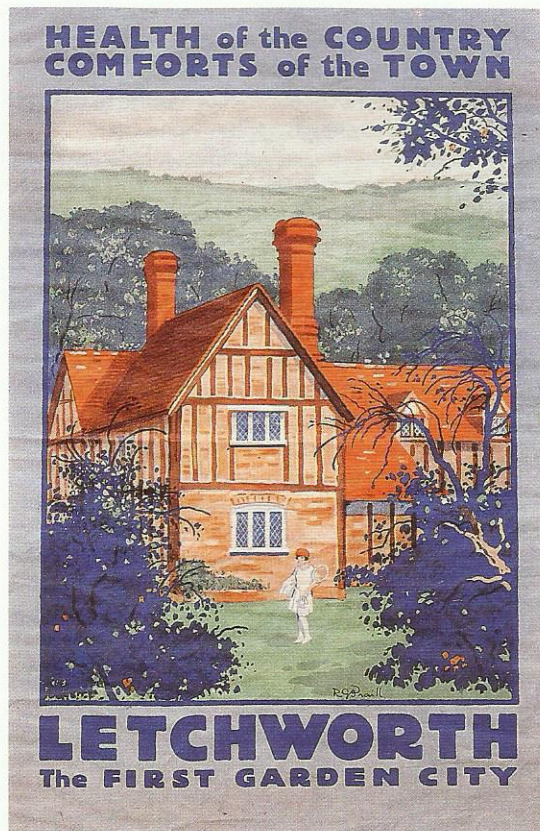


THE OXFORD CHARTER

Jon Rowland and Nicholas Falk set out a manifesto for 21st Century suburbs



→ One of the early posters advertising the appeal of the suburban garden city

Our task – as professional people and as citizens – is to formulate standards; to set forth as a conference ten or twelve propositions on which we are willing to stand up. Let us begin this, here and now.

The Big City, The Politics of Truth by C Wright Mills (2008)

HISTORIC MANIFESTOS

The idea of a manifesto is a call to action, and is a reflection of times of political and economic uncertainty, like today. Any manifesto is a broad rhetorical statement rather than explanation of the detail. Since the demise of CIAM, not much has been promoted in the way of a charter or manifesto for the design of housing. Although recent polemics have focused on particular aspects of our cities, it is the more prosaic publications that have emerged through the political system that have made the most impact. Therefore the manifesto is perhaps no longer heroic but consensual. Domestic manifestos include *Quality in Town and Country, By Design, Responsive Environments and Towards an Urban Renaissance*. Parallel to these was the *Charter of the New Urbanism* (CNU), which was a response to placeless sprawl. Recently the important *Freiburg Charter for Sustainable Urbanism*, produced with the Academy of Urbanism, and the *Cambridgeshire Quality Charter for Growth* set out principles to underpin sustainable city growth.

Excepting perhaps the CNU, these manifestos have skirted around the sub-urban condition, perhaps because direct action is politically difficult for housing. The government's decreasing ability to do anything significant, and corporate strength of major developers and volume builders, has led to paralysis in housing provision, disempowering communities. We are caught between individual values, developers' commercial interests and public values, and localism does not resolve these conflicts. Housing manifestos have become the stumbling block of political parties, where promises are made, but delivery is problematic. On the other hand design manifestos are often esoteric and metaphysical. So we may be on safer ground if we take a more integrated approach to promoting the way ahead.

STATEMENT OF INTENT

In the absence of a Sub-urban Task Force, or an Academy of Sub-Urbanism and a certain reluctance by the UDG to commit to a manifesto, the time has come for a statement of intent. The debate on new suburbs was proposed to UDG most recently in 2010. One of the themes within the October 2012 UDG conference was the value of place-making, not just monetary value, but also social and cultural value. A group of delegates took part in a workshop exploring these. The outcome is the basis for what might be called The Oxford Charter for Sub-urban Design, which moves away from the top-down nature of many manifestos, to be based on the way people want to live in suburbs in the 21st century. If there is one philosophy underpinning this manifesto it is sustainability – and not just related to climate change and energy resource efficiency, but social and economic change as well.

GARDEN CITY LEGACY

The Oxford Charter recognises the influence of a manifesto that still resonates with us, namely Ebenezer Howard's *The Garden Cities of Tomorrow* relevant today due to political opportunism. His manifesto saw housing as part of a proposition for social and economic improvement. Today's politicians have avoided the social compact of the Garden City movement and its application to the suburban expansion of cities, and concentrated on greenery. This movement held at its heart the general betterment of the urban dweller. It promoted the best of both town and country, 'no smoke and no slums', 'bright homes and gardens', where rents, rates and prices would be low, and where there would be 'freedom and co-operation'.

Howard's greatest idea was to create a network of settlements connected by high quality public transport, in which the increase in land values would be reinvested in community facilities. His ideas were foiled by the reluctance of investors to look to the longer term (unlike their Continental counterparts). Today volume house-builders, checked rather than guided by under-resourced local authorities, and helped by escalating house prices, provide illusory financial values to those who got on the housing ladder early enough.

Whilst the success of the Garden City was limited, that of the Garden Suburb, as an urban extension, has remained a cornerstone of suburban development. Parker and Unwin ensured its original principles were not just about design or landscape,

and Dame Henrietta Barnet in Hampstead, ensured that beautiful streets were underpinned by an ethos of co-operation and control. The Garden Suburb saw new forms of tenure other than renting and home ownership. It involved co-partnership (co-ownership and co-tenancy) and the sharing of facilities with all that that implies. To maximise the common wealth, an approach to land pricing, infrastructural investment and returns through raised values, rates and sales was proposed. Whilst the more political, social and economic aspects of the Garden City movement have fallen by the wayside, the image and branding of the Garden Suburb has become part of our psyche because it provided an answer to the social, economic and environmental challenges of its time.

A PLACE FOR FAMILIES

Since then, the idea of the neighbourhood as place for families to put down roots has changed. Houses are seen primarily as investments. Changing household demographics, exacerbated by the corporatisation of the development market and its products, have led to anonymous developments, poorly designed and offering little quality of life. With the collapse of confidence in private banking in 2008, it is time for a new paradigm where housing is not primarily the mainstay of a credit industry but a place to live well.

If one looks at the Government's (DEFRA) Sustainable Development Indicators these challenges remain. Conspicuous by its absence and buried in the sub-heading of Land Use and Development (the responsibility of DCLG) is the statement about 'raising design standards so that the requirements for design are the most exacting yet.'

The question is why with all this good intent we have paralysis and inertia in the provision of housing, reducing numbers and quality, and what Nick Boles, Planning Minister, has termed the 'pig-ugliness' of British housing: 'We are trapped in a vicious circle. People look at the new housing estates that have been bolted onto their towns and villages in recent decades and observe that few of them are beautiful. Indeed not to put too fine a point on it, many of them are pig-ugly. In a nutshell because we don't build beautifully, people don't let us build much. And because we don't build much we can't afford to build beautifully.'

We could take issue with the last statement: the Government can't have it both ways – especially as current policies rely on an unimaginative private sector.

DIFFERENT APPROACH?

But why build differently? According to WWF's *One Planet Living in the Suburbs*, 86 per cent of us live there, CABE's audits indicated that 82 per cent of housing is poor or average, and we only invest 3.5 per cent of our GDP in new houses compared with 6 per cent in Germany and France. According to the RIBA's recent survey on Future Homes, only 25 per cent of people said they would prefer a new home to an old one. This dysfunctional relationship and the barriers to improvement are set out in Jon Rowland and Clare Mitchell's paper *The Quality of Life in Cities – the 21st Century Suburb*, namely the contradictions between consumer choice, values, procurement and design,

institutional and invisible constraints. It points to the lack of a value system or philosophical underpinning to reflect what form we want our places and neighbourhoods to take, to the number of organisations and agencies involved, fragmented decision-making, and promotes the importance of Quality of Life Indicators.

In *Sustainable Urban Neighbourhood* (1999 & 2009), David Rudlin and Nicholas Falk explored models designed to meet 21st century needs and the issues that stop us building places where we would like to live. The conclusions and implications for local and central government were set out in the Joseph Rowntree Foundation's report *Building Communities that Last*, based on the experience of 13 new communities that are trying to be different. The principles were also set out in the *Cambridgeshire Quality Charter for Growth*, based on places that work well in the UK, the Dutch Randstadt and Freiburg. It is clear that the implicit values of many of the new Dutch and German suburbs respond much more to Garden Suburb principles and offer greater consumer choice. The *Freiburg Charter* sets out 12 guiding principles that embed values such as diversity, cooperation, tolerance, and reliability, and has shown that not only can a city set a vision, but can promote, control and develop it. The result is that we now look to Europe for our suburban housing exemplars.

CHALLENGES

The five design challenges that we need to meet are how to:

- accommodate a demographically changing population
- improve the design of our built environment
- make new housing more affordable
- address quality of life and other values
- reduce our carbon footprint and energy costs.

So the following draft Charter comprises ten interdependent themes that emerged from the UDG conference, and recognises the relationship between the hard urban design of physical masterplans and house design, and the soft urban design of support mechanisms to give place meaning. It tries to ensure that we build new places which are delightful to live in, that will sell well, and will also stand the test of time. ●

REFERENCE

Joseph Rowntree Foundation (2012) *Solutions: How local authorities can build sustainable urban neighbourhoods.*



THE OXFORD CHARTER

A draft UDG manifesto for sub-urban Design

Our suburbs should be living places for the 21st century that reflect our changing lifestyles and values, where all of us would like to live for some part of our lives, rather than be pale copies of past models. We should stop planning and building large developments of poor quality housing, on the edge of towns and cities, that are badly designed, have few or no facilities, are not well connected, and reinforce opposition. The collapse of house-building and financial confidence provides a unique opportunity to draw inspiration from the best of places, and build communities that offer the long-term capital growth that financial institutions are looking for. The demand for the standard product from the volume builder is over. There is a need for a much more long-sighted approach to the design of our 21st century suburbs.

An analysis of the best models past and present suggests the following ten most important and interdependent design principles and values, for schemes of more than 500 homes or 20 hectares, each of which could be assessed and benchmarked:

1. AFFORDABILITY

Strategic planning and spatial urban design should shape growth. Much can be learned from European experience of local authorities working together at the sub-regional level.

- a Government should establish new fiscal mechanisms that bring down the cost of land and make new homes widely affordable, by opening up new sources of private funding, such as infrastructure bonds, and borrowing against the rise of values once development is complete.
- b New roles are required for our financial and other institutions, building societies, banks, insurance companies, utility organisations and social, economic and transport organisations. Greater investment in improving the quality of life in our suburbs through a Green Deal will help reduce our ecological footprint. This could improve the opportunities for people to part-share, or build their own homes over time as well as provide a greener environment, by designing



out 'invisible constraints'.

- c. Local authorities should lead the way in promoting, parcelling, and servicing development in partnership with landowners and developers.

2. CIVILITY

Our suburbs should be places where it is a pleasure to live, which are attractive, safe, well-connected and where families can grow, children can play, and where good physical design is underpinned by good social, economic and institutional support – (hard and soft urban design). They should be designed to provide a sense of place, identity, ownership and belonging.

- a. The neighbourhood should be organised to be understandable, simple, easy to get around, and be characterised by different areas with different identities and sense of place.
- b. A community focus is desirable. Shops, school and other facilities for new and existing residents, that reflect local needs help promote civic pride and community spirit should be designed and managed to encourage positive interaction. This may need to be on the edge where it can serve a large enough catchment area to be viable.
- c. Streets should be designed for the benefit of the pedestrian and cyclist, and enhanced through the use of sustainable urban drainage systems (SUDS), tree planting, and informal spaces. Parking should not dominate but contribute to making streets look lively.

3. INCLUSIVITY

The new suburb should reflect the wider demographics in age and income and social balance. Establishing balanced communities of incomes and ages will add to the sense of community pride and identity, and allow a development to mature in an equitable manner without residents having to move away.

- a. Streets and neighbourhoods should allow for a full mix of residents and not zoned by tenure or cost.
- b. Covenants should ensure that the balance is retained over time (for example using a Community Land Trust).
- c. Existing communities should benefit from adjacent new urban extensions and not find themselves in a 'them and us' situation. That means an improved and integrated physical environment, increased accessibility to jobs, shops, leisure and other facilities, as well as the

certainty of visually attractive and beautiful development to provide them with a better quality of life.

4. CONNECTIVITY

Connectivity and movement must be rethought:

they are key elements of suburban design. Good suburbs offer a choice of jobs and services within easy reach. Layout and transport connections should give primacy to walking and cycling. Parking should be managed to make the best use of land and create livelier streets. Streets should be safer places for children through the uses of shared surfaces and home-zones where the car takes second place.

- a. New neighbourhoods should be located in places with adequate infrastructure, existing or planned, and be designed as walkable communities.
- b. Public transport should be good enough to attract people away from their cars.
- c. Densities should be related to the quality of public transport with higher densities closest to good transport connections.

5. DURABILITY

Homes should be designed to allow for changes in lifestyle and demographics with scope for personalisation. New and diverse forms of tenure and the rediscovery of previous ones are required. To do this the housing market should be widened through new fiscal and other mechanisms, and new more innovative developers and designers, including self-builders, co-operatives and local authorities, encouraged.

- a. New forms of tenure are needed, such as long-term leasehold and rent; co-ownership/co-partnership and co-tenancy; as well as shared equity, social and private rent, and owner occupation, and custom-building, and should form a significant part of the suburb.
- b. New homes should be large enough and adaptable enough to allow for a range of layouts and uses. They should be designed for longevity, capable of extension, with plots earmarked for later development. New typologies will ensure changing lifestyles can be accommodated.
- c. Homes should be marketed in terms of space and not rooms. The current system of using dwellings or habitable rooms/hectare as an indicator of density, or a determinant of economic value, has led to the UK building the smallest houses with the largest number of rooms in Europe.

↑ From left to right:

- Public play areas make for happier families in Reiselied urban extension, Freiburg
- Giving primacy to walking and cycling, Houten, Holland
- Garden square housing with parking beneath, Dickens Heath, Solihull
- Photovoltaic roof panels to reduce energy consumption, whilst edible gardens provide sustenance and a living public realm, Graylingwell Park, Chichester



↑ Streets designed for the benefit of pedestrians and cyclists

↗ An 1843 house designed by Pugin has not changed much in 170 years



6. QUALITY

Designs should reflect local traditions, and future priorities. Local authorities should have robust design policies which, together with staged applications, design quality indicators (such as *Building for Life* criteria) and Design Reviews will help to ensure high quality design. Quality of Life Indicators should play a more important role in the design and delivery of our suburbs.

- a. The masterplan and design codes should be simple enough to be readily understandable by existing and new residents.
- b. Variety should be encouraged to suit individual taste, with streets and closes that are easy to navigate.
- c. The development as a whole should look of its time, securing economies where there is no loss of quality, for example through new forms of construction.

7. BIO-DIVERSITY

The development should add to the natural capital. The new suburb should have a green framework at its core that will enhance biodiversity and improve the quality of open space and public realm.

- a. Space should be given over to food production and play to offer a full and healthy life.
- b. The boundaries between town and country should be broken down, improving links between the two.
- c. The development should support much more wildlife than it displaces by a well designed and managed green infrastructure of parks, green streets, SUDS, multi-use public spaces and hedgerows.

8. EFFICIENCY

Addressing climate change is critical and the design of the new suburb should help to reduce the carbon footprint and energy costs, and enhance the provision of renewable energy and resource efficiency. This means re-appraising supply chains, introducing new smart technologies, management techniques and changing constructions practices; (running costs should offer significant savings over older buildings). Resource utilisation and management should be considered from the outset.

- a. Local forms of renewable energy should be supported where densities allow.
- b. Water use and management should be turned into a feature.
- c. Waste management should be unobtrusive with the minimum environmental impact.

9. COMMUNALITY

Collaboration between all parties involved is central to success. Collaborative programmes of development and co-production are needed, with councils, developers and communities participating in the design of their neighbourhoods and the extension of their towns. Neighbourliness is critical, and promotes mutual support and greater sharing of resources, both in terms of social and economic initiatives and the provision of safe, secure and well-designed environments to live in.

- a. The basic aims and constraints should be set out and agreed at the start, in a Design Charter. Community ownership of land, community trusts, development agreements, covenants and other legal mechanisms such as codes are required to ensure that new development is visually delightful, as well as functioning well.
- b. Smaller building and development companies should be involved, including housing associations and self-build groups, by providing enough serviced sites.
- c. Land values should reflect the agreed development framework and not drive it.

10. RESPONSIBILITY

Ongoing management should maintain quality standards and promote a sense of community.

The establishment of longer term involvement by developers, in the form of stewardship, management, covenants and tenure will result in well-designed higher quality development. (Grosvenor Estates or Bourneville's garden suburban developments are examples of such historic and contemporary development).

- a. Communal areas should be designed and managed in ways that engage local people as fully as possible.
- b. Standards should be written into covenants that future residents have to enter into.
- c. Sufficient funding should be allocated to supporting community initiatives that bring people together and enable them to realise their potential.

Finally, taking a cue from the Charter of the New Urbanism, we dedicate ourselves to reclaiming our homes, blocks, streets, parks neighbourhoods, districts, cities, and environments.

It is time for the debate to begin and a manifesto to be adopted. ●