UPTON CASE STUDY

Noel Isherwood for CREW

BACKGROUND TO DEVELOPMENT

Project location, scale and context: Upton is an urban extension to the market town of Northampton, England, 67 miles north of London. It sits right on the edge, but connected to, the existing built up area of the town and is skirted by the Weedon Road (A4500) to the north which links Northampton Town Centre to the M1 in the direction of Coventry to the west. This new settlement was granted an outline planning permission in 1997 as Phase 1 of the strategic urban expansion within the South West District of Northampton, to develop approximately 1,020 homes, a primary school, a local centre, medical centre, nursery and other community facilities.

Governance and funding structure: In 2001 new recommendations for development came in and English Partnerships as landowner began a project together with its partners, Northampton Borough Council and the Prince's Foundation to create an urban extension that would promote best practice in sustainable urban growth. In December 2001 an Enquiry by Design event to place, a four day public consultation event led by the Prince's Foundation to address issues that included, flooding, traffic impact, built design, relationship with existing communities and the ongoing management of Upton. This resulted in a revised urban framework for the area, supported by the community and the statutory authorities. Implementation was carried out firstly through a Working Group set up for the project with representatives from English Partnerships, Northampton Borough Council, the Prince's Foundation and a consultant team led by EDAW. The Working Group developed the principles of sustainable urbanism set out by the Enquiry by Design and obtained a variation to the original planning application in 2003. The Working Group report to the Upton Steering Committee, a group which includes all the development partners together with a local Councillor, the Parish Council and an enthusiastic local resident.

Issues and challenges targeted: The principle aim was to provide more housing and affordable housing for the people of Northampton. The challenge was to create a neighbourhood based on sustainable urbanism which required that standard practice be radically altered to ensure success. The norm for housing developments in 1997 was still the low density suburban model with its kite mark cul-de-sac layouts, sweeping roads to facilitate vehicular movement and an absence of mixed use's within the development. All this was reflected in the 1997 outline planning application that had already been obtained.

1 Above: *The switch in architectural language here was part of the experiment with architecture and urbanism. The questions being asked are, do eco-homes have to adopt a particular 'eco' aesthetic and can traditional building forms reflecting local identity meet eco house standards? Here the completed homes on the left of the picture and those on the right, equally meet BRE Eco Homes Excellent rating.*

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THEORY AND PRACTICE

Interventions applied: The introduction of the Enquiry by Design through the Prince's Foundations involvement was a clear indication of the intension to change the default settings that otherwise could have kicked in. The need to communicate a new approach to all parties including consultants, multiple contractors - one for each of the 8 phases, local residents and other stakeholders, resulted in the idea of the creating the Upton Code. The Upton Code expanded on the principles established by the Enquiry by Design and was published in May 2003 as supplementary planning guidance for the Upton area with the full support of Northampton Borough Council. The Code applied ensures that the development meets the aspirations of a sustainable community where residents want to live in a neighbourhood with an easily walkable permeable urban structure, good surveillance of the streets, good quality local play areas and open space, local facilities and a useable public transport system. The Code provides detailed design guidance on how the urban elements are assembled and how they relate to one another. Together with site specific Development Briefs and Constraints Plans, the Upton Code provides the developers with a clear set of rules. They also promote the use of quality materials to add value and encourage the continuous improvement of energy and water efficiency design across Upton. In 2005 the Upton Design Code Version 2 was published following evaluation of lessons learnt during the implementation of the first sites.

Timescale and development trajectory: In June 2003 preparation work was complete. The Working Group progressed to implementation with the production of the site A Development Brief to support the Design Code. A two stage selection process was introduced to ensure that the design quality aspired to within the Design Code and Masterplan would be attained. Stage 1 process is design based, with the Working Group assessing the submissions based on the Design Code and a site specific brief. Stage 2 process is based on both the design and the financial bid, however, if a scheme does not meet the rigorous design and environmental standards required the bid is invalid. All development at Upton is required to meet the BREEAM or EcoHomes rating of 'Excellent', to reduce CO2 emissions to less that 20kg/sqm/year and to reduce mains water consumption by various means. English Partnerships provided the advanced infrastructure which included all the SUDS (Sustainable Urban Drainage System), open space, playing fields and road network. This helped to speed up the overall delivery. Site A obtained planning permission and started on site in 2004. Site B also obtained planning permission and commenced on site in 2005. Subsequent phases, C, D1+2, and E obtained planning permission and were commenced on site by 2007. Despite the disruption of the recession the final stage F & G obtained detailed planning approval in March 2012 and has now started on site beginning with the completion of the main square. It is believed that the project is well on track to complete by 2017 including more mixed uses.

2 Above: *The swale, part of the SUD's system, meets the square with the well used children's play area in the centre, enclosed by three to four storey houses whose windows provide good natural surveillance.*

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LESSONS LEARNED

Identifying reasons for its recognition as best practice:
The exemplar status which Upton has acquired is supported by a raft of publications including those from: - CABE; Energy Saving Trust; Architecture & Design Scotland; Northampton University and others. The key successes for this achievement include:

- Pioneering use of the community engaging tool **'Enquiry by Design'** for a large scale project.
- Full use made of a **'Design Code'** to be a continuing influence on the quality of each stage.
- The ground breaking use of **'SUD's'** at scale with urban swales and an emphasis on biodiversity.
- **Permeable settlement structure** based on walkable neighbourhoods with a clear distinction between public and private domain via streets and squares and flexible blocks.
- Inclusion of **mixed uses**; eg Primary School for 420 children; Elgar community hall; shops and offices (the majority to be delivered in final phase)
- Respect given to **local identity**, with architectural form, street types and building materials.
- Good use made of **Section 106 commitments** requiring the provision of or contribution to; i) 22% tenure blind affordable housing, ii) Sustainable Urban Drainage system (SUD's) iii) Playing fields and community meeting hall iv) A public transport system, v) The primary school achieving BREEAM 'Excellent' standard.

Key Successes:

- The integration of the SUD's system with the urban street form; it provides play space for children; there is clear evidence of increased biodiversity across the development area which has been monitored by Northampton University.
- The integration of a large thriving primary school embedded in an urban block facing the main square.
- A strong sense of place with a regional identity and a developing community spirit seen in the play areas in the squares and the new Elgar Community Centre

Barriers and remaining challenges:

- *Economic & Government changes*: The latter stages of the project have been affected by the onset of the recession and by significant changes in government policy. The selected developer for the final phase (F&G) pulled out of negotiations which included the delivery of the mixed-use elements on Weedon Road and the new High Street linking to the main square in front of the primary school. This left the HCA (formerly English Partnerships) with the difficulty of going back to market in 2008 which resulted in not a single bidder coming forward. By this time the HCA was under internal reorganisation vastly limiting their

3 Above: *The relationship of the SUD's system using 'swales' has lent considerable character to the street scape, has reinforced the urbanism with the strong tree planting regime and makes for an eminently walkable neighbourhood.*

ability to micro-manage the project with a remit to reduce their landholdings. By the time a new developer had been secured the original outline planning application had expired and a new full planning application was required which was granted in March 2012. The project has now started on site and in the spirit of the original Design Code will include the provision for a health care centre within the proposed commercial mixed-use centre and a condition that ties the developer to providing only a limited number of housing units before mixed use elements are delivered.

- *Adherence to the Design Code over time*. In the first couple of development phases following the EbD and the production of the Design Code the Prince's Foundation had a stronger role than in the latter phases. They were represented both on the Steering Group and the Working Group and had one of their network members in place as the co-ordinating architect. As would be expected of the Prince's Foundation the architecture here reflects the local Northampton character in building form, materials and general detail. The Code encourages variety of architectural expression but only time will tell whether the apparent reduced adherence to traditional street character and a broader interpretation of the Code will produce the same quality of sense of place that has been achieved in the first phases.
- *Social integration:* Pepperpotting of the affordable houses has been more of a challenge than at Poundbury, the urban extension to Dorchester by the Duchy of Cornwall. The rear parking courts at Upton have harder finishes and are perhaps a little too large. As a mitigating interim measure, gates have been added to the entrances which gives a greater sense of security to the residents of the blocks.

Implications for practice elsewhere: As an advert for the use of legible streets and perimeter blocks, historically a tried and tested model in the UK, Upton offers a rare example of how a new development can successfully produce a convincing sense of place. As one member of the Urban Design Group put it on a recent visit (aug 2013), *'this place has soul'*.

Further reading and resources: Links to case studies demonstrating the impact that Upton is having:

- CABE case study; The Prince's Foundation- Upton SUD's system; Architecture & Design Scotland - Upton case study; Energy Saving Trust; IDS Water - Water & SUD's at Upton;

Further reading material referring to Upton:

- The Upton Code; University of Northampton - monitoring the SUD's system; Aecom - Upton; The Zed Factory Upton; Ecology & SUD's;

4 Above: *Upton demonstrates that by using a Code you are in fact Coding for variety. The range of architectural expression in the scene above would not usually be part of a mass house builders tool kit with predictable and often, monotonous results.*