

NFH Development, regeneration and maintenance conference

Good design to aid sustainable mixed tenure developments



In asking the question 'how design can aid the creation of sustainable mixed tenure developments' it may be useful to ask whether design is necessarily a contributor to the failure or unsustainability of past housing? We have seen how mistakes are just as likely in suburbia, or in urban settings, in blighted pre 1919 terrace housing in areas of market failure in the north or 60s estates in areas of high demand in the south. Is urban form an issue here?

Perhaps what is common is the cleft that forms between two polarised conditions: parallel worlds where one set of human beings live normally, with high expectations of the authorities, whilst the rest are lumped in the isolated estates resigned to whatever is thrown at them. The two worlds don't meet.



In looking to replace modernist housing estates with high-density urban blocks or replacing terrace housing in market renewal areas with something else, or even building new we should avoid confusing signs of social problems with the physical?

We can't design communities; people build communities. Having said that there is a difference between good and bad design and good design can help enable the forming of strong neighbourhoods through good placemaking. I think there are a number of design attributes that consistently contribute to success and are based on observation of failed housing. They go beyond architectural expression and do not hinder creativity but are the characteristics of places, be they historic or modern that survive the test of time and the novelty of ideas.

I've tried to identify 9 components that make for sustainable housing.

The first three components relate to Programme:

- > mix of tenure
- > mix of accommodation
- > management

The next three related to urban design and the relationship of buildings to the spaces between:

- > permeability
- > passive surveillance or what you could call the threshold condition i.e the relationship of building to street
- > public realm or landscaping

The last three could perhaps be considered at the architectural components.

- > intensity, that is space and use
- > identity and character
- > innovation i.e. progress.





I would argue that all components contribute to the building of a neighbourhood or placemaking.

I hardly need to make the point that mixed tenure is a critical factor in success given that it is in the title of the session. We do, however, need to design and manage the mix carefully. Affordable housing is only meaningful in a wider context that reflects broader social concerns too often ignored by architects. Yes we need to avoid creating isolated neighbourhoods that lead to social exclusion but research shows and commonsense indicates that people tend to socialize and network with people like themselves. Are we going to get the desired results if we have pensioners kept awake by student's music or young professionals driven to distraction by kids playing in the street? We have to avoid determinist thinking that says that if we build it the right way people will live the right kind of lives. So by all means integrate tenures but consider carefully the relationship between different types of accommodation- single person dwellings and family homes.

Management is crucial both in terms of the product but also the process, engaging local communities and resident groups at the right time especially during the design process. In terms of the development dealing with anti-social behaviour and vandalism quickly in order to avoid the broken window syndrome i.e vandalism attracting vandalism.

The three p's

Permeability, Passive surveillance (privacy) and active frontages and Public realm

The evolution of Holly Street illustrates well the first principle here: permeability, that is how places are connected and what networks there are for circulation. The 20th C plan shows a neighbourhood well integrated in its context with good accessibility. It lasts 100 years.

The 1970s replacement demonstrates a bold vision, clean lines, open spaces but scant understanding of how people move through the city. As a diagram it is a cul-de-sac: one way in, no way out.

90s plan returns to a permeable and highly connected urban grain, Perhaps what the plans show more than anything is the value and importance of figure ground plans to illustrate connectivity and appropriateness to context.

Passive surveillance of streets and public spaces, and active frontages give a sense of humanity to our street. The interface between the buildings and spaces control the privacy of homes and safety in the spaces they adjoin.



Public realm- quality of streetscape, quality of private garden and shared garden space and public spaces. Provision for all age groups. The space around housing is as if not more important than the housing itself.

And finally the three I's. The components that make the architecture interesting: Intensity, Identity and Innovation



Intensity: It is critical that we understand the density that we are dealing with. Units per hectare may be the preferred measure according to government policy but it rarely relates to intensity of use. Occupancy levels in affordable housing will generally be higher than developments of a similar density where accommodation is owner occupied. With lettings policies that demand flats and houses are fully occupied we have to be generous with space standards to compensate for the fact that there is no spare bedroom to act as a study, a playroom, utility or store. With high density we need to compensate with decent provision of outdoor space, shared gardens or balconies big enough to use.



I think that intensity is a more useful expression than density. Intensity is what supports public transport and local amenities, equally we have to be mindful in determining density that it is appropriate for the context and level of provision within an area. Low density if occupied intensively by a large number who fit the housing well can achieve what we're after in terms of density just as well.



Identity. The right to buy led to a boom in DIY. Often the first thing new owner occupiers did to their council house was to change the front door, to give the house a sense of identity and individuality. Architecture is about managing the relationship of the individual with the collective. That doesn't mean I'm advocating personalised front doors as a solution to creating a sense of identity. We have to be mindful of the scale at which we work. Creating a sense of identity is about scale, character and understanding the context. It is not about style.



My last principle: Innovation. As new issues come to light such as climate change or shortage of construction skills we have a duty to find new solutions in order to meet housing demand in a way that is sustainable. Innovation, whilst too often seen as a risk and the preserve of a few enlightened patrons needs to be promoted and encouraged more widely. It is not just the mistakes of the past that we contend with but possible problems in the future that we might be building up for future generations if we continue to build in our accepted but generally conservative and inefficient way. We do need to recognize that this will cost. We cannot build sustainability on the cheap. Pevsner said that 'the English will go to any expense to get something on the cheap'. Perhaps the price of our bargains in the past is their failure today?



I want to finish by illustrating a project that in my view has got something drastically right. This is a plan from a German Housing development delivered jointly by the local population, government, Housing Associations, and student Union Housing organizations.

Vauban is a new district on a 38 hectare, former barrack site in south Freiburg. The planning for the district started in 1993, it will eventually form a home for some 5000 inhabitants, and 600 jobs. It's all the things I've described- mixed use, permeable, low energy, pretty much car-free and dense, this is achieved by not allowing detached development on the site, though not too dense as a maximum four stories are allowed for each building and priority is given to smaller group development.

What is interesting about this scheme is the manner in which the local city authority, (who happens to be the site owner), sought to create a socially diverse city district in a participatory manner. The initial stages of the development consisted of an urban design competition for a master plan and implementation strategy. A group of local citizens formed an organization called Forum Vauban – which was recognized by, and financially supported by, the city of Freiburg. The Forum offered help with information exchanges and events to help inform self-builders and ran practical DIY seminars and provided information on energy saving, on design and cost management for some of the projects.

At the other end of the scale the city recognized that by empowering this organization, with embedded local officials dealing with planning, road and building standards as advisers, Forum Vauban could shorten the time it took to review and agree the multiplicity of individual and group building proposals. In fact this organization went on to drive standards for design, green space, amenity and social policy and energy



efficiency, where they were particularly successful. There are over 50 passive houses and at least 100 units with “Plus energy” standards. The completed projects generally exceed the pretty strict energy criteria originally set down in the development plan organized by the City.

One of the development goals at Vauban is the creation of a variety of housing catering for a balance of social groups. One of the drivers for this was the creation of Baugruppen, (small, one off building co-operatives). Several households get together, decide on a plot of land to purchase within the master plan (typically 10 – 15 units), often hiring an architect and builders to assist in the design and construction process. The cost savings generated by this approach, in terms of fees and economies of scale of building materials etc. over individual self-procurement allow larger numbers of lower income households to participate in the scheme. Social interactions through the planning and building process help to knit community before any one moves in. It’s a sort of “bake and shake neighbourhood”. It is so popular with families that they had to open a second kindergarten instead of the one they thought would be sufficient.

These Baugruppen in turn had the practical assistance of a Citizens’ Building Stock Corporation, (The Buergerbau), set-up in order to coordinate their efforts. The corporation offers a range of services throughout the project development, right up to the moment when the self-builders move into their houses. These services include guiding the building group and answering any questions during planning and contract periods, acting as centralized clerk of works and ensuring that the generally agreed standards for the scheme are met in the most efficient manner. This organization currently manages 5 co-operative housing groups in the development.

What this settlement shows is a political will. Local Government behaving like government, giving a lead for it’s citizens, empowering them, but perhaps more than these two points, trusting them to make their own decisions about what they want and need in terms of housing. Backing them, empowering them through training, helping them organize, and then letting them get on with it like a bunch of grown-ups.

The project demonstrates that you can have it innovative, you can have it high standard, you can have it cheap and you can have it fast, but you cannot have it wall of those things at once. If you want it sustainable and high standard then be prepared to spend some time on negotiating the deals that are needed to achieve this. Getting things to a high standard which are unconventional requires time and lots of intervention.

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