

RTPI EAST OF ENGLAND AWARDS FOR PLANNING EXCELLENCE 2018

STEWARTBY PARK DESIGN GUIDE

Submitted by **O&H Properties**, in association with **David Lock Associates, Persimmon Homes (East Midlands), Central Bedfordshire Council, Bedford Borough Council and Stewartby Parish Council**

INTRODUCTION

Excellence in the practise of town planning can be tricky to test. Do you look at the end result and judge whether what is coming out of the ground is of exemplary design quality? Do you consider the functional aspects of a development and assess how it has integrated existing and new communities? Or, do you evaluate the process that you went through as a team to reach a milestone in the project and reflect on the passion of the characters involved and the success of the outcome?

Our submission focuses on the production of a Design Guide for Stewartby Park in Bedfordshire, where we aim to demonstrate excellence in all three of these tests.

We will tell the story of the process that a master developer and a master planning team went through to produce a Design Guide that would ensure that the village extension would be sensitive to its historic surrounds, of truly democratic planning where the Parish Council were fully engaged, of passion for the project and strength from the local authorities and of a housebuilder who was willing to try something different.

STEWARTBY VILLAGE

Construction of the village of Stewartby began in 1926. Following in the footsteps of Sir Titus Salt and the Cadbury brothers, Sir Halley Stewart, and his son Sir Malcolm, set about creating a village to house the local labour force who worked in their brickworks. The Stewarts wanted to provide each house with piped water, drainage facilities and electricity. A key ambition for Stewartby was to ensure that all properties were spacious in design and had their own large garden.

The plans that were submitted for the model village were based on the 'garden village' principle, striking a harmonious balance between the built form and the open countryside. The houses themselves were to be showpieces demonstrating the versatility of bricks as a building material, resulting in some distinctive architectural detailing. Stewartby has a formal pattern of development with a legible network of streets.

Retirement homes were added in the 1950's as shown in this short video <https://www.britishpathe.com/video/opening-of-the-sir-malcolm-stewart-homes>



PLANNING HISTORY

The concept for a village extension to the north of Stewartby was first set down in policy through the Bedford Local Plan (2002) and the Mid Beds Local Plan (2005). By August of 2009, O&H Properties Ltd (the landowners) had been granted outline planning permission by both local planning authorities for a sustainable village extension of 730 homes. One of the conditions of the permission was to have an adopted Design Guide in place prior to the submission of any reserved matters. It took a further two and a half years to achieve an adopted Design Guide for the site. Achieving excellence in town planning is not the work of a moment!



VISION STATEMENT

The aspiration for Stewartby Park is to create a new integrated part of Stewartby that will reflect and enhance the locally distinctive character of the existing village, responding to the special characteristics that are inherent to its form. The development will deliver new facilities complementary to those within Stewartby, along with a mix of housing types and good quality usable open space. Stewartby Park will support a mixed and balanced community that is sustainable now and in the future, providing a safe and secure environment that responds positively to the surrounding landscape.

ENGAGEMENT

At the heart of the vision is a desire to respect the form and function of the host village. To that end, we made it a priority to engage with Stewartby Parish Council and the wider community during the design evolution of the scheme. There were regular meetings to present new ideas and to respond to earlier concerns as well as wider public events where we sought input on how best the extension would function as part of the village. 'Hard to reach' groups within the community were also encouraged to engage.

CASE STUDY: ENGAGING WITH LOCAL CHILDREN

One Saturday, we held an event in the village hall to find out from local children about how they liked to play. We asked them to choose green stickers to represent the equipment that they liked and red stickers to identify the features that were less important to them. This information fed into the scheme for the regeneration of the sports ground, which is currently being developed. The sports ground is physically connected to both the existing and new homes and the hope is that it will serve as a community integrator.

CASE STUDY: ENGAGING WITH FORMER BRICKWORKERS

Some features of the model village had fallen into disrepair since the closure of the brickworks and so a specific working group, including retired workers from the brickworks, met to look at these features with a view to regenerating them through the public art budget. We engaged an artist to illustrate how these features could be brought back to life (please refer to Image Sheet 1).



The core partnership between O&H Properties Ltd (landowners) and David Lock Associates (town planning and urban design practice) has been successful for almost twenty years. David Lock Associates understand the importance to O&H of creating a development that engenders pride in future generations. To achieve that it is imperative that a site is passed on to a housebuilder with as much design rigour as possible and the planning and design teams in each organisation work hard to ensure that the design guidance is successful. The team at David Lock Associates care passionately about place making and putting into practice the highest principles of design thinking. Together, the project is managed to take all stakeholders with us through the planning process.

Working on a cross-boundary scheme always has its planning challenges. In this instance there were different policy approaches to some elements of the scheme, polarised political control of each authority and different skills sets and resources when it came to influencing urban design guidance. Despite these differences, there was an absolute commitment from the planning officers to getting the Design Guide right and in working together to achieve the best possible outcome for the model village of Stewartby.

Our approach to the early stages of the Design Guide work was subtle and simple. By holding the design team meetings on neutral territory, no one party was in overall control of the process or decision making. All stakeholders had an equal voice – no one had the home advantage. This resulted in willing collaboration between the key stakeholders and a wider commitment to expanding the stakeholder group from time to time to bring in experts from other technical disciplines.

This wider work began in March 2011. We convened a group of technical stakeholders to set out our vision for the Design Guide and how we intended to engage with all interested parties. We were also able to use this session to establish the priorities of each stakeholder towards achieving a sustainable development. This event gave us the mandate to move forward with the preparation of the Design Guide and establish key contacts that would help us along the way. Image Sheet 2 illustrates the guiding sustainability principles that underpinned the subsequent design work.

The case officers from each local planning authority worked together to reach a compromise whenever there was a clash of policy requirements. The wider group of officers worked in partnership with the developer's technical team to overcome matters of dispute and devised bespoke design solutions to ensure that the characteristics of the model village were respected. An example of such an issue is the authorities' differing approach to the treatment of street trees.

CASE STUDY: STREET TREES

The primary streets throughout Stewartby village are characterised as formal boulevards, bordered by wide verges with a regular rhythm of mature street trees along each side. The design aspiration was to replicate this throughout Stewartby Park. The difficulty came when it became clear that the highways authorities took different approaches to the adoption of street trees within the highway verge and required various sums for management and maintenance. Undeterred, the case officers worked with us to find solutions to ensure that this important feature was not eroded. Part of the solution was to parcel up the generous 'highway' verge into the open space so that it was managed as part of the landscaped areas. The other solution was to place the street trees in the deeper front gardens of the properties that fronted the boulevards.



There is a point in the planning process where the landowner / master developer loses the ability to control and influence what actually comes out of the ground. To ensure that the design stewardship is not lost, it is essential that the successors of the scheme are part of the journey. In the case of Stewartby Park, this meant ensuring that the relationship between the local authorities and the housebuilder was starting from the same baseline understanding of the vision and how it would be implemented. Image sheet 3 compares the Design Guide's Regulatory Plan with the approved layout for the Persimmon scheme and demonstrates the robustness of the structuring principles therein.

Once the structuring principles for the Design Guide had been established, it was the right moment to invite the prospective purchaser of the site – Persimmon Homes (East Midlands) to join the design team. There was still work to be done on agreeing a materials palette, storey heights, density, phasing, architectural detailing and the blend of house types. It was vital to ensure that we weren't getting carried away with requiring design detail that the market simply couldn't deliver.

DESIGN RIGOUR

The in-house planners at Persimmon Homes really embraced what the Design Guide was trying to achieve. In fact, they seemed excited by the potential to do something different. They commissioned a bespoke range of house types to ensure that the special characteristics of Stewartby model village were carried through into Stewartby Park.

The Design Guide was deliberately rigorous about the siting of homes with a plot, roof pitch and architectural detailing. Some examples of the requirements are listed below:

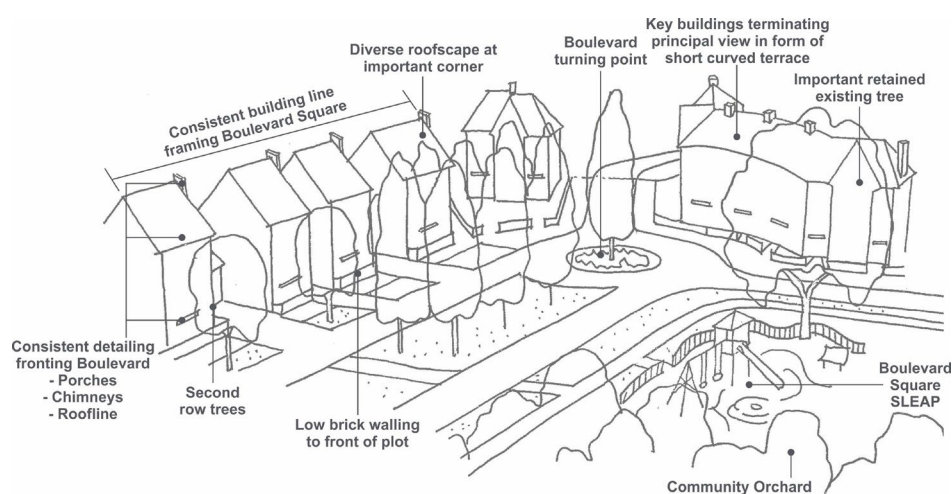
- consistent, formal building lines incorporating curves where possible,
- separation between buildings to provide accessibility to rear gardens,
- prescriptive boundary treatments reflecting street hierarchy,
- minimum front garden depths,

- a simple materials palette for construction materials and street furniture,
- prescriptive detail about type and colour of fenestration,
- decorative projections at the eaves, and
- targets for numbers of chimneys and detail on design and functionality.

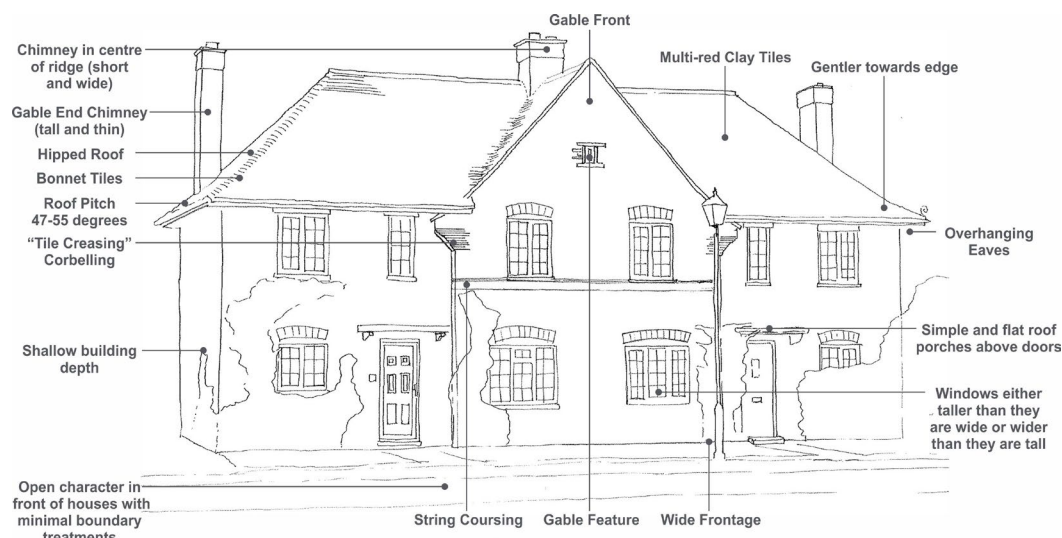
Image Sheet 4 illustrates how these principles reflect the houses from the model village and looks at how they have been implemented on site. The homes have been incredibly successful from a design perspective and the residents love living there, indeed there is now a waiting list for three-bedroom homes.



Persimmon Homes East Midlands - Approved house type elevations



Approved Design Guide Key Grouping - Boulevard



Design Guide - Building features and Design cues

PRIDE IN STEWARTBY PARK

The town planner at Bedford Borough Council provided the consistent thread through the process. His belief in the Design Guide process and his commitment to using it as a tool through which to determine the subsequent reserved matters applications has ensured the delivery of a high-quality built environment.

At the point of adoption of the Design Guide, Stewartby Parish Council declared a sense of pride in the Design Guide and admiration for the house types that had been designed by Persimmon Homes. Care had been taken to ensure that their village would be respected by the new development and they had been a part of ensuring that legacy. This positivity has continued as the reserved matters applications have been submitted.

LESSONS FOR THE FUTURE

There is enormous pressure exerted by Government to speed up delivery of homes. This is resulting in shorter planning permissions, delivery rate agreements and threats of enforcement action for non-delivery. In this emerging system, where is the space for democratic and inclusive design control which ensures high quality homes and bespoke infrastructure? What will the effect of this be on placemaking? Successive Governments try to reform the planning system to streamline and stop 'it' from being the barrier to economic growth.

The planning process that we went through to ensure that Stewartby Park would respect the heritage of the host village was vital. It was truly inclusive and respectful and has resulted in a high-quality development.

Town planning is so much more than the speedy delivery of development projects. It facilitates permanent change to places that we love and that can be a frightening prospect for those already invested in a community. Democracy, understanding and compromise have to be at the heart of this change in order for it to be acceptable. We must build trust that development can be a force for good and bring with it improved facilities and that incoming populations have the same hopes and dreams as those people who have lived there for decades. This is sensitive work. It is what we do as town planners. If we are to do it excellently, it cannot be rushed.



ENDNOTE

Persimmon Homes now have approximately 300 homes delivered on Stewartby Park and are preparing schemes for the final phases.