

The Guts, Manchester

Contributors: Great Places Housing Group
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Responsive Design

The Guts comprises 18 affordable terraced and semi-detached homes and is located in the central ('guts') area of New Islington in Manchester. Completed in 2012 it is the third phase in the on-going New Islington scheme. Ten of the homes were provided on a 'right to return' basis for residents who used to live in the area's former Cardroom estate.

The client for the development was Great Places Housing Group, principally working in conjunction with developer Urban Splash, architect Mæ, contractor Mansell, and engineers Stockley Associates (now Civic Engineers).

Design skills for creating great places to live

"Great design skills are about understanding functionality, durability and place-making, i.e. looking beyond the doorstep. It's about physical links, getting streets in the right places and making sure the project responds to the needs of the community."

Assistant Director, Great Places Housing Group

Good housing design is about more than technical skills. It is also about research, communication and design interpretation that place residents at the heart of the design vision. At The Guts, residents were involved in the design process and were represented on the decision-making panel for the choice of architect.

One of the critical skills for housing design is, perhaps, also one of the most difficult to measure – the sensitive and holistic appreciation of 'place' and 'community'. Great Places and Mæ visualised and designed the layout of The Guts so that people would feel safe, secure and comfortable for the long term, and this has resulted not only in strikingly spacious interiors, but in the effective orientation and layout of houses and streets.

Central to the design concept was the creation of active frontages to ensure a strong relationship is formed between the front of a property and the street. This is achieved through front-facing doors and main windows rather than entrances via an alley or side door; and by ensuring well lit entrances to improve safety and security.

Mæ used their design skills and experience to create a housing typology that orientated the semi-detached homes at 90-degrees to the street, thereby joining them back-to-back rather than side-to-side. This solution responded well to a very constrained site that prevented the use of terraced or conventional semi-detached houses: "This design enables good surveillance with each semi facing out on two streets. It also allowed for off-street parking and generous garden space - really maximising the use of space on a limited site" (Partner, Mæ Architects).



Creating safe external spaces

“We stopped to think – do we really need to build houses in the city centre with two or three parking spaces? Do people really want and need that?”

Director, Civic Engineers

A multi-disciplinary design team can work to turn site and environmental constraints into opportunities. For example, working on The Guts, Civic Engineers identified that the proposed site was at risk of historic land contamination. To find a solution: “We researched the history of the site at the start of the New Islington site-wide enabling works and, rather than taking the less sustainable approach of moving potentially contaminated soil to landfill, we undertook further research and development that enabled us to safely treat it on site” (Director, Civic Engineers).



The design of open spaces needs the specialist technical skills of engineers and landscape designers. Civic Engineers worked creatively to design the streets at The Guts to maximise safety, security and well-being in line with place-making best practice. They pointed out: “We wanted to prioritise pedestrian access and create communal areas that would feel safe for families using that space to stop and chat” (Director, Civic Engineers). Their expertise involved shaping the geometry of the streets, incorporating tight corners rather than sweeping kerb lines to reduce vehicle speeds.

Fostering a culture of continuous design learning

“Great Places recognised the importance of good design, which enabled us to focus on what we do well.”

Partner, Mæ Architects

To ensure design knowledge and skills have maximum leverage in the housing construction supply chain, Great Places promote and encourage design-led thinking through the learning and development of staff. The organisation encourages critical thinking among staff when considering design proposals. To this end, it runs a summer school every year. The focus in 2015 was offsite construction and Building Information Modelling (BIM).

