

# ACHIEVING GOOD TOWN FORM

Strategic Urban Design | Laying the foundations for successful place-making

This paper sets out the key urban design considerations in the preparation of a local development plan. This strategic urban design approach lays the foundations for the layout of streets and buildings within the local plan area. We look at the timing of those key design inputs and note the importance of having a high-level shared vision and a delivery plan as integral components of a town's local plan.



Hammarby Sjöstad, Stockholm

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## Credits:

'Call for Sites' map published by South Oxford District Council and Vale of White Horse District Council

Roussillon Park, Chichester, housing design by Ben Pentreath, Architects. Photo courtesy of Broadway Malyan

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## WHAT IS GOOD TOWN FORM?

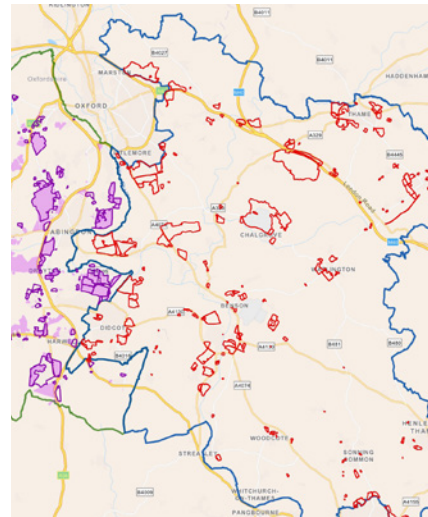
Town form is the result of how streets and buildings are arranged within a landscape to shape a town.

Good town form achieves social, economic and environmental objectives through a considered spatial arrangement of these elements. Individual buildings might be replaced over time but building footprints and surrounding street patterns can last for centuries. Town form shapes our human habitat and good form helps make for efficient towns, healthier lives and a better environment.

Town form is sometimes also called 'built form', 'urban form' or 'urban morphology'. This paper is aimed at a wide audience and uses the term 'town form' because it is thought more likely to be readily understood even though it refers also to villages and cities.

## DOES OUR 'PLAN-LED' PROCESS DELIVER GOOD TOWN FORM?

The first stage in the local planning process is a district-wide issues consultation (currently known as Regulation 18) accompanied by a 'Call for Sites' - an invitation for landowners to submit a site to be considered for development.



Typical map showing dispersed locations of potential development land arising from a 'Call for Sites'

A map is compiled of the submitted sites and further iterations of the local plan process invite comments on their suitability. Landowners' agents will argue that their clients' sites are the best suited for new development while others will oppose development. It is an expensive and time-consuming exercise with questionable results.

Invariably, sites with the fewest objections and constraints tend to be chosen. These are often poorly connected, frequently lie on the boundaries of political areas and are under the control of a single owner or promoter. Design considerations are deferred largely until a scheme is brought forward as a planning application.

A range of problems have been raised in recent studies of growth areas. Transport for New Homes' report *Garden Villages and Garden Towns: Visions and Reality* (2020) included research which found that most of the current programme of Garden Villages and Garden Towns have been planned in the wrong locations, far from town centres and rail stations; they lack local facilities and their streets are designed around car use. The study *Location of Development* (2018) commissioned by the Royal Town Planning Institute found that only a fifth of new housing units surveyed were within walking distance of a public transport node, such as a railway station or tram stop.

*A Housing Design Audit for England* (2020) conducted by Matthew Carmona at UCL for the CPRE, and supported by housing industry organisations and a number of environmental charities including the UDG, showed that there has been little improvement in housing design quality nationally since audits were last conducted between 2004 and 2007. However, because this improvement is from a low starting point – what CABE at the time called 'an uncompromising and unflattering picture' – a large majority of new housing developments are still assessed as 'mediocre' or 'poor'. Three quarters of the audited projects fell into these categories. The report finds that the worst new estates lack nearby amenities such as shops, pubs and cafes. They are often unconnected to the surrounding areas, with few public transport links, and do little to encourage cycling and walking.

### **Why has it gone wrong?**

Attempts to raise design standards have focussed largely on producing design guidance for development sites. Recent examples include 'Building for a Healthy Life', published by Homes England and aimed at improving the design of new and growing neighbourhoods.

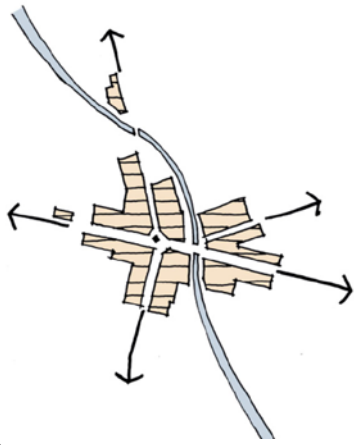
The National Model Design Code, produced by the Ministry of Housing, Communities & Local Government, targets 'helping local authorities and communities decide what good quality design looks like in their area' and then prepare design codes for new development.

These initiatives provide valuable guidance on the layout and design of major development. The National Model Design Code requires local planning authorities to consider the character of growth areas and existing neighbourhoods undergoing change. Building for a Healthy Life urges developers to 'look beyond the red line that marks the extent of your site' and create 'places that are well integrated into the site and their wider natural and built surroundings'.

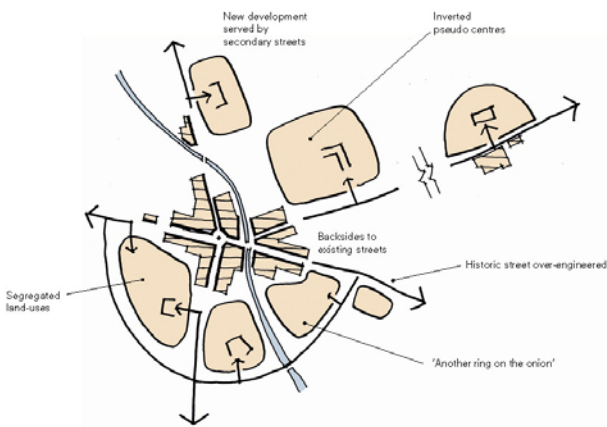
But if new development is to respond to a wider context, then a vision for that wider area, setting out primary streets, their character, and the massing of buildings, is required. Without that vision each development site is likely to look inwards rather than address the wider town. This has major impacts on layout, potential land-use and built-form. This approach of prioritising the selection of development sites ahead of having a shared vision for the shape of a town can severely reduce the prospects of achieving good design on individual sites.

In urban areas, the character of the surrounding streets may be self-evident to a developer but in areas undergoing change or in greenfield areas, if the future layout and character of the surrounding town has not been considered then many key urban design decisions will already have been taken - inadvertently - in simply allocating sites for development.

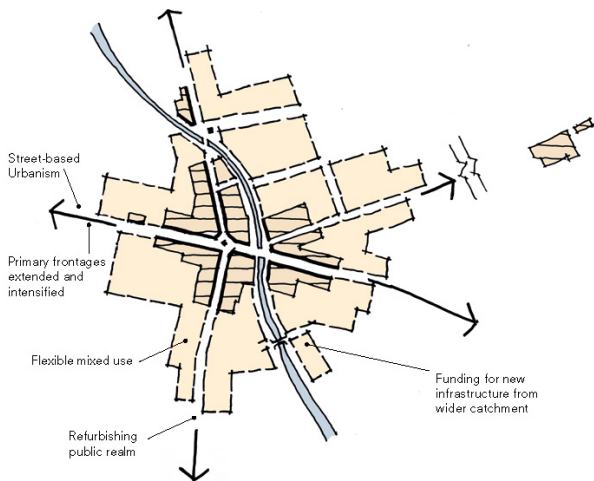
For example, the location of development sites often relies on private car ownership; if there are few surrounding street and footpath connections, then the internal street layout is likely to be based on random choices or personal whims, rather than any reasoned connections to the wider area. With little or no existing street structure to address, such sites turn inward, and with little through-movement, such sites are likely to struggle to attract mixed uses or establish a thriving neighbourhood centre.



Existing town



Growth by development sites arising from local plan allocations: isolated estates, dependant on car ownership and costly major road infrastructure.



Street-based urbanism: growth designed as seamless and harmonious extensions of a town, and enable walking, cycling and public transport.

## AN ALTERNATIVE APPROACH TO MAKING LOCAL PLANS

The planning of towns benefits from strategic urban design considerations being an integral part of the plan process, and there is nothing in the current or proposed changes to the planning system that would prevent this.

A strategic urban design approach to the preparation of local plans would not start with a 'call for sites' but would first develop a shared vision for each town.

The key strategic urban design considerations should include a landscape framework, a plan for the primary street network and proposals for a neighbourhood structure, much like a high-level set of parameter plans as would be submitted for an individual strategic site.

### Landscape framework

An analysis of the underlying landscape is critical to any town plan and will reveal the land's eco-systems, microclimates and topography. By seeking to grow settlements by watersheds rather than arbitrary ownership boundaries, we are better able to plan settlements that are 'hefted' to the landscape and create a meaningful context for the creation of new landscapes within subsequent development sites.

Historic towns and city quarters which grew incrementally benefitted by design decisions being taken by townspeople who could walk around their neighbourhoods, along routes that followed the underlying topography, who knew the local micro-climate and so could avoid frost pockets and plan shelter from prevailing cold winds.

Landscape survey and analysis should result in a sieve map showing where the landscape could best accommodate potential development: opportunities, not just constraints. In the absence of landscape planning, we are reliant on mitigation and off-setting measures for each individual site rather than ensuring that development is in the right place from the outset.

Settlements with a long history are often characterised by local development patterns such as how the street structure responds to topography. These may be as important in influencing the shape of growth areas as architectural details or local building materials.

### Primary street network

The network of primary streets – arterial routes, high streets and avenues – establishes the structure of a town. How this network is configured, how it navigates the landscape and the resultant hierarchy of routes, determines to a high degree the location of different land-uses.



*The primary route structure establishes the identity of a town (Newbury)*

The network will also influence built-form and density. This forms our mental map of any town: a public realm is the common ground, in both a spiritual as well as geographic sense, that creates identity and engenders community. Yet it is difficult to think of a new high street or major avenue that can compare to those we have been gifted by earlier generations. The creation of a meaningful and memorable public realm should again be at the centre of town planning, not an afterthought.

One reason we fail to build such main streets is that local plans identify sites rather than development corridors along arterial routes. Development on large sites frequently turns inwards, placing 'centres' at the lower end of the street hierarchy which means they invariably struggle to attract mixed development without cross-funding or subsidy. District-wide uses such as large food-stores might be located against the primary road network albeit with a carpark on the frontage. Compare that to high streets or boulevards which create the highest land values along the street frontages.

Creating a high street requires dealing with land ownerships on both sides of the street corridor, having a vision for the modes and character of movement that is supported by the highway authority,



*District centre alongside arterial road following a 'site selection' approach. (Bicester)*



*District centre following a street urbanism approach. (Summertown, Oxford)*

and producing design codes which coordinate building frontages, the detailed design of the street, pavements and possibly tree planting.

The result could not only be a memorable public avenue or high street, but also accommodate significantly higher built densities compared to the back-edges of inward-looking development sites.



*Arterial approach to historic market town 'upgraded' and funded by developer contributions on either side of the road.*



*Same street designed as a public space with higher density mixed-use frontage development and accommodating other modes of transport.*

The local plan thus often discourages street-based urbanism along the primary routes in favour of estates that fail to create frontages that address the surrounding town. This is an unintended consequence of the 'call for sites' at the beginning of a local plan review.

Failing to support a street-based urbanism along the primary routes has a further consequence: the street is likely to be re-engineered to accommodate high volumes of fast-moving traffic to service the development pods. Such distributor roads simply connect allocated sites rather like a plumbing diagram might join up random appliances.

### Connections to existing streets and paths

Good town form is well connected, so new streets, footpaths and cycle ways should join seamlessly onto the surrounding movement network, and ideally in all directions.

These connections generate the street layout and hierarchy of streets – from main streets to mews lanes - within the development. Development that is inward-looking or is the result of a bypass creating a barrier to the surrounding landscape, is unlikely to have this connectivity and is more likely to have an illegible and poorly connected internal street pattern.

### Settlement history

The history of a town or quarter should inform the planning decisions that we make today. Yet streets that developed over centuries to accommodate people on foot and horse-drawn wagons were seen as unfit for modern use by the second half of the 20th century.

We now value such historic, walkable places. The archaeology of a town may be displayed in the local museum, but it should also be evident in the streets today; these are anchors to the past.

### Neighbourhood structure

A new development does not necessarily equal a new neighbourhood: a neighbourhood will have a social cohesion, often fostered by having a range of facilities and amenities within easy walking distance. Planning for neighbourhoods requires an analysis of travel distances to such amenities, calculating population thresholds to support amenities and facilities and recognising natural boundaries within a development.



*Long term strategy to progressively remove / reduce vehicular traffic from city centre over several decades (Copenhagen)*

A development site might therefore comprise a single neighbourhood, seek to complete several existing neighbourhoods or some other mix. The branding of neighbourhoods may play a part in marketing new development but should not determine planned neighbourhood structure.

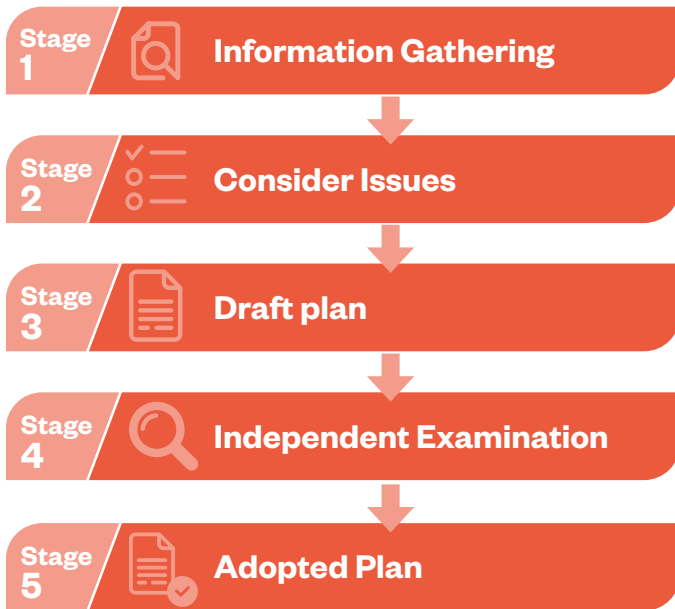
### Neighbourhoods in the right location

The location of new development will influence whether people can get about by walking or cycling, or whether they will be dependent on cars. Parking standards for car-dependent developments mean that their parking footprints will be the same as the housing footprint unless housing densities rise to justify urban house typologies with integral car parking, multi storey or below ground parking solutions.

Where new housing is not adjacent to employment opportunities or served by rail, the connecting roads will need to cater for sustainable commuter traffic. Bus services are rarely frequent enough to rely on, unless new development is an extension of an existing urban area with a good standard of existing provision. Furthermore, the towns to which people will travel from these car-dependent developments will need to provide additional parking too. This dominance of cars brings pollution, noise and safety concerns with the likely result that residents will walk and cycle less or encourage their children to do so. Development that is planned as growth to sustainable towns can avoid these problems. New settlements need to be of considerable size to be self-sufficient, so that they minimise the need for travel just to meet people's daily needs.

# TIMING OF URBAN DESIGN INPUTS INTO THE LOCAL PLAN PROCESS

The preparation of a local development plan usually follows five stages. Recommended urban design inputs for each stage are indicated below:



Proposed urban design inputs into local plan process

## **Stage 1** INFORMATION GATHERING

**Understand the character of the town, constraints and opportunities:**

- The underlying local landscape, ecosystems and microclimate
- The historic context – its landscape and settlement history
- The shape of the town, its street pattern and how this fits the underlying topography
- Architecture and the materials from which the town is built
- Transport infrastructure, including rail and connections to the wider region

## **Stage 2** CONSIDER ISSUES

**Explore options for growth:**

Design options for growth can be developed as alternative scenarios through engagement with local communities.

This can become the basis for the local council and community to agree the direction and form of growth, creating the pattern of districts, neighbourhoods and open spaces that make up a successful village, town or city.

## **Stage 3** DRAFT PLAN

**Develop an agreed vision with the community:**

For each town, agree with local communities a vision for the physical shape and character of each town.

**Consultation on proposed submission plan and land availability:**

Ascertain the availability of land identified for development. Most land with any prospect of development has already been ‘optioned’ to developers or land speculators on the basis of its future value, and so availability is unlikely to be an issue. Where a landowner is reluctant to make land available, a choice would need to be made between a design solution or compulsory purchase.

The ‘call for sites’ should be the last stage of the local plan process, not the first.

The suitability of potential site allocations can be assessed against five key criteria:

**Topography, landscape and micro-climate**

Is there a clear logic for how the proposed development sits in the landscape?

**Movement and connectivity**

Does the proposed site provide close access to rail or other public transport node? Could the layout facilitate an efficient bus route? Does development tie into existing footpath and cycle networks?

**Neighbourhood structure (land use)**

Would the development provide / enable people to live within an easy walk of convenience shops and services? Within a ten-minute journey by public transport to a district centre? Within a 20-minute journey by public transport to a town or city centre?

**Historic context**

Could development continue the settlement narrative of the locality? e.g. a particular form of planned settlement, edge conditions such as meeting the water, countryside or parkland?

**Urban form**

Does the likely layout establish an urban form that is likely to serve future generations? Is the nature of the site likely to constrain development to fixed land-uses for all-time or would some parts be capable of evolving from sub-urban to urban centres?

**Stage 4  
INDEPENDENT EXAMINATION**

This should include strategic urban design considerations.

**Stage 5  
ADOPTED PLAN**

Following adoption, site-specific codes would be required for primary routes, setting out the street design and the massing of buildings.



Strategic urban design framework showing landscape structure, primary street network and neighbourhoods/amenities (Oxford West End)

## RECOMMENDATIONS

A focus on good urban form aspires to enshrine placemaking principles into the earliest planning stages. Seven recommendations follow:



*Architecture Centre in central Gothenburg built to engage with local communities in planning the rapid growth of the city*



*Oslo is one of the fastest growing cities in Europe and delivering high quality architecture and public realm across sites in multiple ownership and multi timeframes but always with early provision of infrastructure*

- 1. Strategic urban design** | Seek appropriate urban design inputs into the preparation of a local development plan. This will help local communities to engage with the process, understand the planning vision and lay the foundations for good design at the level of individual sites.
- 2. A shared vision** | A strategic urban design dimension to local plans and site allocation policies would help to raise the quality of the built environment, reduce opposition to new development, and ultimately speed up the planning process. Town-building rather than simply house-building offers the prospect of something better than the site by site allocations that existing communities have come to resent. A 'whole town' approach would deliver good urban form that will successfully function for decades or centuries leaving good urban form for future generations. The UDG will publish more on delivery shortly.
- 3. Delivery of infrastructure** | Having a vision for the urban form of growth areas enables all forms of infrastructure - utilities, social infrastructure (education and health), landscape infrastructure (including rainwater management) and transportation to be planned ahead of development in a coordinated manner. Currently, much infrastructure is only planned on the back of planning consents for development on each site using S106 and S278 Agreements. If infrastructure planning can be undertaken concurrently with local plan preparation different solutions might be possible. For example, isolated housing developments might each only fund a basic bus service but taken together, and planned along a public transport route, a more efficient form of public transport might be possible. The UDG will publish more on achieving a shared vision shortly.
- 4. Land supply** | It is sometimes argued that it is not possible to produce a local development plan without first knowing what land might be available for development. Yet most of the potential development land within any UK town has already been 'optioned' i.e. the landowner has signed a contract with a development company to promote the land for development through the local plan process. [it estimated that 85% of the UK urban land is under the control of option agreements].



*Urban rooms tracing the development of the town and providing a forum for discussion around new development options (Ghent)*

5. **Resourcing** | Such changes would require local authority resources to be moved from development management to plan preparation. Just as generic design codes are to be prepared to assist development management, site-specific codes would be needed for the primary routes if we are to achieve a street-based urbanism.
6. **Streets not roads** | End 'permitted development' exemption for 'off-site' highways in urban areas. Many primary routes that were once high streets or arterial routes entering a town have become four, six or eight lane racetracks, hostile to pedestrians and cyclists, with no buildings addressing (fronting) the roads and unusable landscape separating road and development. Almost all towns have examples.

These road 'improvements' have often been funded by S278 contributions from adjacent development.

Such road schemes are not subject to design review nor planning scrutiny as they are built by highway authorities as 'permitted development'.

7. **The golden rule** | Urban designers must look, continually, up and down the scale from town-wide to street detail to solve problems. The golden rule is to help make the larger entity 'whole' and the smaller detail possible. This is an important consideration for design review and the assessment of planning applications. 'whole' and the smaller detail possible. This is an important consideration for design review and the assessment of planning applications.

## BENEFITS OF STRATEGIC URBAN DESIGN

Urban design is often thought of as an activity that sits between town planning and the design activities of architecture, landscape architecture and engineering. This view sees urban design layouts or masterplans being prepared once sites have been allocated in a local development plan but before buildings or streets are designed in detail. Yet when a local plan is agreed (made), half of the key urban design decisions are likely to have been already taken, often inadvertently. By the time that planning applications come forward it is often too late, many of the urban design decisions will already have been taken by the site selection process: an urban design input is needed at the local plan stage.

Urban design needs to continually work at a range of scales, across different timeframes and across ownership boundaries.

Creating good urban form means also making some site-specific design decisions that affect urban form – as distinct from generic or topic design codes which are intended to guide development after allocations are made in the local plan.

**We enjoy a heritage of towns and cities whose town form is both functional and beautiful, street patterns and a public realm that can support new lives, new uses. Let us say the same of the towns form we leave behind.**

Over the next ten years around three million new homes will be built in the UK together with supporting uses such as convenience shops and services, schools and workplaces. At current typical housing densities around 90 square miles of land will be needed to accommodate this - roughly the size of Surrey. We need to ensure that not only is this volume of development fit for purpose but leaves a legacy; we could be leaving future generations towns to cherish while allowing those who come after us to colour their use-maps according to the needs of their age.



*Efficient and appropriate use of land along a primary route, family housing at Roussillon Park, Chichester*