

By the people, for the people



Successful placemaking needs to consider community first – how facilities are designed, where they are placed, and how residents will interact with them, now and in the future. **BEN HOLDEN** reports

Placemaking, as defined by its WhatHouse? Awards category, is about new housing communities that support and enhance nature-based solutions and the local environment, while also championing civic pride and public open space, with a commitment to the health and wellbeing of residents – developers and landowners as custodians and legacy builders, seeking long-term collaboration to meet housing need across all tenures.

The challenges with creating new places are myriad, starting with the most obvious: the planning process, with its length and complexities. Housebuilders, developers and promoters often find themselves in an adversarial dynamic, facing confrontation with local authorities, existing community residents, and neighbouring landowners. This creates an entrenchment on both sides, leading to bitter battles and extending the journey to development.

Secondly, expectations have risen, with local authorities and residents expecting more from developers in providing infrastructure that genuinely creates cohesive communities. This has meant both the timing in which this is delivered as well as the type of infrastructure. Therefore, this has the potential to cost more, leaving placemakers with difficult decisions around size, function, and location of buildings.

Thirdly, the infrastructure has been driven by a predominantly retail focus. These commercial units are often reliant on subsidy and vulnerable to failure, especially once the peppercorn rent expires after the initial opening period. Additionally, the developer can be responsible for the liability of community assets once the housebuilding is completed.

I was a judge of the Best Placemaking category of the 2024 WhatHouse? Awards, alongside James Alcock, CEO of Plunkett UK, a business supporting the setting up and running of community-owned businesses, such as shops and cafés. After our visits and deliberations we reflected on how best to create communities where people actually want to live.

The first mistake in poor placemaking is focusing only on the bricks and mortar – building just houses. This has been the domain of many profit-driven housebuilders, and the disastrous social consequences are well-documented and widespread. It produces more isolation, a generation of dormitory towns, and a weak sense of community. Over time, these places are less desirable in which to live and house prices reflect this.

The second aspect is the concentration of retail in one corner of the development. While this makes logistical



Gold winner Chapelton by Places for People

sense and is a cheaper and easier route to plan and build, it produces a suboptimal outcome for the connectivity and accessibility of the whole community.

When combined with a 'symbol group' (a corporate chain brand) approach to tenants, the feel is often generic, bland, and above all, lacking soul. Neighbourhoods become homogenous and lack the distinction of uniqueness of individual place. They become copycats of one another and the same schemes can be found anywhere in the UK, whether that is in Cumbria, Cambridgeshire or Cornwall.

The worst aspects of placemaking rely upon a consumption mindset. There, of course, needs to be essential services, such as food stores, cafés, and health provision. However, I believe that a business model built on huge retail spaces will not stand the test of time. In addition, advertising has crept into new developments in the form of billboards at bus shelters and kerb signage on pavements.

Adfree Cities does great work in raising awareness about the detrimental impact on advertising, especially its effects on children through the advertising practices of the fast food and soft drink industries in particular.

Placemakers have an opportunity, and I would argue a duty, to create healthy communities, and that starts with the mental and physical health of the future residents.

The provision of retail space has been changing and forced to adapt due to the shifting buying patterns



Silver winner Winchburgh Marina



James Alcock

since the onset of Covid. More people are shopping online and bricks and mortar stores struggle. There are many housing developments that have dozens of vacant units, finding themselves stuck in an unviable position.

One potential solution is to embed a community-owned business model so that developers and housebuilders can work with the community to empower people to adopt the infrastructure with the continuing expert support of companies such as Plunkett. This helps to increase community cohesion and allows a diversification alongside corporate business interests. Once established, the community business model is incredibly robust and resilient: Plunkett shops have a 99% survival rate over five years, and a 94% survival rate over 20 years.

Reconsidering the size and location of the provision is an important placemaking decision. Rather than the typical set up of large retail units at the edge of the site and next to the main road, an alternative formula is to de-scale the offering and pepperpot the spaces throughout the site.

This means that the physical spaces can be smaller, and therefore cheaper to build and maintain, and can be accessed more easily and quickly by all residents. This encourages walking and spontaneous moments of connection, all of which help to form the strands of community that bind us together within a neighbourhood. This has the additional effect of reducing isolation and loneliness.

The type and timing of the buildings is also a consideration. By taking an infrastructure-first approach, developers and housebuilders are able to build trust with the existing and incoming community and demonstrate their intentions beyond the realms of making profit. Sadly, there are too many instances of promised infrastructure that materialises only when several hundred houses have been constructed, leaving residents without basic shops for many years and thus forced to drive to the next nearest location.

Temporary or meanwhile provision has proved an effective tool to satisfy localised demand, as well as engaging the community authentically at an early stage. The gold winner in the Best Placemaking



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category at the 2024 WhatHouse? Awards, Chapelton in Aberdeenshire by Places for People, demonstrated this to great effect with The Boxes @ Chapelton, which provide micro spaces on micro leases to local businesses, such as a dog groomer, shop, and taproom. They have the capacity to grow and then take on larger, permanent premises around the development.

Given that the government's focus is on housebuilding, it is important to remember that the necessary accompanying infrastructure is what transforms a place into a community. I hope that by next year's WhatHouse? Awards there will be many more schemes coming forward in the Best Placemaking category and beyond that embed such positive principles. ^{sh}



Bronze winner Beaulieu by Vistry Group and L&Q