

Ordinary places







Contents

Introduction	4
Summary: Sparking the debate	8
Mobilising public involvement	12
Changing places to become world class	18
Next steps	24

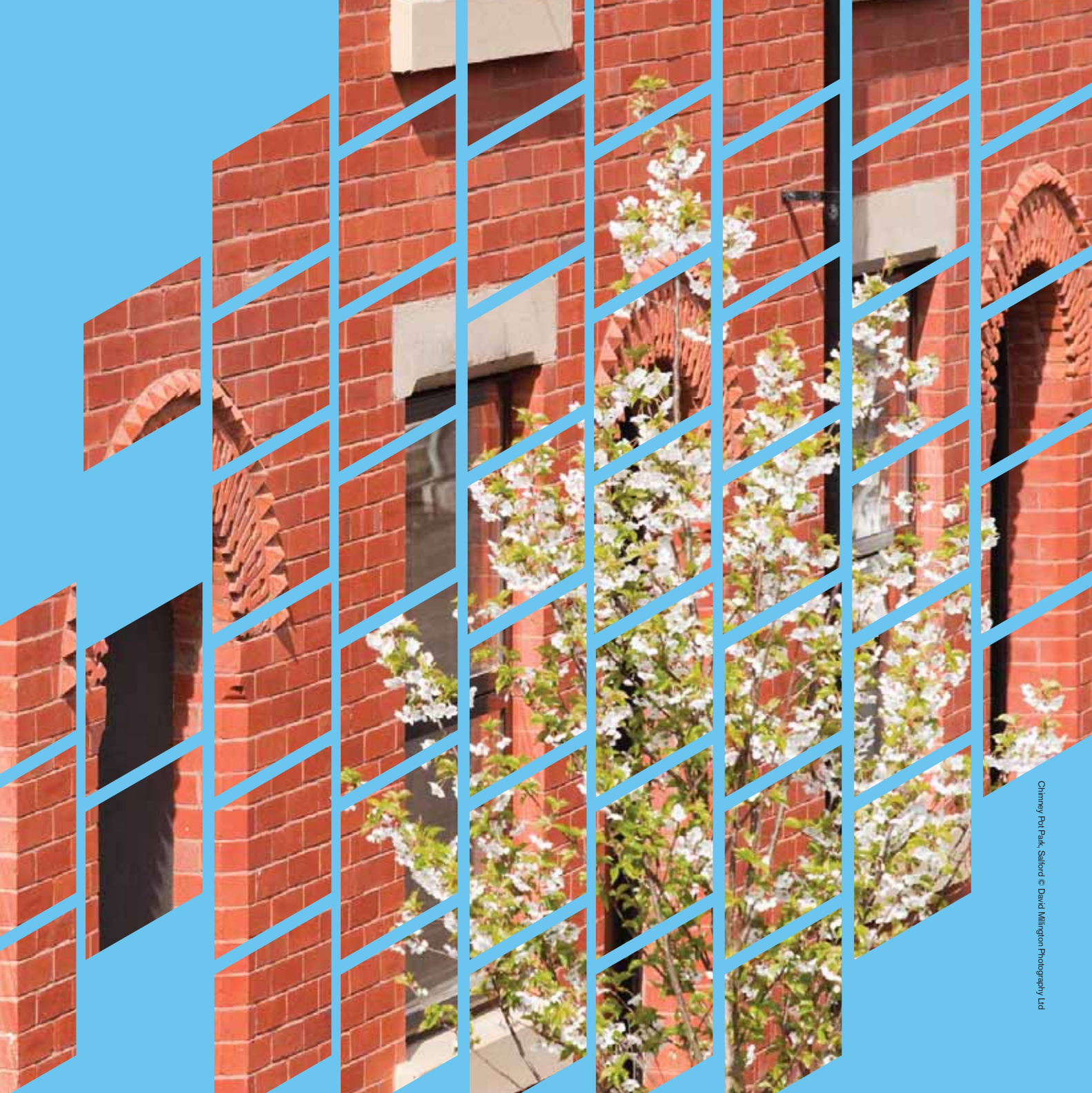
Introduction

Ten years on from Lord Rogers' urban task force, the government's *World class places* strategy pointed to evidence that our collective ability to make great places has been relearned. Many city centres have improved beyond recognition. Places like Sheffield's Peace Gardens are so good they already feel part of British heritage.

Over ten years, CABI has built a network of local design advisors. Listening to these architects, planners, engineers, landscape architects, urban designers, surveyors – all leaders in their professions – keeps us in touch with the way people feel about the places where they live. We have asked them what would make the biggest difference to the quality of places across England. They came back with ideas directly informed by their own local experience.

They told us that the ambition in *World class places* can inspire change. With the right culture and conditions, ordinary places can achieve the same levels of resurgence as our flagship city centres and become world class too.







Ordinary places are where more than 80 per cent of people live. They are found in every city, town and village, but they miss out in comparison to more glamorous locations. They are the residential rings around big city centres; the smaller post-industrial cities; the varied and distinctive areas often lumped together as 'suburbs'. In fact, ordinary places make up most of our built environment. These are the places that now deserve more care and attention.

Ordinary places have been nourished and cherished far less than city centres. Many now have a frail identity and do not function well. Local parks and public buildings have improved, but in many places ugly commercial development, heavily trafficked roads and badly designed new housing still erode local confidence. Such places will struggle to prosper in a low carbon world. Meanwhile, reducing budgets for management and maintenance could now lead to shabbier, dirtier streets, parks and public spaces, lowering sights to a point where an unbridgeable gulf opens up between the best and the worst places.

We need a debate to ensure that clever choices are made in straitened times, and that they are driven by local people directly engaged in improving the places where they live and work. The design process is a problem solving tool, which should be made available to the people who can use it most effectively to help

Sparkling the debate
What will most
help local decision-
makers to make
the right choices?



each place become world class. This is the surest way to cut resource use and equip local economies to flourish through creativity and innovation.

Four reasons to care about ordinary places

Ordinary places are usually taken for granted but they need more attention because:

- They are where most people spend most of their time, and so have most influence on quality of life
- Our economic future depends on the skills, networks and social capital they will generate
- They hold the key to mitigating and adapting to the effects of climate change
- We need to appreciate what we already have and make better use of the existing buildings and spaces we inhabit every day

Above all, we know this matters to people: 87 per cent of the public believe better quality buildings and public spaces improve their lives.¹ ■

¹ *Attitudes to the built environment*, Ipsos, MORI for CABE, 2009

The gulf between the best and the worst places

South Gate in Totnes is a delightful, leafy, community-led development. Local people rejected early designs (pastiche Devonian vernacular) so the architects worked in close partnership with the council, the developer and housing association to ensure more distinctive and varied designs. It's obvious that these homes were built with care and with attention to sustainability and green infrastructure. They respond well to the landscape, and feel as though they belong to the place – and only to that place.

Queen's Hills on the outskirts of Norwich is, by contrast, a large development on an isolated site off the bypass. There's only one access road, via four roundabouts and an out-of-town shopping centre. The houses are the product of standardised industrial processes, and could be anywhere. They are badly designed, monotonous, and built from low-quality materials. There was no vision for a community and the result is a disheartening place to live.

These are both quite 'ordinary' places, yet South Gate was the overall winner of the 2009 Housing Design Awards, and enhances its surroundings. Queen's Hills could never be entered for an award.



Summary: sparking the debate

The important challenges facing Britain – frugality, living more sustainably and fostering civic engagement – will all be played out in ordinary places. So they deserve to be the focus of debate about how they should develop in the future.

CABE's role is to support local decision-makers. We strengthen capacity and share expertise with those who have to deliver new buildings and places. We think that the debate needs to resolve in particular how to ensure quality without central *diktat*, by supporting local decision-makers to make the right choices.

So how can public involvement in placemaking be mobilised, to nurture and strengthen community and create well-loved places with character? And what other changes can help ordinary places to become world class? Below we summarise some thoughts on how this could be done.

How do you mobilise involvement?

Teach visual literacy.

CABE encounters too many clients and decision-makers in local communities who struggle to recognise or value good design. Tomorrow's leaders will similarly fail if they do not understand how good design underpins the potential of cities, towns and villages, helping them to flourish. Visual literacy



Sparking the debate

How do you maximise benefit from every penny of local investment?



should rank alongside verbal literacy and numeracy as a core skill every pupil learns. Schools will be offered a programme introducing the top 20 best designed, most successful places in the country.

Train professionals in participation.

People want to be players, not spectators. The best designers understand that the best designs respond to users and local communities. Training in public participation should be compulsory for all built environment professionals before they qualify. It should be an obligatory standard of professional practice, not just for architects but for all disciplines in the sector.

Guarantee funding for public engagement

Good community and user engagement doesn't come for free. Public funds are shrinking but paying for community engagement is a good investment with guaranteed returns. All public programmes that benefit ordinary places should set aside funding for it. Participation helps build consensus (instead of feeding the currently adversarial planning system), so it actually speeds things up and cuts the cost of decision making, as well as producing a better product.

Track progress.

How do you know that street upgrades and redevelopment are really making a place better, and future proofing it? We think that every local authority

investing in place improvements should publish its performance against a quality of place indicator. Even better if indicators for quality of place could be developed within a framework that allows communities across England to make comparisons.

What changes can make ordinary places become world class?

Use a design threshold.

The public building programme is a mainstay of economic recovery. It makes the biggest difference to ordinary places because of its reach and scale. A school, for instance, has an impact far beyond its perimeter through its buildings and grounds, contributing to the character and identity of its local area.

The best way to guarantee quality is through a design threshold. The principle is very simple: if it isn't good enough, don't build it. *World class places* commits the government to developing minimum design standards for all public building projects, from libraries, museums, stations and bridges to healthcare buildings. It is critical that we find ways to make these design thresholds work.

Seize the opportunity of climate change.

Half of all greenhouse gases come from towns and cities, so there needs to be wholesale change to the way places work. Every local authority should

be articulating a response to climate change that explicitly charts a route towards higher quality places. And climate change responses should always start from investment in green infrastructure, which is as critical as roads and drains. Parks and green spaces make all the difference to ordinary places. A 'working landscape' should be at the centre of community life, providing food, sustainable fuel, cooling and recreation.

Treat streets as places.

We have a serious problem with the quality of most ordinary streets. Streets determine how places feel, yet cars still dominate. To civilise them, streets need to be designed first and foremost as places in themselves, prioritising the needs of disabled people, pedestrians and carers with pushchairs, and cyclists, above the motorist. This frees councils to remove clutter such as unnecessary signage and guardrails. Once sights are raised, streets can start to reflect local identity.

Start with a programme of walkabouts.

A national programme of professionally facilitated visits should end the standoff between councillors and developers, giving them the chance to discuss successful schemes with the people who live and work there. They could see what locally distinctive design means, and how much it is valued by residents and homebuyers. ■

Mobilising public involvement

In sections 3 and 4, we expand on the points in the summary above.

Teaching visual literacy

After 10 years' experience of advising on new buildings and spaces, CABI has concluded that many people who should be able to recognise good design simply don't. This includes politicians, administrators, developers, some customers, clients and many professionals.

CABI isn't talking about some exclusive idea about aesthetics. We mean the basic ideas of functionality, sustainability and identity. The East Midlands had the worst housing quality in CABI's housing audits. A recent survey revealed that no fewer than 26 per cent of people there aren't interested in the way places look or feel.²

To change this culture, verbal literacy and numeracy need to be balanced by visual literacy: the ability to read the world through your eyes. The Three Rs – reading, writing and arithmetic – aren't enough for a country that wants to grow its creative economy and return to its tradition of making great places. The Fourth R – architecture – means getting everyone to the point where they've got the interest and the confidence to articulate what they think about the street they're walking down. Everyone should be able to express an opinion on what they like about a place and why; how it works; and what would make it better.

² *Attitudes to the built environment*, Ipsos-MORI for CABI, 2009





Ground-breaking programmes like Engaging Places³ and Green Day⁴ have brought learning alive. CABA research shows that 90 per cent of 11-14 year olds remember more from a school trip than from a classroom lesson, but any learning through the built environment helps young people to develop creative skills and become active citizens. It offers a window into our cultural history and our identity as the most cosmopolitan country in the world.

CABA research also highlights the impact that learning about the local environment can have on young people's behaviour. In a national survey of 11-14 year olds living in cities, 80 per cent said that knowing more about a place, street or building would encourage them and their friends to behave better.⁵

Recent changes to the secondary curriculum strongly encourage schools to promote learning outside the classroom – including learning about the built environment. It's a big project. Architecture is only one part of it but it should lead the way CABA will work to create a programme for all young people to learn about the most successful places in Britain, and be able to articulate why they work well and the qualities that could apply to other places.

Training professionals in participation

Schemes presented to CABA's design review rarely include information on the views of local people, or demonstrate how they helped to shape the brief. Too often planning and design are seen only from a technical standpoint, even though our planning system makes them democratic processes, too.

When CABA brings leading designers into the service of local communities, we watch how they support residents to become advocates for good design. The best planners, designers and managers know that asking people what they want, and helping them to make trade-offs between desirable things, enables them to create places that are valued and which work better. You could witness this for yourself on Channel 4's *Big Town Plan*, which chronicled improvements to urban design in Castleford, West Yorkshire, including a lovely new footbridge.

The identity of a place comes from the people who live and work in it. Everybody in the neighbourhood should be involved in decisions about its future, particularly those whose opinions are least likely to be heard, such as young people, or those whose needs are most likely to be overlooked, such as disabled or working class people. They could be involved on a project basis or a 'visioning' process run by the planning authority.

³ www.cabe.org.uk/engaging-places

⁴ www.cabe.org.uk/publications/green-day

⁵ CABA research, forthcoming



Local people bring valuable skills, resources and networks. No one knows the locality like they do and they have to live with new development, so they are in fact among its clients.

CABE has seen that where communities believe their views are being taken seriously, they will assume a crucial role in changing ordinary places for the better. For example, at Dale Mill, a housing market renewal site in Rochdale, the local Asian community has been instrumental in ensuring that the new homes built to replace terraced housing are designed for extended families.⁶


High-quality places reinforce the positives in culture and identity, making people from diverse backgrounds feel that they belong. It is even possible for the key organising idea behind a place to move away from consumption and towards participation, focused on the production of new assets that will endure for generations.⁷

So training in public engagement should be compulsory for all built environment professionals before they qualify, and their institutions should make it an obligatory standard of professional practice.

Sparking the debate
**How can local people
get the kind of places
they want?**

⁶ www.cabe.org.uk/design-review/dale-mill

⁷ *Willing Citizens*, Council on Social Action, 2008,
www.cabinetoffice.gov.uk/social_action



Sparking the debate How do you track whether ordinary places are improving?

Sometimes, 'community control' can amount to handing over accountability without power or resources. A culture change is needed to create a genuine and equal dialogue. Already local authorities need to treat citizen participation as a requirement.⁸ It works best when it concerns something people really care about. There is genuine public interest in the built environment and concern about the quality of places.⁹ Engagement in projects to improve local areas is an excellent first step towards wider participation in other local services.

Guaranteeing funding for public engagement

The principle of participation is crucial for programmes that are creating civic infrastructure, be it hospitals, schools or parks, to get best value over the long term. All large public procurement programmes should set aside an agreed proportion of their overall budget to support it.

Partnerships for Schools has successfully promoted pupil involvement in design. This could be extended to community engagement: schools can move to the heart of their neighbourhoods through a programme of out-of-hours activity. A small levy on a programme such as Building Schools for the Future (BSF) could provide each school project with a dedicated fund for participation, saving time and money in the long term.

⁸ www.involve.org.uk/duty_to_involve

⁹ *Attitudes to the built environment*, Ipsos-MORI for CABE, 2009

Tracking the progress of ordinary places

It is much easier to monitor and value things that can be measured. Every authority investing in place improvements, from street upgrades to redevelopment, could publish their performance against a quality of place indicator, signalling their ambition and measuring their success. A national indicator for quality of place would send a message from national government that people deserve to live in well-designed and maintained places.

Local indicators for quality of place could be developed within a framework that allows comparison.

CABE has created a way to measure the quality of public spaces, Spaceshaper, and tools like these draw out local distinctiveness, create a dialogue about what is good for an area, and don't impose rigid or unrealistic regulation.

CABE believes that quality of place should feature in the national indicator set for local authorities and in the comprehensive area assessment. There is a precedent: all local authorities use CABE's Building for Life tool to assess the quality of new housing development. How much more valuable also to assess how the whole place is doing. ■





Changing places to become world class

Using a design threshold

The public sector rebuilding and refurbishment programme has become a mainstay of economic recovery, and programmes like BSF, LIFT, the Primary Capital Programme and Sure Start offer the chance to improve dramatically the quality of ordinary places. Councils such as Blackburn with Darwen and Bolton recognise this and are working with CABI to develop a strong vision for how high-quality school buildings and grounds can be used to drive regeneration, and help pupils to fulfil their potential.¹⁰

In *World class places*, the government undertook to extend the minimum design threshold adopted by BSF to all public building programmes, and CABI will assist with this. Some departments already embrace the potential from high design quality – the Home Office has its own design review panel, for instance. For other departments, such as health and transport, this threshold will present more of a challenge.

Seizing the opportunity of climate change

Half of all greenhouse gas emissions¹¹ come from towns and cities. There is a clear case for refurbishing homes to improve their energy performance and tackle fuel poverty. But there is a greater opportunity to reduce carbon emissions by improving the way neighbourhoods work.

¹⁰ *The value handbook*, CABI 2007

¹¹ *Hallmarks of a sustainable city*, CABI 2009



Although responding to climate change is a key government priority, very few local planning authorities understand how spatial planning for an entire place can mitigate greenhouse gas emissions and adapt to climate change. This is crucial for understanding how places work, and developing a vision for change.

Local planning authorities often work to achieve government targets for growth of homes and jobs without taking account of the opportunities provided by the need to respond to climate change. The key to success with local development frameworks lies in the quality of the evidence presented. This is why CABI encourages the use of eco and carbon footprint studies as a standard baseline for showing how a place works, and for managing resources and emissions. They help with scenarios for future demand for local building materials and vegetation, and show how to future-proof economic activity in a low carbon world.

Local authorities should also work together to form coherent plans for tackling climate change in ways that, just like the problem itself, transcend administrative boundaries.

Sparkling the debate
What is the
fastest route to
friendlier streets?

In CABE's experience, the role of green infrastructure in responding to climate change is seriously underestimated. The networks of green areas, parks, gardens, woodlands, waterways, allotments, trees and countryside provide myriad benefits, from shading buildings and streets to water management and flood prevention by absorbing rainfall and slowing run-off.

The Tees Valley green infrastructure strategy, which CABE has assisted, is a good example of an integrated approach. The strategy shows how over the next 15 years, the environment will play a role in rebuilding the local economy and creating sustainable, vibrant communities.¹²

Proper planning for green infrastructure is an integral part of infrastructure masterplanning. Local authorities are already required to gather evidence about green infrastructure to support their local development framework core strategies, but they could go much further. Mandatory open space strategies, embedded in both core and regional strategies, would create a consistent, co-ordinated approach to improving health.

Without local green spaces, people are less likely to be physically active,¹³ and if spaces are poorly maintained and unsafe, they won't be used. If the route from home to school is along heavily trafficked

streets, children won't walk. If shops and services are all too far from home, there's no choice but to drive. Green corridors make cycling and walking the easy choice for short journeys (21 per cent of car trips are less than one mile).

The further beauty of green infrastructure is that it requires community involvement to develop and protect it. It provides weekend projects for all the family, and it is a source of food security and sustainable fuel.

Treating streets as places

The quality of neighbourhoods is largely determined by the quality of streets. Too few streets are walkable, lively and sociable. It is almost impossible to imagine ordinary streets now without ugly clutter: guardrails, signs, more signs, rubbish bins, grit bins, parking meters and bollards.

Most streets are still designed to separate people from cars, despite evidence that this leads to higher speeds. Research has shown that guardrails increase the likelihood of accidents.¹⁵ Department for Transport demonstration projects show that busy urban streets can be made safer by designing for everyone including elderly, blind and sight-impaired people.¹⁶

¹² Tees Valley Green Infrastructure Strategy, Tees Valley Joint Strategy Unit 2008

¹³ 'Green space access, green space use, physical activity and overweight', Natural England 2009

¹⁴ *National Travel Survey 2005*, Department for Transport 2006

¹⁵ *Pedestrian Guardrailing*, Department for Transport, April 2009

¹⁶ *Mixed Priority Routes: Practitioners' Guide*, Department for Transport 2008



Local authorities can take a lead by making sure engineers and design professionals work across disciplines to design streets that work for the people who use them, with a hierarchy which reverses current priorities, to put the needs of disabled people first and the motorist last. They can learn from the transformation of some of the places we have worked with, such as Stamford in Lincolnshire and Ashford in Kent.

Once the clutter associated with fast-moving cars is removed, then streets can become places with special meaning. At Burscough Bridge in Lancashire, for instance, memories and tales have been incorporated as visual motifs into decorative paving schemes.

Starting with a programme of walkabouts

Everyone is familiar with the brick box estates that sprawl on the edge of towns and villages. CABE audits of new market housing have shown that 29 per cent has been so poor that it should never have received planning permission. The vast majority is no better than average.¹⁷

Ordinary places do not have to be mediocre. People want architecture that is specific to a place. This does not automatically discount the use of standard house types. But it requires much better, more thoughtful site layouts and detailed architectural treatment.

¹⁷ *Housing audit: assessing the design quality of new housing in the East Midlands, West Midlands and the South West, CABE, 2007*

However, it's often more complex and expensive for a developer to get planning permission for a scheme that is bespoke, precisely because it will be different to the standard application. Housebuilder Taylor Wimpey, for example, says it would hesitate to build an award-winning development like Staiths South Bank in Gateshead again, despite the reputational gain, because of the time and costs incurred by the number of submissions required to get an atypical site layout through the planning process.

This situation has to change. Local distinctiveness should speed up planning consent rather than slow it down. But it's difficult to legislate for character and no-one has an appetite for more guidance. So we need a simpler, cheaper solution.

A real-life example is worth a hundred volumes of guidance. And there is no longer any need to travel to the Netherlands, Germany or Denmark to see well-designed housing developments. Just look at the schemes that have won Building for Life awards here in England and it's clear that most people have good examples within easy reach that reflect our own culture and context.

What's required is a large-scale programme of walkabouts: professionally facilitated visits to give councillors, developers and local people the chance to view and debate successful schemes together. They can see what locally distinctive design means, with a strong response to existing buildings, landscape and topography, and use of local building materials and vegetation. They can hear about its appeal to residents and homebuyers, and the idea will start to become accepted, and expected. Then local distinctiveness can become the norm. ■

Sparking the debate

**How can everyone get
on the same page?**

Next steps

We want to hear from people about the ideas in this pamphlet – visit www.cabe.org.uk/ordinaryplaces to feed back to us.

During 2010 CABC is working with partners to improve citizen engagement in public space management, learning from practical examples of real and sustained engagement. We are working with expert partners on neighbourhood initiatives, and improving our support for councillors.

In developing the proposal for walkabouts, we will employ the model of our education initiative, *How places work*, which used knowledgeable guides to explain the thinking and issues behind buildings and spaces to pupils.

We are exploring models of housebuilding, including the issue of communities owning land and assets to promote self-help and mutual aid.

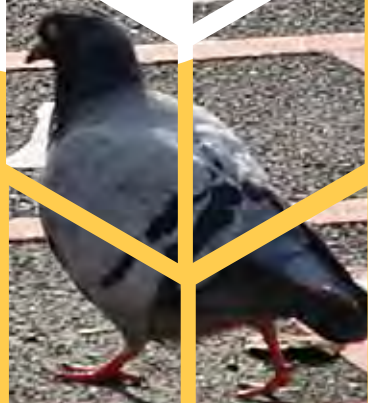
We will launch a public debate about visual literacy based on learning about the best-designed places in Britain, with suggestions based on the advice of young people, teachers and architects. Then the public will be invited to give their opinions.

It is in Britain's ordinary places that the consequences from a shrinking public purse, climate change and weak civic engagement will be most keenly felt. The solutions to these problems will also come from ordinary places.

The solutions do not need to be spectacular or eye-catching. They need to be pragmatic, sensible and place-based. If they are, they can work. ■



5







Supported by:



Published in 2010 by CABE.

Design: johnson banks

Printed by Seacourt Ltd on revive recycled paper, using the waterless offset printing process.

As a public body, CABE encourages policymakers to create places that work for people. We help local planners apply national design policy and advise developers and architects, persuading them to put people's needs first. We show public sector clients how to commission projects that meet the needs of their users. And we seek to inspire the public to demand more from their buildings and spaces. Advising, influencing and inspiring, we work to create well-designed, welcoming places.

©Cotswolds Photo Library/Alamy;
©Image Source/Alamy;
©iStockphoto/Brett Charlton;
©iStockphoto/Brian Opyd;
©iStockphoto/chris scredon;
©iStockphoto/David H. Lewis;
©iStockphoto/ilbusca;
©iStockphoto/Matt Jeacock;
©iStockphoto/Mcklin Photography;
©iStockphoto/Nick Webley;
© iStockphoto/Neil Lang;
©iStockphoto/ooyoo;
©iStockphoto/Pamela Moore;
©iStockphoto/pappamaart;
©iStockphoto/Pgiam;
©iStockphoto/Sami Suni;
©iStockphoto/susandaniels;
©iStockphoto/TheBiggles;
©iStockphoto/www.image-2-
photography.co.uk; ©Niall
McDiarmid/Alamy; ©The Garden Picture
Library/Alamy; Alys Tomlinson; Andrew
Hendry/www.newcenturypictures.co.uk;
BCA Landscape; CABE/Dave Morris;
Countryside Properties; David Millington
Photography Ltd; English
Heritage/National Monuments Record;
freefotouk/Ian Britton; Jefferson
Smith/bere:architects; Joe D Miles;
johnm2205/John Moore; Natural
England/Doorstep Greens; Richard
Hanson; Stephen McLaren;

This pamphlet is a starting point for debate about creating the culture and conditions to help ordinary places to become valued and valuable. It asks how people can directly influence the quality of their places? Why don't all pupils learn about design, to help make sense of the places around them? Why aren't all architects trained in public engagement, so that they can respond directly to local needs? *Ordinary places* is full of new thinking and ideas that make ordinary, common sense. It is essential reading for anyone interested in getting the best for their place, from politicians and local councils to schools and community groups.

CABE
1 Kemble Street
London WC2B 4AN
T 020 7070 6700
F 020 7070 6777
E enquiries@cabe.org.uk
www.cabe.org.uk

Commission for Architecture
and the Built Environment

The government's advisor
on architecture, urban design
and public space

