

Ten ideas for happy places

April 2022

Create Streets' urban designer, George Payiatis, reflects on what he has learnt working on projects from Devon to Cumbria.

How do we plan happy places? My experience working on sites across the country suggests to me that what makes for a good place is strongly intuitive but that we too frequently lose sight of where people want to be. Nearly everyone wants to live in communities that are beautiful, healthy and green. Our task as designers is to focus on these simple truths and turn this vision into a reality. Master-planning is about building new neighbourhoods and communities that integrate with their context and creating new physical and social connections. Evidence suggests that many of the new places we have been building take little regard for their context or the needs of those that will live there in mind. "Units", "developments" and "roads" are delivered but homes, neighbourhoods and streets are not created. This note briefly outlines well-established yet often overlooked principles of master-planning and strategic design.

1. *Look beyond the red line.*

Proposals must integrate with the surrounding context and communities. The first place to start in any design is to look at the wider context and not design in isolation. The surrounding built form, existing and historic landscape character, connectivity to key destinations and proposals for future growth in the area should all help to inform the vision and to structure designs from the earliest stages.

2. *Celebrate the existing site features and integrate these into the design.*

What is there on site? How can this be successfully integrated into the design? An existing building could be repurposed into a community centre, mature trees should anchor new pocket parks and streams, or hedgerows can become landscape corridors with sustainable drainage (known as SuDS), new habitats for wildlife and places for people to play, relax and re-connect with nature.



A mature tree sits at the heart of a village green (Epsom Cluster, Surrey).

3. ***Consult and engage with communities early.***

People have a stake in how we design in their local area and opportunities must be taken to bring a range of communities and stakeholders on the journey when designing a new place. We need to better understand who we are creating places for and the places they want to see. This should be an active engagement process that responds to people's concerns and vision for a place through site walkovers, design workshops and event days.



Co-design should take place early in the design process to ensure people play an active role in shaping the future of their community.

4. ***Connect sustainably through public transport and safe streets.***

Streets must be designed to support pedestrians and cyclists first and foremost to support healthy movement for users of all ages and abilities. Well defined routes that provide convenient links into the existing network of streets, footpaths and public transport links must structure the design. These should provide a mix of direct connections to get from your home to the nearest bus stop, train station, school or shop quickly and safely along with more leisurely routes for recreation. Some sites may be able to deliver new train stations or bus services, while others provide opportunities for demand-responsive travel or car clubs.



If we design streets for people and not only cars and if we use our imagination and a little less tarmac, they can become places for play (Goldsmith Street, Norwich) and greenery (Poundbury, Dorset).

5. Build mixed-use, walkable neighbourhoods.

We must ensure that residents have easy access to the facilities and spaces they need to thrive throughout their lifetime. Opportunities must be taken to deliver services on-site (parks, shops, schools, buses, allotments etc.) that are easily accessible and are for the benefit of new and existing communities. This is especially relevant on larger sites or in areas where there are few existing services.



Communities need places where children can play and people can relax outdoors (Graven Hill, Oxfordshire and Forty Hill, Enfield), they also need places to grab a pint of milk or go for a coffee with a neighbour (Bolnore Village, West Sussex).

6. Support early delivery of facilities.

This ensures people have access to the services they need from the very first stages of a development, reduces car dependency and can create a sense of vibrancy. But don't be afraid to 'build up' over time. Temporary structures, which can be put in place early and grow in line with the development are an effective means of putting this into action. Putting very expensive facilities in first may mess up the economics.

7. Create communities with a clear heart.

New places of all scales, from 10 to 3,000 homes need a place where people can gather and are a focal point for activity whether this is a new high street, a corner shop, or a small village green. Co-locating facilities such as schools and shops can create a critical mass of activity that brings life to a new place. Most 'estates' and 'developments' we see being built lack this.

8. *Design with future flexibility in mind.*

This is true for all aspects of design including individual homes, blocks, streets and public spaces. Could a home have an adaptable ground floor which could accommodate a shop or community space? Could communal parking be located in peripheral areas where they can be more readily changed to another use as and when parking needs reduce? Keep it flexible to keep it resilient. Don't over-design.



A parking courtyard could easily be adapted to a park or a new home (Epsom cluster, Surrey) and a corner shop could become a community centre or home as the needs of a place evolve (The Malings, Newcastle).

9. *Let nature do the work for you.*

Green solutions should be included in designs of all scales to create more beautiful and resilient places. When placed into a street a tree is not only nice to look at, it improves our mood, reduces air pollution and can calm traffic. When you combine a street tree with a sustainable drainage feature, you see even more benefits as you improve ecological connectivity, reduce flood risk and decrease maintenance costs. The use of permeable materials for parking spaces and driveways bring similar benefits. A hedgerow is an important habitat for birds and insects but it also helps enclose a street and can clearly define public and private space. Greenery must not be seen as an additional cost or a 'nice to have', it brings holistic benefits that have a major impact on place quality and sustainability.



A row of trees soften the edge of a residential street (Graven Hill, Oxfordshire) or the edge of a home (Accordia, Cambridge) while trees and sustainable drainage can be used to create a network of 'green-blue' corridors (Watercolour, Surrey).

10. *Deliver a range of houses and develop at an appropriate 'gentle' density (from 35-150 dph).*

This will help ensure a critical mass of people to support a mix of uses and make public transport more viable. Varying the heights, typology, and density of the homes we build creates a varied streetscape with changing characters and visual interest more in keeping with towns and villages that have developed over time than many of the uniform housing estates seen throughout the country from Newport to Newcastle.



Mix terraces with townhouses, not every home has to be a two store semi-detached (Poundbury, Dorset).

Easy to write. I recognise not so easy to do. But this is the approach we're trying to take on sites small and large, greenfield and brownfield and from north to south. The good news is that creating a happy place is also likely to be more popular with neighbours, more valuable to landowners and more sustainable in its land use patterns. A triple win.

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Acknowledgements. Thank you to Robert Kwolek, Lauren Lawson, Lydia Ogden and David Milner for their excellent photos and to the rest of the Create Streets team for their assistance.