

Inside Poundbury: Why Prince Charles's 'Disney-esque' model village is proving critics wrong

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By Matt Oliver



Blake Holt smiles as he points out the architectural “flights of fancy” on show in Poundbury, Prince Charles’s traditionalist village in Dorset.

An octagonal red brick cafe crowned with a cupola stands opposite a neoclassical office at the other end of the square, while the sides are lined with cream-coloured shops below homes that boast cast iron verandas.

This mixture of styles has an arresting effect on the eye – and that is the point.

“With a lot of modern developments, you just get spreadsheet architecture,” beams Holt, 74, the chairman of Poundbury’s residents’ association.

“But here, every street is different. I think people appreciate that.”

The eccentric architectural style of the village is just one aspect of the development that Michael Gove, housing secretary, now wants to export to the rest of the country.

In a bid to ensure minimal resistance and win community support for more housing developments, he has spoken of the need for “beauty, infrastructure, democracy, environment and neighbourhood” - dubbed ‘Biden’ - to be the focus of new schemes.

“You don't get that resistance if you've got a community like Poundbury,” he previously told the Telegraph.

Poundbury was first dreamt up by Prince Charles in the 1980s as a traditionalist answer to what he saw as a string of poor-quality housing developments being built across Britain.

He struck a deal with the local council to allow the Duchy of Cornwall, the Prince's estate, to develop an “urban extension” to Dorchester, featuring up to 2,700 homes over 400 acres of land.

Leon Krier, the feted traditionalist architect, was put in charge of the overall vision and delivered a mix of popular styles: Georgian-style terraces, pretty cottages, town halls with milk bottle columns and faux Victorian warehouse apartment blocks.

These are surrounded by tree-lined streets, wide pavements and a smattering of parks - including the massive “Great Field”.

But it isn't just aesthetically pleasing: local amenities are in full supply too. There is a primary school, two doctor's surgeries, a vet and a pub aptly named the Duchess of Cornwall, as well as a mixing pot of business.



The Prince of Wales visits Poundbury on the 20th Anniversary of the development Credit: Paul Grover

The scheme was initially derided by some who accused the Prince of building his own feudal version of Disneyland. But today, even the harshest critics would accept Poundbury is something of a triumph.

That has helped to spawn two sequels elsewhere: Nansledan, an extension to Newquay, and Fawley Waterside, in Hampshire.

Holt, who previously enjoyed a “bucolic” life in a cottage in the Dorset countryside, loves the three-storey townhouse he shares with his wife, Diane, in Poundbury.

“I think people thought at first that Poundbury was a bit Disney-esque, sort of not real,” he says. “But as it’s developed and you begin to understand the whole concept, your view changes. That has happened to a lot of people now.”

While Poundbury’s eye-catching style is what often garners headlines, housing experts say the development’s approach to so-called “place making” makes it stand out.

Multiple developers followed a masterplan set out by the Duchy of Cornwall and a strict design code which stipulates myriad details – even requiring all doors and windows to be made of painted timber.

An eclectic mix of houses found on each street is intended to recreate the “organic” feeling many English towns and villages have, rather than the identikit appearance some modern developments have been criticised for.

Around 35pc of homes are classed as “affordable” – social rent or shared ownership – but these are mixed in, making them impossible to pick out.

Meanwhile, Poundbury’s layout means each neighborhood is just a five minute walk to the central hub, Queen Mothers Square, where shoppers can drop in to a Waitrose or independent butcher’s. Bendy streets and a lack of signage aim to have a “calming” effect on cars, encouraging everyone to drive slowly.

Nicholas Boys Smith, founding director of Create Streets and chairman of the Office for Place, says Poundbury’s real secret is how it gets the basics right.

“It is things like quality of the building, what the street looks like, how easily you can walk to shops, how easy it is to take your children to the park - all these things weave together.”



Credit: Dale Cherry

Claire Bennie, director of Municipal and an architectural adviser to the Mayor of London, agrees that Poundbury's outward style is something of a "red herring".

"I think quality is the word to look for," she adds. "Design does matter. But people also want a close-knit, sort of village feel to homes so that it feels like a community. They like open spaces so they can relax and be in nature. And they want local amenities which are easy to walk or cycle to.

"It sounds basic but quite often, that's not delivered and the construction is not fantastic either."

She points to Abode, in Great Kneighton, Cambridgeshire, as a good example of a development with a more modern style that is "extremely elegant", uses local materials and also hits these notes.

Bennie argues that what the Poundbury scheme and others like it have in common, however, is an "enlightened landowner" – meaning it may be difficult to replicate elsewhere.

"When you've got a big landowner who is going to stick around they've got all this power and all this new agency and ability to influence what happens," she adds.

"But most of the land doesn't have that. There isn't that kind of vision."

While such influence and power isn't likely to be the case everywhere, Boys Smith points to the Government's plans for local design codes, arguing this should improve developments. He adds that recent changes to the national planning framework, which

councils must adhere to, have placed more importance on design and place-making.

There are other flaws to the Poundbury model, too. Some residents have complained about the strict design rules, which prevent them from repainting their houses or changing their wooden window frames to plastic ones.

Most homes on the development also don't feature front driveways – despite a preference among most homeowners to park their cars in front of their properties – leading to many parking them by the pavement anyway.

Plans for 2,500 eco-homes at Faversham have also met local opposition, underlining how even the Prince's ethos is not a cure-all for opposition to housing schemes.

Back in Poundbury, the sun is shining and the Great Field, where a brand new playground has just been built, is filled with families, many of whom have travelled from other parts of Dorchester.

Opinions about the development's architecture are mixed. "It's a bit 'toy town'," says one mother.

But outside Waitrose, Poundbury residents themselves are full of praise.

"I think it's beautiful," beams Emma Kirk, 33, who lives in one of the development's flats.

Carina Loder, 37, accompanied by her three-year-old Ellie, adds: "It's gorgeous, I love it. It has added a completely different, exciting dimension to Dorchester."

It may be a Prince's flight of fancy, but if ministers can find a way to replicate the unlikely success of Poundbury, they may yet be on to a winner.