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place-making, housebuilding companies and planning

Peter Jones and **Daphne Comfort** look at the characteristics of place-making and at how some large housebuilding companies have addressed the concept

In recent years the concept of place-making has attracted attention as part of possible solutions to the shortage of new housing development within the UK. In drawing attention to the 'sustained criticism of the quality and quantity of new housing', the Royal Institution of Chartered Surveyors, for example, has argued that 'placemaking has never been more important in creating thriving, sustainable communities where people genuinely want to live, work and play'.¹ The first of the recommendations in the All-Party Parliamentary Group on Building Communities' *Productive Placemaking* report² was that the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (MHCLG) 'should incorporate placemaking at the heart of the text of the National Planning Policy Framework'. More recently, MHCLG itself announced that revisions to the National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) would 'make beauty and placemaking a strategic theme'.³

That said, some of the UK's leading housebuilders have been harnessing the concept and the language of place-making for some time. Almost a decade ago, the Berkeley Group claimed that 'our business is about placemaking, not just housebuilding', and suggested that 'Location + Transport + Jobs + Homes + Amenities = Placemaking'.⁴ With this in mind, this article outlines some of the characteristics of place-making, reviews how some of the UK's largest housebuilding companies have addressed the concept, and offers some reflections on place-making in the creation of new housing developments and in contributing to planning policies and practices.

People have been making places, for themselves and for others, in which to live, work, play and worship since the earliest human times, but Relph

suggested that it is 'not clear where or when the idea of placemaking arose, or who first used it'.⁵ Some of the formal expressions of the thinking behind place-making date from the 1960s onwards. Strydom *et al.*,⁶ for example, traced the origins of the concept of place-making to the work of Jane Jacobs, William Whyte, and George Andrews in the 1960s and 1970s in the USA, although Relph⁵ argued that neither Jacobs nor Whyte wrote explicitly about place-making.

In the years since then, the concept of place-making has become a wide church: it has attracted attention in policy and practice arenas and in a range of academic disciplines, and it has a range of definitions and meanings. One of the simplest definitions is: 'placemaking is the process of creating quality places where people want to live, work, play, shop, learn, and visit';⁷ while for CBRE, the global real estate company, 'placemaking happens when buildings are transformed into vibrant urban spaces that offer wellbeing, pleasure and inspiration'.⁸ Pierce *et al.* define place-making as 'the set of social, political and material processes by which people iteratively create and recreate the experienced geographies in which they live'.⁹ Maidment-Blundell suggested that 'there are a range of current definitions of place-making, but they all refer to place-making as a process that involves a collective of individuals who engage with a reimagining of their specific geo-spatial context'.¹⁰

Place-making is also seen to involve public space. The Project for Public Spaces, for example, has suggested that place-making 'inspires people to collectively reimagine and reinvent public spaces at the heart of every community'.¹¹ CBRE has argued



that 'placemaking has many aspects, of which changes to the public realm are one of the most fundamental'.⁸ At the same time, CBRE outlined how place-making in the public realm can create or enhance real estate value – for example by altering the image of an area, creating a new destination for visitors, residents and workers, adding an element of vitality to an area so that it can be used for events, or establishing the character of a newly developed area. Place-making can also be an important element in the process of urban generation. Here, heritage, described as the 'contemporary use of imagined pasts',¹² often plays a central role in urban regeneration and, as such, place-making is often focused on rebranding.

Some commentators are keen to emphasise the relationships between place-making and sustainable development. A decade ago, Phil Myrick, Senior Vice-President of the US-based Project for Public Spaces, for example, suggested that place-making is 'the nexus between sustainability and livability: by making our communities more livable, and more about places, we also are doing the right thing for the planet'.¹³ Further, he argued that place-making 'provides concrete actions and results that boost broader sustainability goals such as smart growth, walkability, public transportation, local food, and bikes, yet brings it home for people in tangible, positive ways'.¹⁴ Ghavampour and Vale claimed 'both sustainability researchers and policy makers are looking for an integrated approach to sustainability within which placemaking has been identified as a powerful tool in achieving sustainability goals'.¹⁴

Place-making and UK housebuilding companies

There are over 300,000 housebuilders in the UK, but a small number of large companies, including Barratt Developments, Taylor Wimpey, Redrow, Countryside Properties, the Berkeley Group and Crest Nicholson, dominate the marketplace and many of these companies have emphasised their

commitment to place-making in their annual and sustainability reports. While all the major housebuilding companies have their own approach to place-making, meeting customers' aspirations and a commitment to sustainable development are consistent themes.

Barratt Developments, for example, claims that 'placemaking principles are fundamental to our business: our customers want to live in great places, that create a positive legacy'.¹⁵ Further, it emphasises that 'our commitment to design and placemaking includes considering the wellbeing of our customers. We expect access to private external space, communal green spaces and access to walking and cycling will be even more desirable for customers going forward.' The company's Montague Park development of 620 new homes, including 140 classed as affordable, on a greenfield site in Wokingham includes a new neighbourhood centre, a primary school with a multi-use games area, a 12 hectare country park, and good pedestrian, bicycle and bus access to the town centre. Barratt's Trumpington Meadows development, three miles from the centre of Cambridge, includes one- and two-bedroom apartments, and three-, four- and five-bedroomed houses, set within a country park, and has good access to schools and shopping facilities.

Under the banner 'Placemaking and quality', Crest Nicholson claims that 'we will continue to focus our investments on high quality locations and invest in placemaking and design that is valued by our customers and communities'.¹⁶ Peter Truscott, Crest Nicholson's Chief Executive, has asserted that 'placemaking is going to continue to be important. People want to have a pride in where they live'.¹⁶ Crest Nicholson cites its new development at Henley Gate in Suffolk, which is focused on the creation of a 'high-quality new community with placemaking at its heart', as an illustration of the company's approach. It has also reported that the development creates

'character and aesthetic appeal by drawing on local architectural style and incorporating existing site features such as trees, hedgerows and woodlands' while also 'developing a sense of continuity and enhancing lifestyles by creating new civic, social and educational and leisure facilities.'

Taylor Wimpey has reported that 'we build houses that become homes, and developments that become communities. We focus on placemaking and design and invest in affordable homes, infrastructure and research and development to help us create great places to live.'¹⁷ For the Berkeley Group 'placemaking is all about people.'¹⁸ In a similar vein, Countryside Properties has reported that 'people do not just want to buy a house; they want to be part of the community. They want a place that is thoughtfully designed, connected and beautiful. Local amenities like schools, libraries, and doctors' surgeries are important, as is a masterplan that prioritises walk-ability. The pandemic has put a renewed focus on the value of community and placemaking, which we are working to address.'¹⁹

For a number of the leading housebuilders placemaking and sustainable developments go hand in hand. Barratt Developments, for example, claims that 'we continue to invest in design and placemaking to ensure all our developments become communities that are socially, environmentally and economically viable and sustainable.'¹⁵ Crest Nicholson has reported that 'our focus on placemaking ensures we create sustainable communities where people and nature can thrive.'¹⁶ In outlining its approach, Redrow asserts that its 'placemaking principles' will 'leave a legacy of attractive, sustainable and vibrant places to live for generations to come.'²⁰

Under the banner 'Encouraging active travel and sustainable transport', Taylor Wimpey says that 'we aim to design walkable neighbourhoods that prioritise pedestrians and cyclists and where customers can enjoy an active lifestyle and make sustainable transport choices. Our placemaking standards encourage layouts that integrate paths and cycle routes that connect with existing networks and street design that encourages slower vehicle speeds and safer cycling conditions.'¹⁷ And the company reports that 'we invest in public and community transport, walkways and cycle paths through our planning obligations and aim to install this infrastructure at an early stage'.

Urban regeneration contributes towards sustainable development through the recycling of land and buildings. Kidbrooke Village in Greenwich, originally the site of a Royal Air Force base and more recently the Ferrier local authority housing estate, was developed as a regeneration project by the Berkeley Group. The development of almost 5,000 mixed-tenure homes consists of four distinct neighbourhoods – the Village Centre, Meridian Gate, Blackheath Quarter, and City Point. The Village Centre has a supermarket, cafés, a pub, a health centre, and community space. The development includes

35 hectares of parkland and open space with a range of wildlife and habitats.

Reflections

A number of the UK's leading housebuilding companies have emphasised their approach to place-making, but a number of issues merit reflection and discussion. In committing themselves to place-making the companies argued that they were responding to customers' demands and pursuing a strong focus on sustainable development. While this may be powerful rhetoric, in many ways commitments to place-making can also be interpreted as part of a wider lobbying campaign to increase government housebuilding targets and to curry favour with local planning authorities.

At the same time, the housebuilding companies' approach to place-making cannot be described as comprehensive. While the place-making successes published by some of the leading housebuilding companies do include regeneration schemes in inner urban areas, developments on greenfield sites in urban fringe locations tend to dominate place-making narratives.

The housebuilding companies emphasised that several of their developments include a range of types and sizes of housing provision, but their approach to place-making cannot be described as truly inclusive, in that it is focused upon those who can afford to buy accommodation, rather than those who have little option but to rent. The term affordable housing is often interpreted as meaning housing sold at a discount of at least 20% below local market value, but even such discounts make access beyond the financial reach of many potential buyers, and, as such, exclude a significant proportion of the population. At the same time, some of the facilities and amenities are often provided exclusively for residents, rather than for a wider community.

More critically, Saitta asked if 'sustainable placemaking is elitist',²¹ while Karacor²² suggested that place-making works only for those with high incomes, and that, rather than solving urban social problems, place-making makes them more complicated. This raises issues about the relevance of place-making for the general population and its possible role in creating more vibrant and sustainable communities across all urban and rural areas. In addressing COVID-19, place-making and health, Scott, for example, suggests that the 'the current crisis has also confronted us with space to think or rethink our relationships with the places where we live or work'.²³

A variety of initiatives designed to promote a more general approach to place-making can be identified. On the one hand, for example, the Royal Institute of British Architects' *Future Place* report²⁴ outlined a number of initiatives designed 'to give new impetus to good practice in placemaking'. The report recognises 'the role of placemaking as the new lens through which growth and regeneration must be viewed to

enable local solutions to the critical issues facing settlements, towns and cities across the country'. On the other hand, estate management company Preim, which manages a range of residential estates and communities across England, emphasised the importance of green spaces in placemaking, claiming that 'we're absolute advocates of the importance of green spaces in communities'²⁵, and that the creation of usable green spaces and the enjoyment of existing green spaces which bring neighbours together 'is incredibly important for placemaking.'

Place-making is also about public space and about health and wellbeing. The Local Government Association, for example, argues that 'placemaking capitalises on a community's unique assets, inspiration and potential with the intention of creating public spaces, places, events and activities that promote people's health, happiness and wellbeing'.²⁶ The TCPA, with its origins in the Garden Cities movement, has long championed the cause of place-making in supporting people's physical health and mental wellbeing, and in a publication produced with The King's Fund, The Young Foundation and the National Health Service²⁷ has reported on healthy place-making in a number of areas across England, including Barking Riverside in East London, Bicester, Ebbsfleet Garden City in Kent, and Halton Lea in Runcorn.

There are also questions about place-making and planning. How will the explicit new focus on place-making as a strategic theme within the revised NPPF be developed? Do local planning authorities have the resources and the necessary professional planning skills to rise to this challenge? While England's previous planning framework made no explicit reference to place-making per se, many local authorities have developed place-making policies and published guidance on place-making.

Bath and North East Somerset Council, for example, adopted a Placemaking Plan in 2017, and it forms part of the Development Plan for the district and is used in determining planning applications. The plan looks to help to 'deliver better places by facilitating the delivery of high quality, sustainable and well located development supported by the timely provision of necessary infrastructure' and 'ultimately it is about creating good places that promote people's health, happiness, and well-being'.²⁸

More generally, Scotland and Wales provide a comparative national policy perspective on place-making. It is one of two principal policies within current Scottish Planning Policy, and 'planning should take every opportunity to create high quality places by taking a design-led approach'.²⁹ This, in turn, 'means taking a holistic approach that responds to and enhances the existing place while balancing the costs and benefits of potential opportunities over the long term', and considering the relationships between 'a successful, sustainable place', 'a natural, resilient place', 'a connected place', and 'a low carbon place.'

In a similar vein, the 11th Edition of Planning Policy Wales³⁰ emphasises that 'at a strategic level, traditional planning policy topics can be clustered around four themes which contribute individually to placemaking'. The four themes are maximising environmental protection and limiting environmental impact; facilitating healthy and accessible environments; making best use of resources; and growing the economy in a sustainable manner. At the same time, 'everyone engaged with, or operating within, the planning system in Wales must embrace the concept of placemaking in both plan making and development management decisions in order to achieve the creation of sustainable places and improve the well-being of communities'.

Conclusion

For a number of years, many of the UK's leading housebuilding companies have emphasised their commitment to place-making in meeting customers' aspirations and in promoting sustainable development. While such messages can be seen also to be seen to target national and local government audiences, the companies' approach to place-making is generally limited, often with a focus on higher-income customers and greenfield sites. More recently place-making was identified as a new strategic theme in the 2021 revisions to England's NPPF. However, it remains to be seen whether local planning authorities will have the resources or planning skills to enable them to adopt a comprehensive approach to place-making which will embrace all communities.

The revised NPPF may make it easier for housebuilders to obtain planning permission for new developments, and thus they may no longer feel the need to emphasise their commitments to place-making to support planning applications. That said, planning authorities may, in part, welcome the housebuilders' continuing rhetoric to enable them to be seen to embrace place-making.

In his examination of the role of 'placemaking in planning', Goebell asked if place-making is 'a simple buzzword or a new planning movement'.³¹ In reaching a verdict on the role of place-making as a strategic theme in planning policies and development plans in England, the jury may be out for some time.

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It is with very great sadness that *Town & Country Planning* notes the death of Daphne Comfort on 5 August 2021. Daphne was a geography graduate who had wide-ranging interests in planning and natural resource management, and for many years she was a regular contributor to the TCPA journal, writing in partnership with Peter Jones and very often, until his death in 2017, with David Hillier. Her contributions were greatly valued and she will be very much missed.

Notes

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