DESIGN PRINCIPLE 2
SENSE OF PLACE

New development should be designed to create a sense of place. Particular attention should be paid to the design of spaces between and around buildings.

key design issues

- Think first about the design of the spaces to be created within a development.
- Consider how best space can be defined with buildings and landscape features.
- Use contrast, variety, distinctive buildings and views to create a sense of place.
In many towns and villages, it is the overall pattern of development, as much as the design of individual buildings, that gives places their local identity.

Where attractive spaces are created within and around a development, its contribution to the local environment will be far greater than the sum of its parts.

> creating distinctive places

Some modern developments lack an identifiable character, and have either a bland ‘could be anywhere’ appearance, or a rather muddled identity. This is sometimes due to unimaginative building design, but more often the problem arises because buildings are grouped and arranged in a haphazard or fragmented way. The layout of buildings and spaces within a development is therefore critical to the creation of a sense of identity.

Distinctive architecture can, of course, create distinctive places, with memorable and eye-catching buildings giving a sense of identity. However, too often attention is focused on architectural detail at the expense of proper consideration of the design of the spaces between buildings. In many instances it is the quality of these spaces, rather than the appearance of the building themselves, that makes places memorable. The design of an individual building, no matter how good, cannot change a poor layout into an interesting one. However, a good layout, with a variety of well-defined spaces, enhanced by hard and soft landscaping, can do much to make up for any shortcomings in the design of individual buildings.

There is of course no magic formulae for arranging buildings and development to create a sense of place. However, the sensitive application of certain well-proven design principles can help to ensure that a sense of identity is created. It is essential that from the outset a clear vision is established of the type of place to be developed. This vision can provide a framework for subsequent decisions about the design and layout of buildings and spaces, to ensure that a cohesive scheme results.
Experience suggests that in order to create a sense of place, new developments should be laid out in an ordered, logical and coherent way. Clear visual links between should be established between individual buildings, and between groups of buildings and the spaces that surround them. This approach requires attention to be focused on the overall structure of new developments, and on the detailed design of spaces within them.

One of the fundamental principles of good urban design and place making is that the buildings within a development should be arranged to create well-defined spaces, each with a clear purpose and function. The spaces within a development should not consist simply of the land left over once the footprints of buildings and the positions of roads and accesses have been established.

Early in the process of the design of new development, decisions should be made about the nature of the spaces to be created within a development and their use.

For small-scale developments, the spaces enclosed by buildings may simply comprise private garden areas, together perhaps with a paved courtyard providing shared access and parking. Infill developments may be designed simply to maintain the existing pattern of and spaces along a street frontage.

For larger schemes, a network of interconnecting streets, mews and squares may be proposed. Depending on their design, the character of these spaces may range from urban to rural, open to enclosed, public to private, busy to quiet, formal to informal. Spaces with different visual characters may be juxtaposed to create interest and variety. Where space permits areas of open landscape may be included. The possibilities are literally endless.

Designing space can be a rather abstract process. Conventional two-dimensional drawings do not always show clearly the relationship between open spaces and buildings. Ground-figure drawings, with areas of open space shaded, are a useful way of checking to see how well a layout of buildings defines the public and private spaces. Axonometric drawings and basic architectural models can also be useful showing spaces in 3 dimensions. It can also be helpful sometimes to think of the spaces between buildings as a series of linked outdoor rooms.
Once the shape and arrangement of spaces within a development has been determined, decisions must be made about how the various elements of a scheme—the buildings, hard and soft landscape features—may be combined to provide good definition and enclosure of these spaces. At this point, particular attention must be paid to building lines and set-backs, building form, visual enclosure and boundary treatments.

**building lines and set backs**
Adopting a common building helps to create visual continuity in a street scene and well-defined spaces. Linked or continuous building forms, like terraces of houses, can be used to good effect to define a wide range of spaces from streets and squares, to mews and courtyards. Within the strong framework created, small set backs and projections for bay windows and recessed entrances can be accommodated without undermining the sense of continuity.

Where a looser pattern of development is proposed, visual continuity and well defined open spaces can be achieved by the careful positioning of outbuildings and walls, railings, hedging and landscaping, to link buildings together and distinguish between public and private spaces.

The extent to which buildings are set back from the street edge can have a significant effect on the character and appearance of a development as a whole.

Buildings may be positioned close to or directly on the street edge to create well defined public spaces, and to create an enclosed and intimate environment. Where access for vehicles is provided to the side or rear, this form of layout can also help to reduce the dominance of parked cars in residential areas. Provided that windows facing the street are not overly wide privacy levels will be reasonable given the restricted field of view of passers by. Locating the more private areas of a building away from the street frontage can also help.

Setting buildings further back from the street edge may be desirable in some situations, perhaps to reflect local building patterns, create a more spacious character or to provide a buffer between new development and a busy road. Where buildings are set back from the street edge, the intervening space must be carefully designed and detailed to ensure that the visual character of the street is maintained. Well-designed walls and railings and appropriate planting can be used to define the street edge, provide visual continuity and to make a clear distinction between public and private space.
visual enclosure

Visual enclosure is a vital element in creating places that are well defined and have a sense of identity. Visual enclosure gives a feeling of shelter and helps to create places in which people feel comfortable. Spaces that lack visual enclosure can feel rather unwelcoming and daunting.

The degree of visual enclosure created within a new development will depend principally on the 3 factors: the ratio of the width of the space to the height of buildings either side, the length of the enclosed space, and the form of buildings.

The width of street and the height of buildings either side can be varied to create places with different visual character. Ratios of between 1:1.5 and 1:3 (building height/street width) will generally create streets with a strong sense of enclosure. For a more intimate mews character, a ratio of 1:1 may be adopted. Squares and courtyards will feel enclosed with a ratio between 1:4 and 1:5.

Long spaces can lack visual enclosure. To avoid this problem streets can be divided into a series of shorter spaces by varying their alignment and introducing visual pinch points. Placing buildings at the end of a street to act as a ‘visual stop’ helps to provide visual enclosure.

Open gaps between buildings reduces the sense of visual enclosure along a street. Visual enclosure will be greatest where continuous or linked buildings are used. Where detached buildings linking walls and outbuildings can be used to close gaps and created enclosure. In some situations, setting buildings at right angles to each other can create a feeling of enclosure.
Elements of contrast and variety in the built environment are critical to the creation of a sense of place. Without these qualities, one place becomes like another, and new developments tend to lack identity.

Layouts based on a network of interconnecting spaces allow places with different spatial qualities to be juxtaposed to create visual interest. The urban traditions of streets, squares, avenues and mews courts provide a good foundation for the development of such varied places.

Creating distinctive places requires clear breaks to be made between individual places so that spaces have a clear beginning and end. Visual breaks can be made successfully in a number of ways, including forming visual gateways, restricting views, and by introducing changes in building materials and hard landscaping. Corner sites offer particular opportunities to mark the beginning and end of spaces by the use of distinctive buildings. As well as creating visual interest, memorable buildings at junctions of streets makes places more legible and help people to find their way around.

The layout of new buildings, roads and paths, walls and hedges, can be used to frame views into and out of new developments in order to create a range of visual effects.

Views and vistas can be used to create and reinforce a sense of place in new development. Looking from one area to another highlights the feeling of being in a particular place. Views also help people to find their way around and to understand the relationship between building and connecting streets.

Restricting views into part of a development, such as through an archway or a narrow gap between buildings, can create a sense of intrigue and curiosity. Similarly, varying the alignment of streets so that not all buildings are visible from a single point, with views opening and closing progressively, can ensure that visual interest is maintained.

Views focused on features of interest, distinctive buildings or local landmarks can help to give places a sense of identity. Positioning buildings on the axes of views gives buildings more significance.

Views onto ‘borrowed landscape’ beyond a development can be used to enhance its appearance.
In recent decades, the design of road layouts in new developments has generally been governed by a desire safe and easy access for the car. The widespread use of standardised road geometries and layouts has resulted in developments that do not relate well to local character and existing development patterns, and which lack a distinctive identity.

It is now generally recognised that creating attractive developments requires a fundamentally different approach to road layout where the layout of buildings and spaces is determined first, having regard to established urban design principles, and then roads and servicing areas are fitted into this layout. This approach does not, however, require safety standards to be compromised. Often, urban design and traffic safety objectives go hand in hand. For instance, arranging buildings to create pinch points helps not to create distinct areas with a sense of place, but also limits traffic speed by restricting forward vision.

When thinking about the spaces within a development, it is important too to allow sufficient room for tree planting and landscaping. Landscaping is of key importance to the creation of attractive urban environments. New planting can do much to soften the raw edges of new development and lift its environmental quality in the longer term. A broad strategy of new planting should be drawn up at the same time as proposals for the layout of buildings and the design of open spaces. This should ensure that landscaping and site layout are integrated fully. Where planting is undertaken as an afterthought, or as a purely cosmetic exercise, the benefits of good landscaping will not be realised.

Landscaping can help to give definition to the spaces around buildings by providing visual enclosure, height and continuity, as well as variety through seasonal change. Hedges provide an attractive, practical and cost-effective way of defining property boundaries. Once established, hedges provide privacy, shelter and, if thorny species are chosen, an impenetrable barrier to deter intruders.

Hard landscaping, including the surfacing of roads and footpaths, and boundary walls and fences, can have a significant appearance of new development of all sizes. Sensitive use of the wide variety of materials available can create places that are visually stimulating and reinforce local character.
DESIGN CHECKLIST

> Are the buildings proposed within a development arranged to create well defined outside spaces with a clear function?

> Has the design of buildings, open spaces and landscape features been coordinated to give development a sense of cohesion and clear visual character?

> Do the open spaces within a development have a sense of visual enclosure?

> Have elements of contrast and variety been used to create a sense of place?

> Has SLOAP (space left after planning) been eliminated?