

Living streets

Designing people-friendly streets
and open spaces



Streets, gardens and parks are essential elements in creating popular, healthy and sustainable neighbourhoods. Yet in many new developments, houses sit in bleak and utilitarian streetscapes. In this chapter we explore how to create successful neighbourhoods where people aspire to live.

The British Isles is renowned for the charm and character of its traditional towns and villages. Many aspire to live in these settlements, away from the dense urban cities, but what is it about this lifestyle that is so attractive? A key feature is their green character.

With the pressure to build many more homes at higher density across the country there is a danger that in new development this much-loved green character could be lost, or worse, that the quality of external space is overlooked altogether.

Housebuilders' own research reveals that people tend to decide within the first 15 seconds whether they want to buy a home. If new homes are set in hard, characterless, parking-dominated streets festooned with refuse bins and covered in meter boxes they will struggle to make a good first impression.

Streets, gardens and parks should provide places to meet neighbours, spaces for children to play, spaces full of nature, plants and trees. They should provide areas to move, to breathe, to get out into. Well-designed outside spaces can promote sustainable communities and can create delight. They can provide a sense of wellbeing, of safety and ownership. They should be places where people want to be, places that people experience in the first 15 seconds and think, 'I would like to live here'.

As the urban designer Jan Gehl has noted: "Cultures and climates differ all over the world but people are the same. They will gather in public if you give them a good place to do it."

This chapter explores the main considerations for designing and creating successful neighbourhoods with the streets and spaces outside our homes.

Green character of traditional village setting in rural landscape



Connectivity – the key to creating harmonious new neighbourhoods

Car dependency poses a great threat to the health and wellbeing of suburban residents and this is worsened by poor connectivity in the neighbourhood layout. For example, the opportunity to access the open, green, landscaped spaces and other facilities around our suburbs (woods and fields, schools, shops, play areas and pubs) is often thwarted by homes located in cul-de-sacs within a warren of unconnected streets that trap residents. This disconnection from the surrounding spaces and facilities limits the options to walk or cycle. This in turn promotes unhealthy, inactive lifestyles which stifle interaction with neighbours and local communities.

Connectivity is key when designing new neighbourhoods. Creating links to existing cycle and footpath networks is paramount. Successful neighbourhoods rely on easy connectivity to spaces and facilities to promote more active, healthier lifestyles and social interaction. It doesn't matter how extensive and beautiful the surrounding open landscape is, if it is remote, disconnected or inaccessible, people will not go there. It also doesn't matter how close the local school or shops are; if there is no easy route to them by walking or cycling, people will drive.



Cycle paths promote connectivity in new settlements

Preserving the green character of suburbs

Green landscaped spaces are an essential aspect of suburban character. There is also a great benefit to health and wellbeing from green landscape because it links us to the changing nature of the seasons. Connecting homes and communities to nature through planting and landscape is therefore of paramount importance in successful suburban neighbourhoods.

Visual connection to the wider countryside

An easy win for connecting homes to the natural environment is to take advantage of any surrounding natural landscape beyond development boundaries.

Aligning view corridors along streets to surrounding areas of natural landscape or open space creates visual connection to the wider area. When open space and landscape surrounds a development, facing homes onto these areas, rather than turning our backs on them can enhance the sense of space and landscape without needing to sacrifice large areas to open space within the development.

Effective use of open space within new neighbourhoods

Open space within developments should be planned in strategic locations. Providing open spaces as an afterthought in the spaces left over after planning the layout of buildings seldom achieves good results. Such areas are often less accessible, poorly overlooked and can attract antisocial behaviour, resulting in poor quality and expensive-to-maintain areas that provide little benefit.

Instead, open space should be planned into the heart of a scheme to promote easier access for all residents. These spaces can be connected to the primary routes to ensure more people use them. Such spaces can be designed more intensively to provide a range of functions including ecologically rich landscape, informal and formal play, orchards, community gardens and seating. They can also contribute to more sustainable drainage design by providing storm water storage.

As such, these spaces can be smaller and more efficiently planned to meet a wide range of needs. They can also provide a focal point and an identity for a community.

Greening the street

There will always be tension between the pressure to plan the maximum number of new homes on a given piece of land and the aspiration for large, open spaces. Therefore, integrating green infrastructure into streets through trees, hedges and planting is an efficient way to enjoy the benefits of natural landscape and preserve the natural character of much of suburbia. Greening the streets also improves air quality and makes the streets more attractive.

Littlemore Park near Oxford is designed around the rich natural landscape which it looks onto. Physical links for walking and cycling are created and visual connections to the surrounding landscape ensure that all areas within the scheme feel connected both visually and physically to the surrounding area.



Planted streets at Littlemore Park



Apartments at littlemore Park face out over the development boundary to connect residents with the nearby Littlemore Brook and the wider landscape setting

Reclaiming the street – dealing with the car

With increasing density of housing and high dependency on car ownership in suburbia, it is very easy for streets and spaces to become filled with vehicles. There is little opportunity for planting or for play within these harsh environments. The rich abundance of Victorian terraced streets illustrates the problem well. Once full of life, with children playing and neighbourly conversation, they are now full of cars, queuing traffic and paved-over front gardens. Crossing the street can be dangerous too, with parked cars screening the view of fast-moving vehicles. These streets were not designed to accommodate cars but our streets can be.

One approach has been to provide for less parking, but this seldom results in fewer cars, just more car-jammed streets and local competition for the few parking spaces available. New housing can be designed to provide space for parking to enable car ownership, but through well-designed connectivity and access we can help to reduce how often we drive. Providing for parking but preventing it from dominating our streets and open space is essential to enabling these spaces to be safe and welcoming for all. Reducing parking within the street also allows space for trees and soft landscape to soften what otherwise can be hard and unwelcoming spaces.



Mews at Wornington Green create characterful informal streets

Accommodating the car

There are many ways to arrange parking that can enrich a development. The excellent guide by English Partnerships, *Parking, what works where*, is a great starting point.

In our approach to designing new schemes we can look at a range of alternatives to on-street parking. One is to provide parking between dwellings, creating detached and semi-detached homes with side parking. This hides the cars from the street but makes them easily accessible to residents. Frequent driveways that provide access to this parking naturally discourages unwanted street parking as this would block in people's cars.

Alternatively, removing access to parking from the front of the homes altogether can release the streets for informal doorstep play and planting. Rear parking courts have often been used to achieve this but these must be handled with care to avoid creating lifeless, inhospitable areas. Other solutions are available. In Victorian London, large family homes were built in terraces overlooking open spaces with no vehicles parked on the street. The vehicles – horse-drawn carriages in this case – were instead housed in mews to the rear. Terraced homes with double garages accessed from mews to the rear, perhaps with an annex above the garage, provide high density, large family houses that can accommodate the car without allowing parking to dominate the public realm.



Mews streets at Chobham Manor provide alternative off street parking solutions



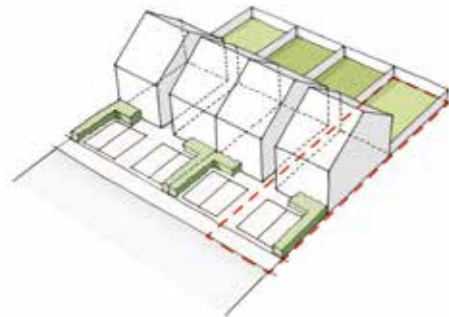
Terraced streets can be free from parking allowing these spaces to be more welcoming to pedestrians and cyclist and give more opportunity for soft landscape



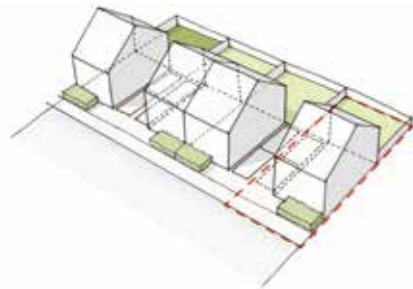
Rear mews parking provides an alternative parking solution that enable the fronts of these homes to be free from parking

Making efficient use of land

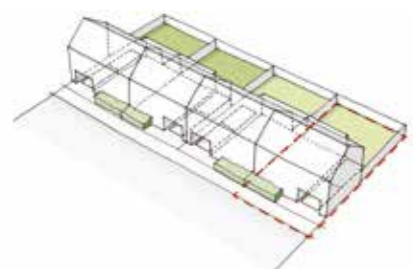
Terraced streets are often perceived as being a more efficient use of land but this is often not the case. By the time parking space, paths to rear gardens and the gardens are accommodated, the site area can be very high. The diagram below illustrates a range of four-bedroom houses with different parking solutions. The houses and the gardens are all the same size. Comparing terraced houses with wide fronted, semi-detached and mews garage dwellings demonstrates the area of land they require is the same. So terraced streets are not necessarily more efficient than many other forms of housing. A range of parking solutions provides for a variety of character with fewer car-dominated streets and more street planting.



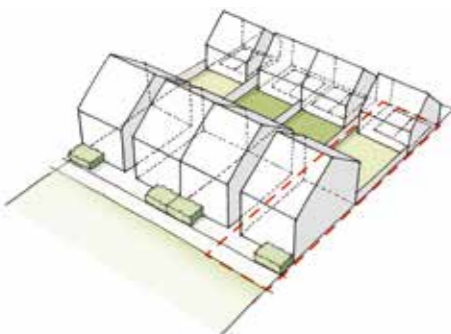
Terraced streets with car dominated frontage



Side parking removes cars from streets



Wide frontage houses with garages concealing parking



Rear mews parking removes road from front of homes

Future advances in transport will impact on neighbourhoods – but how?

With advancing technology and increased concern over environmental pollution, some future gazers predict the demise of individually owned fossil-fuelled cars and the rise of driverless, clean-fuelled vehicles. These so called 'robo-taxis' and Uber-style ride sharing schemes may become so cheap that it may not be worth the expense of owning a car. In time, this prospect has the potential to create a paradigm shift in the way we travel. How will this affect our new neighbourhoods and what impact might it have on the way we plan new developments?

Some recent and planned development may provide an answer. Greenwich Millennium Village in London (which was a suburban area when it was planned but is now absorbed into a higher density area) adopted new approaches to accommodating the car which have worked well for over 12 years. It has removed cars to the edges of the development into a small multi-storey car park. This has recaptured the public realm from vehicles and released opportunities to optimise density, open spaces and routes that work for people rather than vehicles.

If car ownership were to reduce as predicted, even these remote parking areas could also become obsolete, releasing more land for homes or landscaped open space. If this paradigm shift were to take place, perhaps we might again see a resurgence of suburban terrace forms made popular by the Victorians, with streets once again full of life and free from traffic.



Millennium Village enjoys car-free open space

Removing clutter from the street frontage

All the requirements of modern life need accommodating. Places for bins and bicycles need to be provided so these do not end up cluttering the streets, and the services modern homes require should not be allowed to clutter our street facades with vents, grills and meter boxes.

Designing for cycle parking and bin storage

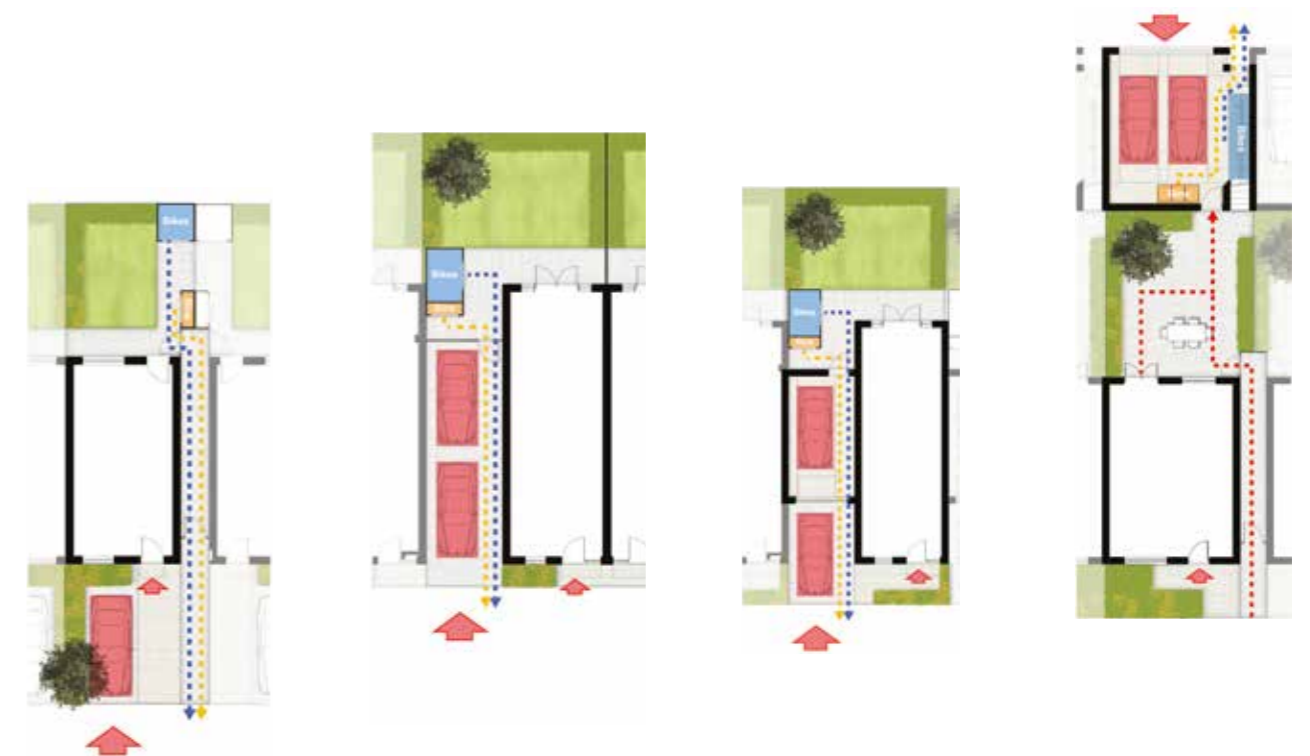
Successful neighbourhoods must consider all the needs of modern sustainable living. This makes providing accessible, effective and usable places to store bicycles and refuse bins an essential consideration in planning our homes and our streets. Traditional terraced streets are often ill-equipped to allow for these facets of 21st century living. Bins are left by front doors and bikes are chained to lampposts or railings. Like cars, they clutter the street. If we can remove unsightly parking from dominating our streets, we should also seek to remove unsightly bins and cycle parking too.

Rear gardens provide a great opportunity to remove this clutter from the street, however access should be convenient. Terraced streets require long rear alleyways to access each back garden. These alleys are often unpleasant and awkward to use, stretching across neighbouring back gardens, and so residents often don't use them. Short, private alleyways between detached or semi-detached dwellings provide simple convenient access to rear gardens.

Providing space to the side of homes enables the integration of parking, access to the rear garden and more effective streetscapes, solving a number of issues. This makes semi-detached and detached homes inherently easier to service and, as demonstrated, not at the expense of density.

Where possible garages, either to the front of homes on in rear mews streets, provide very effective accessible storage but these must be designed to be large enough. Pulling large bins alongside an expensive car with insufficient space to move will discourage their use. Local authorities in some areas such as Cambridge, where cycling is very popular, provide guidance on the effective size of garages to accommodate all these functions to ensure they can be effectively used.

If the front of the home is chosen to locate the bin and bike stores, they must be carefully designed to be attractive and secure. It is difficult to make a good first impression if your first experience is of a dirty, smelly refuse bin!



The diagrams illustrate different approaches to achieve accessible bin and bike storage away from the street frontage

Appealing facades

The fronts of homes create the backdrop to public spaces and streetscapes and this is another area where we can learn from the Victorians. They often used a higher quality brick on the frontage with cheaper bricks to the side and rear. Attention was lavished on the front door to make this a special feature, apparent to every visitor. The result is very attractive houses that have kerb appeal. They are designed to make a good first impression.

Interiors have a direct impact on the appearance of the frontage. Many modern houses are cluttered with ugly meter boxes, flue terminals and ventilation outlets.



Meter boxes dominate hard unwelcoming street frontage

Meter boxes can be located to the side or rear of properties. Meter boxes can be hidden within porches or a recessed entrance. Boilers can be located to the rear of the house or in the roof, and ventilation from bathrooms and WCs is better located to the side or rear.

Making sure furniture, kitchen units and radiators are sited away from the front elevation ensures windows can be generous to give a more open, welcoming feel from the street. Locating bathrooms at the back or side of the house ensures that often small and obscured glazed windows do not compromise the openness and generous proportion of the street frontage.

Finally, there is no better way of creating a good first impression than providing a generous entrance. Elegant canopies, large front doors, perhaps with a side light, immediately give the impression of a spacious home, even when the reality might be quite compact.

If we can avoid cluttering the facades of our homes, we can create attractive buildings that form a pleasant backdrop to richly landscaped streetscapes and open spaces.



Clutter free facades with generous windows and front doors create a welcoming street frontage

Designing streets where people feel safe

Attractive, people-friendly neighbourhoods are only possible where people feel safe. The layout of streets and open spaces can discourage anti-social behaviour by providing natural surveillance from surrounding properties and concentrating movement on to popular routes.

Research on neighbourhood safety shows that wide open streets with large front gardens separate dwellings from the street and limit the benefit that natural surveillance from the home provides. Narrower, more enclosed streets enhance natural surveillance and make people feel safer.

Removing cars from the street or from in front of homes enables streets to be narrower with a more enclosed, intimate feel. They are more immediately overlooked and make these places feel much safer.

Although the front of a house looks out on the public realm, when we turn off a street into a side road, the flanks of houses and back gardens can be dead, lifeless areas. Creating activity and outlook from the sides of houses, such as moving the entrance onto the side at the end of a terrace, can bring these 'hidden' spaces to life.

Other more innovative approaches can also be adopted to overcome these potentially lifeless and unsafe spaces.

At Chobham Manor, in Stratford, east London, the end-of-terrace mews house has been re-invented to provide activity and an outlook on the street and to address the changing and varied needs of households. It does so by providing a more flexible housing model to enable multi-generation living, live/work space or an annex for sub-letting.



The multi-generational house at Chobham Manor has a separately accessible annex and shared terrace space



At Chobham Manor front doors and windows on the end of a terrace provide activity and surveillance onto often lifeless flank walls

Maintaining streets – who pays?

No matter how well-designed or well-built our new developments may be, will they stand the test of time? Will our children and their children want to live in the streets and spaces we build today?

As the saying goes, ‘The mightiest oak in the forest is just an acorn that held its ground’. Our new developments can present far more challenging conditions for acorns to ‘hold their ground’ than a forest. If we want to see the young plants and trees in our streets mature into rich landscapes that can be enjoyed by future generations, we will need to look after them and this costs money.

The legacy of austerity means local authorities sometimes ask for trees and landscape to be removed from designs for the streets as they cannot afford to maintain them.

Some housebuilders, recognising the value of natural landscape to the setting of our homes and neighbourhoods, are rising to this challenge by keeping the roads and open spaces within their developments in private ownership. This provides greater freedom to deliver high quality places but results in service charges being imposed on residents to meet the burden of maintenance costs. Austerity has not only affected public services, it has affected households across the country who can ill afford the added cost of service charges. If we are to create developments that can mature into sustainable, attractive neighbourhoods, we need to find a way to both design and maintain great quality places.

Here are three suggestions.

Nurture communities that care

Our streets and spaces are not just used by individuals; they are used by the whole community and it takes a whole community to look after them. Attractive places attract people. As private garden sizes shrink, so there may be more opportunity to engender neighbourhood support to help maintain and monitor the public realm, close to where people live, or use regularly. This can also be a vehicle to enable public spaces to change and adapt to the needs of those that use them by requiring maintenance authorities to listen to the concerns and suggestions of local people, and to help with funding and fundraising. This virtuous cycle starts with good design and leads to healthy, sustainable communities that look after their spaces. The burden of maintenance becomes cheaper.

Reduce service charges with higher density

Design can play a key role in reducing maintenance costs. Increasing density can actually lead to better spaces as the cost of maintaining the streets and space can be shared more widely. The case studies that follow illustrate how higher density developments do not need to mean loss of open space. It just requires using the space more efficiently and dealing with cars so that the spaces that remain and the planting within them have a bigger impact. Specifications can be directed towards robust, long-lasting materials and components which minimise defects and future maintenance costs.

Ring-fence Section 106 funding for maintenance

New developments not only attract new tax-paying residents but also attract one-off payments from developers to local authorities to pay for the increased infrastructure and services they will require. The Community Infrastructure Levy (CIL) and Section 106 payments can result in large payments to councils to fund the infrastructure requirements. Given the substantial sums of money coming to local authorities from the new developments, some of these payments should be ring-fenced to support the cost of maintaining streets and open spaces in new developments.



Nurturing community landscaping ensures public works well for local people

Concluding remarks

Inviting streets and open spaces are critical to building successful new neighbourhoods that can become sustainable communities. Through connection and accessibility, individual developments become part of a more cohesive whole. With careful planning, new developments can provide for all our needs; for open space, landscape, play; safety and delight as well as the practical needs for parking and servicing our modern lifestyles. If we think beyond the individual home, we can create places where communities can flourish, where health and wellbeing are enhanced, where suburbia’s essential green character can be maintained and where generations to come will still aspire to live.

Recommendations for designing people-friendly streets and open spaces

- **Make it green and keep it green** – allow plants, trees and landscape to permeate streets and open spaces. Planting provides shade, improves air quality and enhances the visual appeal of our streets, especially through seasonal change.
- **Create connected neighbourhoods** – accessible neighbourhoods, with connections to local footpaths and cycle routes, enable easier access to local facilities and open spaces, promoting healthier less car-dependent lifestyles.
- **Recapture the streets for people, not just cars** – create safe appealing spaces where planting, trees, neighbourly interaction and doorstep play can flourish, and where natural surveillance will deter anti-social behaviour.
- **Banish the clutter** – provide discrete and convenient places for car parking, cycle and refuse storage, mechanical and electrical kit, preferably on-plot and away from the street front.
- **Use open space as a community focus** – locate shared parks and gardens at the heart of a neighbourhood and encourage people to participate in their design and management.
- **Plan for the long-term to foster a sense of community** – use robust materials and planting that can survive and flourish. Create spaces that people enjoy and care about – that way, they will treat them better.