborative approach of the team and the determination of the clients.

Parking and highways (as ever) brought challenges but considerable effort has been made to not allow on plot parking to result in a suburban style layout, particularly at the heart of the scheme. The move to low carbon development also raised the spectre of solar orientation and the potential for this to push us towards a 'south facing' scheme. As a result, the clients recognised they needed a suite of house types to allow the delivery of the vision.

Figure 5: The developed site plan as approved



Architecture and Sustainability

The architectural design materialised from a genuine desire to create something special in place, energy and carbon terms. However, it was realised that tensions would emerge between these drivers. Gwynfaen was not to be a rigorously south orientated layout, typically considered the most advantageous in passive solar design. Various nuances needed to be addressed, such as; maximising the western views to the estuary; creating a four sided backdrop to the central green; and the need to lock back gardens together under secure-by-design principles. It was clear that a site of this size could never justify such a singular directional response and inescapably sub-optimal home orientations would arise. The architecture needed to offer a solution to this challenge and at the same time provide the continuous frontages and intimate streets of a rural village to ensure the character and variety of the masterplan was preserved.

The SAP score of at least 96 stipulated for every home, meant a high standard in sustainability terms was locked into the brief. However, inspired by the challenge to secure IHP funding, the team decided to aim for even better, committing to focusing on not only improving energy-efficiency, but also reducing whole-life carbon. In the context of a climate emergency the client and design team had a tangible sense of responsibility to future generations and constantly challenged whether the scheme was doing enough to meet fulfil this responsibility.

To enable the SAP scores to be met, an adaptive approach to reducing energy demand and optimising renewable energy yields was taken. Achieving a high SAP score is about reducing the amount of regulated energy used in a home and, consequently, the home's carbon footprint. This comes down to passive measures such as insulation and airtightness and powering unavoidable loads as much as possible from site generated renewable energy. Even Passivhaus levels of performance would typically only achieve a C to B in SAP without renewables. The proposed renewable energy will come from discrete, integrated roof-mounted photovoltaics, the efficiency of which depends on their orientation to the sun.

Homes were designed that could be configured to be gable-fronted or eaves-fronted, allowing optimised PV orientation. There were also variations with living space orientation to better allow passive gains to reduce space heating demand, or east-west suited types with more modest windows to manage the risk of overheating. In all there are nearly 50 variations, managed in BIM enabled software.

The design follows fabric-first principles using thick thermal insulation to achieve U values of 0.13 W/m²K, all modelled in simulations predicting extraordinarily low bills for all-electric homes. Being manufactured off-site in a factory will help ensure that the desired airtightness is achieved in practice, making the SAP target more achievable.



Figure 6:
Image showing
the village green

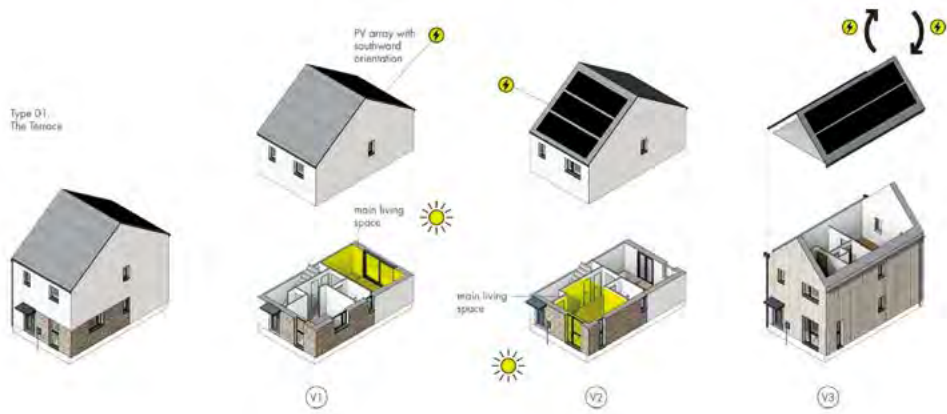


Figure 7:
Illustration of the
adaptive approach to
house type design

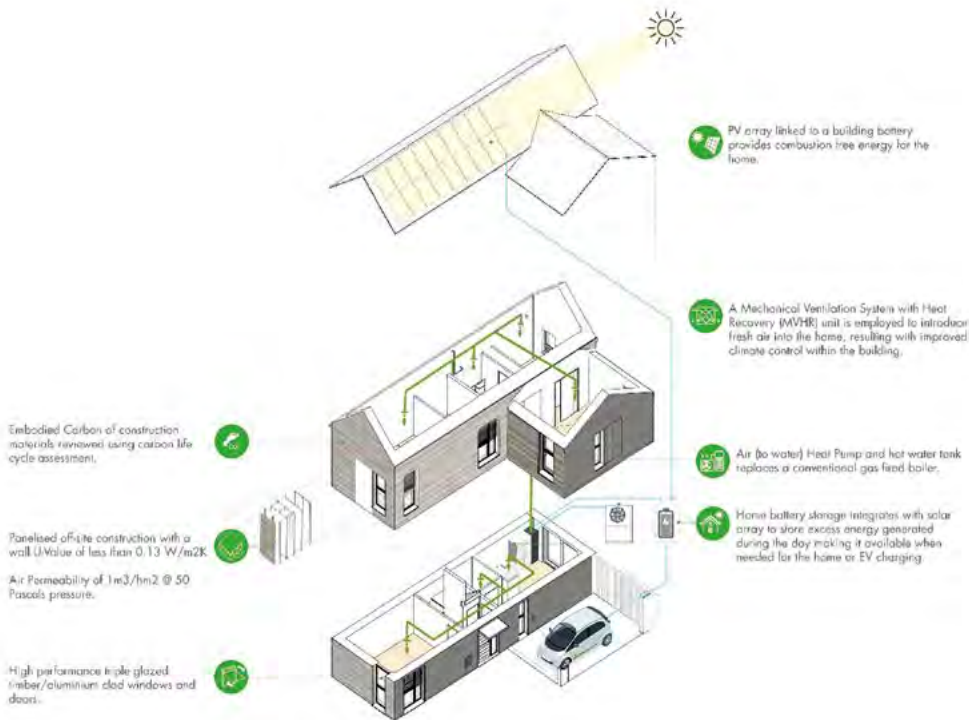


Figure 8:
Illustration of the key
low energy design features

The IHP funding made it possible to implement otherwise unviable sustainable innovations on the condition that their effectiveness is monitored. Anticipating future regulatory change, the homes will have no gas grid connections. Energy for heating and hot water comes from air source heat pumps with digital controls linked to thermal stores to exploit variable electricity tariffs, ensuring overall running costs will be kept to a minimum.

In addition, every home will be fitted with batteries and, to facilitate the transition to electric vehicles, car chargers. These homes tread lightly on the electricity network to enable the shifting of peak energy loads, assisting the grid.

Despite the technology employed it was important the homes echoed the architectural vernacular and used locally sourced materials, the diversity of house forms gives the impression of organic growth, establishing a strong sense of place and connecting fluidly with its surrounding context to encourage outdoor activity.

Targeting emerging definitions of net-zero carbon meant tackling the carbon embodied in the products and materials specified as well as the homes' operational

carbon cost. The buildings will be constructed from a wood fibre insulated welsh timber-framed kit-of-parts constructed in a nearby factory and assembled in large format panels. As well as improved speed, health and safety, and waste-reduction, the system also improves quality. A restrained interchangeable palette of materials was selected, all used in a rain screen format (fig 2) including Welsh Larch cladding and a lime based render. A locally quarried stone slip system was explored but building warranty providers were unwilling to accept it. The testing and approval processes required to bring innovative ideas into the mainstream are quite often out of reach in investment terms for smaller artisan suppliers and this puts up barriers when considering more inventive approaches. The local stone remains in the scheme but in a more limited capacity as walling stone used on some selected focal buildings.

Life-cycle Assessment software was used to measure the CO₂ embodied in the specification and changes made to significantly improve the development's whole-life carbon footprint. The data below compares a 'business as usual' home using traditional masonry and oil based insulants with the homes at Gwynfaen.

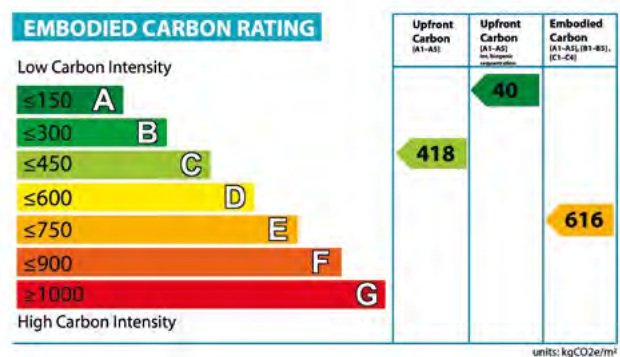
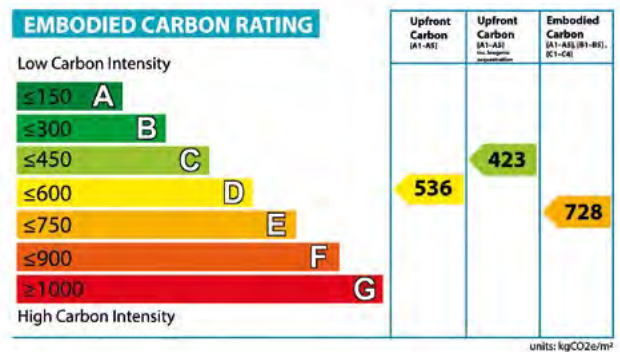


Figure 9: 'Business as usual' compared against Gwynfaen in embodied carbon terms presented in reference to current industry benchmarks



Figure 10: Image showing the green linkages

Innovation and viability

The IHP funding has allowed Coastal and Pobl to push boundaries in terms of a sustainable, place-making led development. Without this funding, a scheme of this size and complexity would face significant viability challenges. Coastal and Pobl have worked on this development since 2017, pre-dating Welsh Government's legislative requirements for SuDS. As a result of the legislation, the scheme had to carry the additional financial burden, and without support from IHP funding, it would not have been financially viable to incorporate additional costs to achieve the ambitious targets set by Welsh Government as a condition of the land sale. Public funds and land provide a route to unlocking otherwise unviable sites and which can provide a testbed for new technologies.

The approach to source low carbon, local materials has presented challenges, in terms of cost, quality, availability and structural warranty approval. All of these factors have influenced the overall approach to the design of the scheme, with the ultimate goal of replicating the principles of the development on future schemes without the need for additional grant subsidy.

How does this become mainstream

Technologically, Gwynfaen represents a departure from the 'norm', by being 'off-gas' and powered by a significant amount of renewable energy technologies. This new approach comes at a considerable economic cost, which will only significantly reduce when economies of scale are established, which will only happen through client specification or external intervention, for example, through legislating the need for change.

There is also a case to be made for further 'buy in' from structural warranty providers. Both clients have been fortunate to gain the support of a large scale warranty provider on this development, but this wasn't without its own challenges. Understandably, such providers are governed by their underwriters, who tend to take a more prudent view towards innovation. However, if widespread adoption of innovation is to happen, then warranty providers have to be part of the process, which again goes back to the point of either changing through market demand, or through external intervention.

In terms of the placemaking led approach, there are two main barriers to widespread adoption of this. Private developers are driven by profit margins; taking a 'Gwynfaen' approach to the site layout has an impact on the developable area of a site, which results in either reduced land values, or increased end product cost. Secondly, the mix of affordable tenures: two-thirds affordable, one-third for sale on the open market also challenges normal models of viability. The main way to influence a placemaking change across the sector, will be for developers, such as Coastal and Pobl, who are not ultimately driven solely by profitability, to continue to lead the way on this front, so that customers have the ability to choose to live in culturally vibrant and diverse communities.

Benefits to inhabitants

Gwynfaen will provide residents with a great opportunity to meet and form a community. Pedestrian routes from the new homes and existing neighbourhoods provide a coherent link between key destinations such as the community hub, playground, key open space, and Public Rights of Way. The open space, blue/green infrastructure,

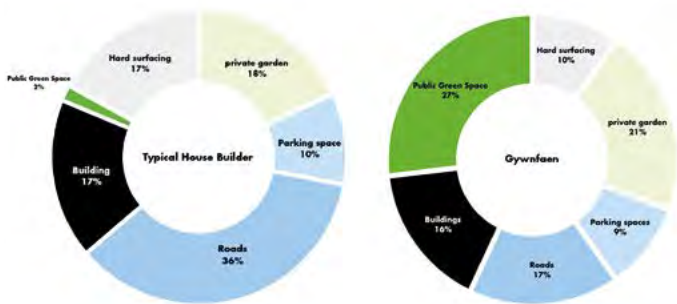


Figure 11: Land use comparison



Figure 12: Image of central community hub

community facilities, and play space will provide opportunities for interaction, play, sport and leisure which are so important to well-being. The new neighbourhood will be jointly managed by the Housing Associations to ensure responsible stewardship of the community assets and benefits are fully realised.

Throughout there has been a focus on how the project can build community cohesion. Through the procurement of the contractor, 0.25% of the value of the contract was earmarked for a community investment sum, which will be made available for any priorities identified by the community and will be used to attract further investment and partnerships to maximise benefits. The Community Hub will evolve over time with the possibility of it being managed by a Community Interest Company, formed collaboratively between the housing associations and local residents. Continual engagement will be key to ensure that the current vision is aligned with resident aspirations which will inevitably evolve over time and a Project Board, currently made up of the HA partners, has been set-up to deal with resident, neighbour and construction matters moving forward.

The design, orientation and materiality of the buildings and incorporation of low carbon technology will ensure that fuel poverty is all but eliminated, with residents able to take advantage of variable energy tariffs and smart use of stored energy collected from the PV cells. With all new technology comes a learning curve to understand how the system works and take best advantage of its capabilities. In addition to a clear set of documents, both paper and online, there is expected to be a need to monitor the residents use of the technology, with feedback from energy

managers to residents so that continual improvements can be made which translate into personal and carbon savings.

Gwynfaen is already influencing the business models of Coastal and Pobl, raising placemaking and sustainability aspirations for future schemes. Pobl have recently recruited a Head of Innovation and Sustainability to explore how the learnings can be best utilised and Coastal are considering how they can normalise the low-carbon approach within their housing delivery programme.

Design team

Architect: Stride Treglown Ltd

Landscape Architect and Masterplanning: Environmental Dimension Partnership

MEP Consultant: Hoare Lea

Civil and Structural Engineer: WSP

Planning Consultant: Asbri

Authors

Elfed Roberts,

Head of Sustainability & Innovation, Pobl Group

Adam Roberts,

Head of Development (West), Pobl Group

Rob Wheaton,

Senior Associate Architect, Stride Treglown

Dai Lewis,

Director, The Environmental Dimension Partnership

Peter Remedios,

Project Manager, Pobl Group

Rhianydd Jenkins,

Head of Development, Coastal Housing Group

Building Back with Better Values

by Robert I Chapman Dip. Est. Man. (Hons),
M Sc (Regen), MRICS, Affiliate RTPI, FRSA

Places for Life II is about promoting “good placemaking and building back better”. In this thought-piece, I will consider the role of developers, placemaking and planning.

The catalyst for my thought piece was a post from the RSA on 1st July 2014 and entitled Developing Socially Productive Places.¹ It referenced an RSA Action and Research Centre report of the same name which was supported by British Land. It challenged and supported local authorities, developers, communities and businesses to deepen their understanding of what makes places good for people in the long term. Furthermore, it stated that successful placemaking requires an understanding of how people, households and community networks respond to and use the opportunities afforded by the built environment. Understood properly, social value is cumulative.

Of the various learning points for leaders, there were two that caught my attention: first, developing socially productive places means supporting local people to engage with development as a means of addressing issues such as local employment, transport and provision of health and education; second, socially productive places build community capacity to benefit from growth, increase resilience to shocks and support people’s ability to adapt together to new circumstances. Altogether, this sounds progressive: a meshing together of the relied upon built environment (the hardware) within which to live life (the software).

In July 2019, a report prepared by Grosvenor² suggested a significant trust deficit facing UK developers and councils. Notably, when it comes to large-scale development just 2% of the public trust private developers to act in an honest way. Only 7% of the public trust local authorities to act in the best interests of the area. If civic and industry leaders want to restore public trust in the planning

system and placemaking then, according to the report three challenges should be addressed: (i) understanding private profit and public gain; (ii) extending the public’s influence over places (many people feel that large-scale development is done to them, not with or for them); (iii) holding public and private sector actors to account calling for transparency, consistency and accountability, throughout the life of a large-scale development.

The COVID-19 pandemic has led to people reflecting on their lives and their places. There is a lot of questioning of what makes a great place? Before I come to place, let me reflect on news items on developments during the period since July 2019, the time of the Grosvenor Report.

Developers:

In the period between July 2019 and August 2020, a host of ‘woeful stories’ has arisen that does not speak well of developers, their developments and the places they are impacting. The blunt truth is that things have not got better, a general theme echoed by co-founder and director at mixed-use developer Cubex, Gavin Bridge who observes that “... as developers we need to be more open and accountable”.³

The case for Quality and Value:

The quality of development delivered by developers is hugely relevant because of its impact on place, placemaking, people and community. British Land is one of the more enlightened developers thinking about this. In 2015, they worked with Happy City to develop a series of wellbeing principles to guide their placemaking strategy (see Figure 1). This led to seven wellbeing principles.



Figure 1: Wellbeing principles that guide British Land's placemaking strategy

Subsequently, they sought to do something that had not been done before. In 2018, they partnered with WPI Economics to produce a report which investigated the effects of the built environment on the health and wellbeing of people. It led to the report 'Design for Life: the impact of good design on mental health'⁴ With circa 46 million people now living in the UK's urban environments, the report suggests that the cumulative impact of designing for life could be immense for people now, and for future generations. For the first time, the report quantified the potential economic benefits of designing places for mental wellbeing. It also outlined a route map for putting health and wellbeing at the heart of development. With three major examples in mind, the report states that placemaking and the built environment can influence: (1) our levels of physical activity; (2) the quality of the air that we breathe; and (3) the state of our mental health (see Figure 2).

It highlighted that annually the NHS in England spends around £11.6 billion on mental health services, suggesting that the wider costs to the economy could exceed £105 billion. Furthermore, the report observed that better-designed

cities could improve wellbeing and reduce reliance on government services, leading to an estimated £15.3 billion boost to the economy by 2050 (ignoring the potential for a productivity increase across the economy of £5.4bn).

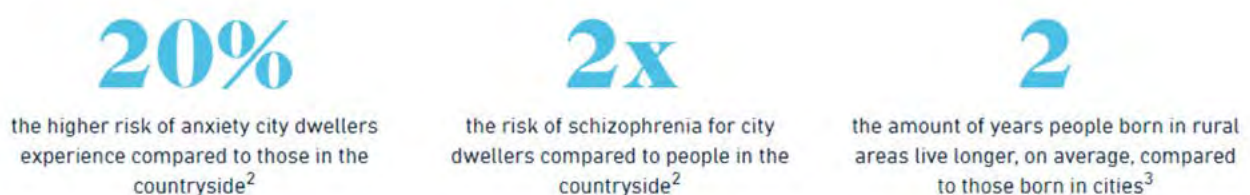
If poor urban environments are partly to blame, then upstream improvements could generate enormous downstream savings: a narrative which is supported by a recent Homes England report (June 2020) entitled Building for a Healthy Life⁵ authored in partnership with Homes England, NHS England and NHS Improvement (and replaces Building for Life 12).

It is also encouraging to see value (other than £ note value) rising up the priority list. For example, Social Value UK has been operating in this space for a number of years now. Recently, instigated by the Construction Innovation Hub, we have learnt about The Value Toolkit⁶ which at its heart is about value-based decision making. In the current circumstances, this is about grasping an opportunity to improve industry perception and lay the foundations for a better future. I hope this is grasped

Naturally, construction forms part of development delivered or procured by developers which impacts on places and people. Positive signs manifesting change - whether in the guise of social value, sustainability or the circular economy - have been tempered by a recently released construction industry research report: *From the Ground Up – Improving the Delivery of Social Value in Construction*.⁷ Published by the Institute of Economic Development (IED), it reveals that the industry is a long way from social value nirvana.

Before leaving the theme of quality and value, a quote from the late Tony Pidgley, who was Chairman at the Berkeley Group before he passed away in June this year and is a plea for places for life. He said: "Good development is all about people. It's about making life better, creating beautiful homes and putting the wellbeing of the whole community at the heart of every plan. It's about creating places people will love as their own and care for long after we've all gone."⁸ We need more of this. Developers worth their salt will aspire to creating great places every time they develop.

Figure 2: true economic benefits of better designed cities



Social Impact Developers:

One should not tar all developers with the same brush. Consider developments delivered by Housing Associations, excellent small SME developers and the 'environmental credentials' of developments delivered by Sero Homes, for example. Indeed, there is an emerging cohort of what I describe as 'social impact' developers who have a genuine interest in the places they are creating for the benefit of people, place and community. Another example, Simon Baston of LoftCo who states that property should be more about community. He is creating "bite-sized" schemes that tap into latent demand and facilitates people engagement in great places where they have choice and flexibility. This resonates with the work of Urbanist Kelvin Campbell, founder of the MassiveSmall⁹ concept. Another social impact developer is Jacob Loftus, founder of General Projects. Interviewed in a podcast, he makes clear that he wishes to create experiential and sustainable space. Space that inspires people and connects communities. Loftus argues that "the vast majority of buildings are bland & uninspiring, designed by people who are monitoring spreadsheets & costs."¹⁰

Finally, in this section, it would be remiss not to mention Climate Change and sustainable development: the former because the built environment is a major cause of emissions, the latter because we need 'inclusive environments'. But the problem is not just about new buildings. As Professor Phil Jones states "some 300,00 households in Wales live in fuel poverty, with many in substandard houses they cannot afford to heat. Large scale energy retrofit programmes are essential for people's health and wellbeing as well as reducing their energy bills."¹¹ Furthermore, he observes that every project that is not zero carbon or energy positive is a future liability. "Inclusive environments" address some elements of the 17 UN Sustainable Development Goals¹² which came into force on 1st January 2016 to tackle environmental, poverty and justice issues especially SDG 3 (good health and wellbeing) and SDG 11 (sustainable cities and communities) recognising the diversity of user needs and the requirement to put people (of all ages and abilities) at the heart of the process. Dare I say it, at the heart of place and placemaking.

Place:

Supported by British Land, the RSA paper Developing Socially Productive Places in 2014 challenged and supported the next generation of developers and local authorities to develop new ways of working with local communities and governments, outlining the value of insight into local networks. It stated that Leaders should consider:

- Planning as a front-line service, which doesn't exist in isolation from other public sector roles which influence how a place functions.
- Investing in planning to bring value to other public sector objectives and pro-actively strengthen relationships between developers and incoming people, and businesses and existing communities.
- Developing socially productive places means supporting local people (building community capacity) to engage with development as a means of addressing issues such as local employment, transport and health and education provision.

The 2014 paper concluded by observing that progress would only be made if both public and private sectors, individuals and community groups, collaborate in new ways. By 2020 little progress has been made and there are a plethora of stories of woeful developers and developments.

Places result from Placemaking, whether by design or by default, the latter influences the former. Like the organisation Placemaking X, I agree that too often the importance of placemaking falls between the cracks of disparate disciplines, sectors, and philanthropic agendas.¹³ And, as we learned from British Land's report 'Design for Life', places affect our health and wellbeing (See Figure 2), and impact on the economy. For me, there is something powerfully holistic about the word because Placemaking plays a 'crucial role in promoting public health, public safety, affordable housing, social inclusion, economic development, sustainability, reducing the impacts of climate change, and instilling a strong sense of community.'¹⁴

Fred Kent being interviewed by Mustafa Sherif of Urbanistica Podcast provides an insight into placemaking.¹⁵ A few extracts are shown in Figures 3 to 7 which highlight key aspects of Places for Life. Yn wir, in Wales, "Creu Lleuedd ... lle mae'r Gymraeg yn ffynnu / Placemaking...as if a thriving Welsh language mattered".

Some 300,00 households in Wales live in fuel poverty, with many in substandard houses they cannot afford to heat. Large scale energy retrofit programmes are essential for people's health and wellbeing as well as reducing their energy bills.

WHAT IS PLACEMAKING?

It is a Community Process
It is a Natural, Organic Process
It Localizes
It is Economic Development
It is Scaled to each Community
It Creates Social and Place Capital

Outcomes: Inclusive, Healthy, Sustainable, and Viable Communities



9 Ways to Reinvigorate Towns & Cities Everywhere

Saving the planet depends on reclaiming our communities, rebuilding our social life and creating a sense of place

Small photo of a street scene with people and a sign that says 'GIBBE HILL LINE WAS'.

Social Life Project

1. Bringing Back the Public Square
2. Using Markets to Strengthen Neighborhoods
3. Turning Streets into Places
4. Applying Design as a Tool For Creating Destinations
5. Spawning New Community Hubs
6. Capitalizing on the Appeal of Waterfronts
7. Expanding Cultural Destinations to Spark Everyone's Imagination
8. Strengthening Assets that Express a City's Character
9. Highlighting a Community's Identity by Creating Great Amenities

Small photo of a street scene with people and a sign that says 'GIBBE HILL LINE WAS'.



Figure 3-7: Extracts from Fred Kent Presentation

Place and Planning: Placemaking is inextricably linked to Planning. A 2020 webinar from the Urban Design Group highlighted The Raynsford Review of Planning in England. It was described by a Planner as a fantastic report embedding real purpose for planning, including the United Nations principles. Two of the three project aims included: (i) engaging constructively with politicians and council officers, communities, housing providers, developers, consultants and academics (all those interested in the built environment) about how better placemaking could be delivered through a fairer and more effective planning system; and (ii) setting out a new vision for planning in England and rebuilding trust in the planning process by communicating with the public as well as professionals. How remarkable that these salient points chime with key points in the Grosvenor report of July 2019.

In Scotland, a jointly developed tool has been developed by the Scottish Government, the NHS and Architecture and Design Scotland. Described as 'participatory plan making', the tool is named the Place Standard. It provides a structure for "a formalised dialogue" with people about the places where they live. The Place Principle is more of a philosophy enshrined in policy. It is an approach to placemaking that, in the words of the Scottish Government, "promotes a shared understanding of place, and the need to take a more collaborative approach to a place's services and assets to achieve better outcomes for people and communities".

In Wales, the Minister for Housing and Local Government, Julie James MS's speech to the Royal Town Planning Institute (RTPI) Cymru conference in Autumn 2019 set out the Welsh Government's approach to placemaking, and how it intends to turn it into reality. She opined that "The challenge for all of us is to build high quality development in communities that people can be proud to call their home". In July 2020 the Welsh Government's Building Better Places guide was launched. The RTPI welcomed this guide which puts planning and planners at the centre of responding to COVID recovery. Subsequently, the Placemaking Wales Charter, developed by Welsh Government and DCFW with input from the Placemaking Wales Partnership, was launched in September 2020.

Planning and Place: Planning should be thought of as a frontline service, but it needs to be adequately resourced. Chartered Planner Wayne Reynolds observes that if you look at funding for Welsh Local Planning Authorities, paradoxically the funding regime from Welsh Government neither corresponds with investing in people, nor underscores the importance of placemaking. Emphasis is being placed on developers to bring forward good quality schemes, which doesn't always occur, so Councils are often faced with the question: is a development design bad enough to refuse? The reality is that investing in planning can bring value to other public sector objectives, and

Tackling place-based inequality	Delivering affordable and high quality housing in the right locations, regenerating deprived areas for the benefit of existing communities, and improving access to key services, amenities and infrastructure
Enabling a green industrial revolution	Actively planning for the growth of sectors which deliver emission reductions, environmental gains and jobs, while helping places adapt to shifting economic and labour markets
Prioritising healthy and sustainable modes of transport	Integrating temporary active travel measures into strategies which lock-in behaviour change and support regeneration, and plan for growth that helps public and shared transport to recover
Accelerating the deployment of zero-carbon infrastructure	Local and strategic planning for energy efficiency, renewable energy, smart grids and nature-based solutions to flooding and overheating, guided by ambitious policies and standards

Figure 8: Priorities for a place-based recovery, across four themes

pro-actively strengthen relationships between developers, incoming people and businesses, and existing communities.

As evinced by the British Land Design for Life Report , there is a growing recognition of the relationship between the built environment and mental health, as well as neurological and spectrum conditions and the role that town planning plays in creating healthier environments. Places should accommodate 'well beings' as well as being 'child-friendly'.

The importance of Place was underscored in the Future Generations Report 2020 which was issued earlier this year, in particular, chapter 5 which focuses on land use planning and placemaking. The recommendations to Welsh Government are to: (i) invest significantly in the implementation of placemaking and Planning Policy Wales 10 to ensure placemaking is delivered and that skills are not lost; and (ii) produce a plain language explanation of the Planning Code and process. Beyond process recommendations, placemaking should be considered in all Public Bodies' strategic decision-making forums. Furthermore, additional resources should be provided to the Design Commission for Wales to increase their scope of engagement.

The RTPI's policy response to COVID-19 Plan the world we need was released in June 2020. Chapters 2 to 5 of the report contain the RTPI's priorities for a place-based recovery, across four themes - see Figure 8.

RTPI Cymru responded to Welsh Government's Building Better Places Guide with a clear statement supporting the guide but requesting appropriate funding for planning departments because placemaking demands truly local planning strategies, policies and approaches. The guide builds upon the health and well-being considerations woven throughout Planning Policy Wales: Edition 10 in which 8 key issues are identified to bring individual policy areas together to ensure that action is the most effective.

Conclusion:

Good Placemaking and building back better is the raison d'être of Places for Life II. COVID-19 has heightened the need for significantly better Places. The case for quality and 'value' - economic, social, environmental, cultural - is now paramount. It is over a year since Grosvenor 'outed' the significant trust issue pertaining to the development industry (and local authorities). Evidence suggests that not much progress has been made to address this, notwithstanding the health and wellbeing benefits of creating socially productive great places. Developer mindsets need to change. The catalyst for this may be a combination of influencing factors including environmental, social and corporate governance (ESG), requirements of procurers and those providing sustainable finance, consumers, and influencers such as DCfW.

Planning is a frontline service that is key to supporting quality development in Places and reducing inequalities. However, it needs to be adequately resourced and there must be proactive collaboration.

We need Developers to build back better, not just build, build, build. Let us not have a race to the bottom in achieving quality outcomes for Places and people where the industry forgets the things, highlighted by the COVID crisis, that will lead to a better long-term outcome for all of us. The current situation represents a once in a generation opportunity to reset the clock. The question for the development industry is this: is there an appetite to lead in the creation of Places for Life?

About the author

A Chartered Surveyor with 35 years+ post qualification experience. Operating his consultancy practice RC² he provides (i) strategic advice to businesses and organisations when they engage with commercial property and (ii) undertakes regeneration consultancy work.

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