

Neo-Traditional Housing and Town Planning: An Assessment

Max Herford

Introduction

Neo-traditionalism in building is the present-day construction of new buildings to historical designs. In this article the less cumbersome word 'traditional' will be used to designate Neo-traditional projects. Master-planned developments with codes written along traditional lines are now widespread in the USA; there are now over 200 such developments in most states, amounting to thousands of newly-built traditional homes.¹ In America the leading traditional master planning practice is Florida based Duany Plater Zyberk (DPZ). The movement started at Seaside, a residential development on the Gulf of Mexico in Florida. This became a template for many later projects and DPZ are now specialists in this category of master planning.

In Britain there are at least forty traditional projects, current and complete. The principal traditional master planning consultants are Adam Architecture (by far the largest), John Simpson, Ben Pentreath, Richard Reid and many others. In addition, traditional country house architecture is available from Adam Architecture, Quinlan Terry, his son Francis Terry and around thirty members of the Classical Design Group, a part of RIBA (The Royal Institute of British Architects). In Germany and Holland France and Italy there are over thirty traditional town planning projects.²

How did Modernism become such an established way of approaching architecture? It is now the standard for architectural training in almost every western university. Modernism is, of course, difficult to define in a comprehensive way, as it has taken so many varied forms in the twentieth

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¹ Richard S. Geller 'The Legality of Form-Based Zoning Codes', *Journal of Land Use & Environmental Law*, vol. 26, no. 1 (Fall 2010), pp. 35-91. See also Jack L. Nasar, 'Does Neotraditional Development Build Community?', *Journal of Planning Education and Research*, vol. 23, no. 1 (2003), pp. 58-68.

² Michelle Thompson-Fawcett 'A New Urbanist Diffusion Network: The Americo-European Connection', *Built Environment*, vol. 29, no. 3 (2003), pp. 253-270. Also, Alireza Sagharchi, Lucien Steil *Traditional Architecture* (New York: Rizzoli 2013), pp. 145, 149, 273, 257.

century. *The Penguin Dictionary of Architecture* describes Modernism as a twentieth century movement in architecture dedicated to functionalism and the use of new technology. Modernism rejects all ornament and symbolism. In its early days it aspired to create new solutions for architecture and urban design. The Modernist approach is characterised by asymmetrical composition, unrelieved cubic and rectilinear shapes, metal and glass construction resulting in large windows in horizontal bands, a complete absence of architectural mouldings and a preference for open ground-plans and white as a dominant colour.³ 'Historicism' in this context refers to respect for the past and the revival of historical styles and ornament.⁴

An interesting theory about the evolution of Modernist theory was formulated by David Watkin (1941-2018): he had been a pupil of Sir Nikolaus Pevsner, and became the professor of Architectural History at Peterhouse College, Cambridge.⁵ In his book, he argued that modern architecture as a movement had assumed a dominant position due to a line of ideological thought which had started with the publications of A.W. N. Pugin. In the mid-Victorian period, he connected architecture to an absolute moral and religious condition: to him Gothic was morally good, while everything else was morally inferior. Pugin was convinced that, as the Classical Revival had occurred in the same century as the Reformation, they were somehow causally linked.⁶ As the British Reformation was to Pugin an outright rejection of Catholicism, it was immoral. So was Classicism; it had come to England around the same time.⁷ Then, around 1960, Pevsner located stylistic links between the Arts and Crafts Movement and early Modernism. He became a passionate spokesman for the Modern Movement, taking a similar moral position to Pugin. To Pevsner, modern architecture was honest,

³ John Fleming, Hugh Honour, and Nikolaus Pevsner, *The Penguin Dictionary of Architecture and Landscape Architecture* (London: Penguin 1999), p. 384; Dennis G. Rodwell 'Identity and Community', *RSA Journal*, vol. 140, no. 5432 (August/ September 1992), pp. 631-633; Ann Forsyth and Richard Peiser, 'The British new towns: Lessons for the world from the new-town experiment', *Town Planning Review*, vol. 90, no. 3 (2019), pp. 239-246; and Daniel Maudlin, 'Constructing Identity and Tradition: Englishness, Politics and the Neo-Traditional House', *Journal of Architectural Education*, vol. 63, no. 1 (2009), pp. 51-63.

⁴ Fleming, Honour and Pevsner, *The Penguin Dictionary of Architecture and Landscape Architecture*, p. 265.

⁵ Quinlan Terry, *Quinlan Terry* (London: Academy Editions, 1993), p. 136.

⁶ David Watkin, *Morality and Architecture Revisited* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1977), p. 8.

⁷ Watkin, *Morality and Architecture Revisited*, p. 21.

of its time, functional and efficient, while new-built traditional architecture was dishonest, extravagant, and quite unacceptable.⁸

Over time, and with other influences, this opinion became part of the outlook in the architectural schools. Around 1975, the writing of Sigfried Giedeon was used to take up the cause for the advancement of Modernism in these schools. Students were taught, more or less, that Modernism as a broad style category was correct and appropriate while traditional architecture was irrelevant.⁹ Giedeon's text *Space Time and Architecture* went on to more than sixteen printings, becoming known as Giedeon's Bible, a foundational text in the principles of Modernism.

According to architectural historian Paul Thomson, the architectural profession in the 1970s had adjusted to the post-War disappearance of the wealthy private client and the emergence of the public authority and the corporate developer as the main sources of work; they did not have any preconceptions. As a result, architects started to assume authority for design. In this new era, style decisions were left up to architects, and this position was taken up in the architectural schools, with the result that young architects commenced practice with what could be described as a 'Modernist mindset'.¹⁰

This was the architectural background to the design and development of Poundbury in Dorset, the first English entirely traditional planned development. In England at this time, around 1980, very few architects were prepared to offer design services in pre-modern styles, and the preference for Modernism had spread to most parts of local government. This will be seen in the case of the primary school design at Poundbury, the single functionalist, modern building in what is a newly-built traditional development.

Traditionally designed private housing in England had several starting points: some scholars nominate Edwin Lutyens (1869-1944) as the last Traditionalist working in the 1920s. His final traditional project was Castle Drogo, the recreation of a medieval fortress on Dartmoor, built for Julius

⁸ Niklaus Pevsner, *Pioneers of the Modern Movement* (London: Penguin, 1975), p. 210.

⁹ Sigfried Giedeon, *Space, Time, and Architecture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1941), p. 705.

¹⁰ Paul Thompson, 'The Victory of the International Style', in *A History of English Architecture*, eds. Peter Kidson, Peter Murray and Paul Thompson (London: Penguin, 1978), p. 305.

Drewe and finished in 1930.¹¹ Then, the first Neo-traditionalist architect was probably Raymond Erith (1904–1973) whose younger partner Quinlan Terry (b. 1937) worked with him on Kings Walden Bury in Hertfordshire in 1966, one of the very few traditional architects working in England at that time.¹² His time in Rome as a student had given him a taste for Borromini and the Baroque; he much later became prominent in the design work at Poundbury.¹³ Around 1977 a young architect, Robert Adam, started practicing in Winchester: he had also spent a year in Rome on a scholarship, studying Roman culture and urbanism. He offered his services to clients who expressed a preference for traditional or classical architecture. Robert Adam is now the chairman of largest traditional practice in England, Adam Architecture, based in Winchester, with over 90 employees. He is a founder member of The Traditional Architecture Group (TAG) which in 2019 has around seventy practitioners; it puts forward qualified professionals for local councils when they need to assess a traditional proposal.¹⁴ Such publications as *The New Classicism in Architecture and Urbanism* (1988) created a profile for this segment.¹⁵ Thus the climate had changed: by 1980 there were a number of younger traditional architects who worked, and in many cases honed their skills, at the town extension of Poundbury in Dorset.

Professor Michael Pacione (The University of Strathclyde, Glasgow) posed a critical question in 2002: how and where to provide the estimated 3.8 million new houses needed in England between 1996 and 2021? This he saw as one of the most pressing challenges for policy makers and planners at that time. The factors that contributed to this state of affairs were: changing attitudes to marriage, later retirement, longer lifespans, and the adjusted expectations of homeowners.¹⁶

¹¹ Gavin Stamp, *Edwin Lutyens: Country Houses* (London: Aurum Press, 2001), p. 141.

¹² David Watkin, *Radical Classicism: The Architecture of Quinlan Terry* (New York: Rizzoli, 2006), p. 12.

¹³ Richard Economakis, 'Raymond Erith: Kings Walden 1969-71', in *Quinlan Terry* (London: Academy Editions, 1993), p. 55.

¹⁴ Richard John, *Robert Adam: The Search for a Modern Classicism* (London: Images Publishing, 2011), pp. 10-13.

¹⁵ A. Papadakis (ed.), *The New Classicism in Architecture and Urbanism* (London: Academy Editions, 1988).

¹⁶ Michael Pacione, *Urban Sustainability in the United Kingdom* (East Lansing, Michigan State University Press, 2013); and Michael Pacione, 'New Settlements for the United Kingdom in the Twenty-First Century', *Geography*, vol. 89, no. 2 (April 2004), pp. 152-164.

In 1987 the Dorchester City Council approached the Duchy of Cornwall to see if there was a possibility for a town extension on Duchy of Cornwall agricultural land which bordered the city limits, a conversation about various options followed. As is now a matter of historical record, the Prince of Wales had deplored the state of modern architecture in his famous ‘carbuncle speech’ at RIBA in 1984.¹⁷ He felt that most housing estates in provincial England were unimaginative, predictable, and depressing. Poorly researched neo-Georgian was the standard look. The creation of more estates to meet pressing housing needs, without trying a different approach, was not a good idea.¹⁸ But it became apparent that a radical new approach to town planning had been developed shortly before in Florida, USA.

Seaside, Florida

In the 1970s in regional America, social disorder was becoming a real concern. Zoning policies favoured the high-rise city centre with immense, tall buildings surrounded by a sprawl of suburbs. The policies were considered by many to be obsolete, and they were held to be partly responsible for high levels of street crime, violence, and social unrest. In 1977 in Florida, USA, Robert S. Davis had inherited a parcel of land from his grandfather, and aimed to transform it into an old-fashioned beach town, with the traditional wood-framed cottages with front porches, typical of the Florida Panhandle. Davis, his wife Daryl, and architectural partners Andrés Duany and Elizabeth Plater-Zyberk toured the south studying small towns, looking for local design motifs as a basis for planning Seaside. The final plan was complete around 1985. Seaside was designed by a town planning group with radical ideas; this group included European master planner Léon Krier, who later became central to the innovative planning at Poundbury. Seaside was designed on lines that were described as Neo-traditional: there was much clapboard detailing painted in white or certain designated pastel tones; it gave the development the look and feel of an authentic old-fashioned Florida settlement. To achieve this, in the interests of creating a viable and healthy community all houses had to comply with strict building and design codes.¹⁹

So-called ‘modern’ rectilinear architecture (of glass, steel and concrete) was expressly excluded from these codes. Warranting special

¹⁷ Christopher Martin, *Prince Charles and the Architectural Debate* (London: Academy Editions, 1989), pp. 30-35.

¹⁸ Martin, *Prince Charles and the Architectural Debate*, pp. 30-35.

¹⁹ Martin, *Prince Charles and the Architectural Debate*, p. 71.

mention for exclusion was the Modern picture window; these large, rectilinear windows are often specified by present-day architects. The vision shared by the architects and the owner of the traditional development was to promote psychological security through the feeling of a connection with an idealised, reimagined version of the past.²⁰ Seaside was successful commercially and in terms of community formation. In terms of its look and feel it is a world away from Poundbury, its code documents stress a completely different local vernacular; one of timber and whitewash, with white picket fences and native plantings of hardy coastal plants and shrubs. There is easy access to the beach by pavilion-styled walkways. The master-planned density of the buildings is high, it is urban, not suburban.²¹

The codes covering this plan are readily available at The Notre Dame University Seaside Research Portal: they show that the stipulations with regard to the design of individual elements and motifs were most comprehensive. However, importantly, the planners left the actual implementation of the code to other architects. The approach favoured local trades and suppliers, and the buildings were small and economical in scale. The concept was formulated to allow residents to walk to their local shops so that car-use became optional, it encouraged residents to pass by their neighbour's front porches as a place of easy connection with each other. 'Walkability' was identified as one key objective. Seaside, when contrasted to Poundbury and Nansledan, will show buildings of very different styles embedded in a similar approach to the principles of New Urbanism.²²

The Concept of an Urban Village

Léon Krier argued against Modernism and Suburbanism, and for Traditional Urbanism. He wrote that traditional architecture and urbanism represented a global theory of organising humane settlements in intelligent and aesthetically pleasing ways. Modernism had not only challenged the validity of past practice, but had nearly succeeded in destroying traditional urbanism worldwide.²³

He developed a theory of urban development based on the division of urban centres into parts (he called them quadrants or sectors) of manageable

²⁰ Philip Langdon, 'A Good Place to Live: Seaside Florida', *The Atlantic* (March 1988).

²¹ David Mohny (ed.), *Seaside: Making a New Town in America* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1991), pp. 62-65.

²² Mohny, *Seaside*, pp. 65-73.

²³ Martin, *Prince Charles and the Architectural Debate*, pp. 30-35.

size rather than the conventional process which had been directed to growing a high-rise city centre.²⁴ The sectors of an urban village used high density ratios, urban rather than suburban, to achieve a relatively compact unit of around 800 residences. There was a small family-business shopping facility in amongst the housing of each sector, rather than in a remote drive-to, large shopping mall. This was designed to enable reduced car dependence, because all shopping and services could be reached on foot.²⁵ Community formation was a centrally important objective.²⁶

In 1985, Krier received an invitation to join a new consultative group headed by the Prince of Wales directed to the creation of an English neo-traditional development. A number of prominent traditional architects were invited to prepare traditional designs. In consultation with the Dorset Council over twelve months, this led to a decision to develop the fields around Poundbury Farm House (1878) as a town extension. In the event this meant the Poundbury Farm homestead became, by far the oldest building in the new development.²⁷ Rather than simply provide land for housing to be designed and developed by others, the opportunity was taken by the Poundbury consultative group to create a traditional community using ideas on community planning which were quite different to the conventional thinking of the day.

Krier created a four-quadrant plan for the development, avoiding an orthogonal grid, and using an organic approach to town planning based on the principle of permeability, that is easy movement by walking between houses. The aim was to allow for a maximum ten-minute walk for residents from their home to key shopping and service locations.²⁸ The layout of each quadrant shows a striking similarity to well-known medieval town centres. Houses are clustered around the centre in a radial pattern without any

²⁴ Martin, *Prince Charles and the Architectural Debate*, p. 49.

²⁵ Martin, *Prince Charles and the Architectural Debate*, pp. 47-53. For a well-structured critique of Krier's theory, see Thomas Dutton, 'Cities, Cultures, and Resistance: Beyond Léon Krier and the Postmodern Condition', *Journal of Architectural Education*, vol. 42, no. 2 (1989), pp. 3-9.

²⁶ Martin, *Prince Charles and the Architectural Debate*, p. 47.

²⁷ Poundbury Factsheet, *The Duchy of Cornwall*, at <https://duchyofcornwall.org/poundbury.html>. Accessed 20/03/21.

²⁸ Martin, *Prince Charles and Architectural Debate*, p. 55.

orthogonal grid layouts, this is achieved by thinking about housing first, then allowing traffic engineers to fill in the roads between the houses.²⁹

Poundbury was constructed to become a new town extension to Dorchester; it was started around 1980 and the development is now thirty years old. It had, in 2019, around 2500 buildings, and around another 300 are planned, with completion in 2025. Most existing buildings have been finished in the last fifteen years; all are traditional in appearance. There is a constant flow of architects, designers, town-planners and developers visiting the centre. One of the key managers was Simon Conibear who has been a member of the Prince's planning group since the first days. His opinions are forthright; where the development has fallen short of its ideals he is ready to acknowledge this reality; at the same time he believes strongly in the integrity and the ideals of the 'placemaking' approach that had underwritten the project. To Simon, comprehending the full possibilities of the idea of 'place' as a theoretical concept is essential, as he maintained that 'everybody recognises an authentic place when they are there.'³⁰ Depending on its context, certain elements, furnishings and signs have to be present to turn a setting into a convincing 'place'.

Poundbury is in places eccentric and surprising; certain parts appear to be less effective than others, but unlike most UK housing estates, it is never boring. However, it is vital to remember, that it has only been a recognisable proto-community since the opening of Queen Mother Square in October 2016. It is still a community in-formation, in a region where the ages of communities are measured in hundreds of years.

Dorchester is the county town of Dorset on the south-west coast of England. A historic market town, it is situated on the banks of the river Frome. Its population was around 20,000 in 1916, and had shrunk to only 16,000 in 2020.³¹ The proportion of older, retired people was growing every year while migration of younger people to larger centres was constant. Sources of employment were limited, and agriculture was in slow decline. It

²⁹ Martin, *Prince Charles and Architectural Debate*, pp. 47-49; and Léon Krier, 'In Conversation with Christopher Pierce & Thomas Weaver', *AA Files*, no. 60 (2010), pp. 68-77.

³⁰ Simon Conibear interview at Poundbury February 2019; and Léon Krier, 'Classic and Vernaculus', *Log*, no. 8 (Summer 2006), pp. 25-30.

³¹ Area profile for Dorchester, *Dorset Council*, at <https://mapping.dorsetcouncil.gov.uk/statistics-and-insights/AreaProfiles/Parish/dorchester>. Accessed 30/03/21.

is a part of Britain that was moving slowly towards an uncertain future; Poundbury and the smaller Brewery Centre are two developments which have injected life and avenues for the employment of younger people into this social matrix. Tourism, retirement services and education are being promoted as new sources of employment.

Dorchester is a long way from prosperous, busy London: over three hours by train, way out of commuter range. It looks and feels rural and agricultural with a mixture of Victorian and eighteenth-century buildings and a more or less predictable high street with all the major chain stores: Waitrose, Sainsburys, Tesco, and Iceland are all located around the centre. The town has a history going back to Roman times; it was originally a town called *Durnonovaria*. The largest Iron Age hill fort in Britain, Maiden Castle, is located close to the southern extent of the development. In the nineteenth century it was used as a Wessex setting by Victorian author Thomas Hardy (who was an architect) in his novel *The Mayor of Casterbridge*. Very few of the characters in this famous novel are acknowledged in Poundbury street names. Many references describe the coastal county of Dorset as possessing areas of outstanding natural beauty, marked by large fields of grass supporting sheep and dairy herds.

Poundbury is built on around 165 hectares of land divided into 100 hectares of mixed-use buildings and 65 hectares of open green space. To be clear, Poundbury is not intended as a self-sufficient town: it is an extension to Dorchester.³² Poundbury in 2019 is home to some 3,800 people in a mix of private and affordable housing, its projected population in 2024 is around 6000 residents.³³ In 2019, employment had been created for some 2,306 people working in the 207 shops, cafés, offices and factories. A further 557 were employed in construction across the site; many more were self-employed and working from home.³⁴ In the local town planning guidelines, the recommended density of dwellings per hectare is 30, at Poundbury it is higher, around 38 dwellings per hectare.³⁵

³² Poundbury, *Duchy of Cornwall*, at <https://duchyofcornwall.org/poundbury.html>. Accessed 21/3/21.

³³ Poundbury, *Duchy of Cornwall*, at <https://duchyofcornwall.org/poundbury.html>. Accessed 21/3/21.

³⁴ Poundbury, *Duchy of Cornwall*, at <https://duchyofcornwall.org/poundbury.html>. Accessed 21/3/21.

³⁵ Housing Care Locator, *Housing LIN*, at <https://www.housinglin.org.uk/Topics/HousingCareLocator/>. Accessed 25/3/21.

In 1989, the Poundbury Masterplan was exhibited in Dorchester. Local residents and interested parties were invited to share their opinions and the feedback was reflected in the scheme designs before planning consent was sought. The resulting masterplan divided Poundbury into four distinctive quarters— with construction work commencing on the first phase in October 1992.³⁶ This was presented to public review and critique as it has at the beginning of each phase. Critics argued that home buyers would be uninterested in houses that shared a dividing wall with council housing. As well, the dense housing environment was thought to be outside the expectations of middle-class British house-buyers, usually attracted by detached houses with wrap-around gardens. Others predicted that business would not want to move to the middle of a residential area, and that Poundbury would end up as another council estate. In many ways, the masterplan for Poundbury went directly against conventional planning orthodoxy in the UK. The residential streets, with their close proximity to shops, workshops and factories, enabled residents to live and work in the community without the need for car-based commuting. Its fundamental tenet, mixed use, ran counter to conventional zoning practice, which prefers to concentrate business in designated business parks, housing in housing estates, and shops in shopping centres dominated by the established national chains. As well, new business creation, job creation, mental health indicators, crime rates, and accident rates indicate a successful project. House prices in Poundbury are, on average, 25% higher than similar locations in Dorchester. The development is designed for the middle market, definitely not high end, the average price for housing ranges from 500-800K Pounds. That is a fraction of an equivalent house in outer-suburban London at well over one million pounds.³⁷

Having conceived Poundbury as a carefully planned recreation of a traditional village, the planners did not expect to encounter the problems facing other suburban developments; and in large part this proved to be the case. This is not to say that it was stress-free or easy. Examination of the Léon Krier interviews makes quite clear the continual need for compromise

³⁶ Léon Krier, 'The City Within the City', *A+U* (November 1977), pp. 69-152.

³⁷ International Making Cities Liveable, 'Simon Conibear - Poundbury, a Sustainable New Urban Settlement', YouTube video, 27:27, uploaded 29 August, 2015, at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=u_e69J7apjk. Accessed 31/03/2021.

and accommodation during the lengthy evolution of the development from ground-plan to build environment.³⁸

Prince Charles' book *Vision of Britain* sets out a list of ten principles to ensure a successful modern urban living environment. These are as follows:

1. Place. That planners should understand the local environment, and design their projects to blend with it.
2. Hierarchy. That the design of buildings should always reflect their hierarchical position in the community, that public buildings ought to proclaim themselves with pride, and others be designed in function of their value in society.
3. Scale. That buildings should bear relation to the human scale, and the scale of other buildings in an area.
4. Harmony. That buildings should blend harmoniously with others in the vicinity.
5. Enclosure. That spatial identity is of major importance, and that new developments should incorporate such public spaces as squares and courtyards.
6. Materials. That building materials used should reflect the diversity of local traditions, and not conform to any national or international standard.
7. Decoration. That decorative craftsmanship should still be, as it always has been, a major feature of the urban environment.
8. Art. That artistic decoration has a major and a symbolic role to play in the enhancement of the urban environment, and that artists as well as architects should have a role to play in the designing of new living environments.

³⁸ Krier, 'In Conversation with Christopher Pierce and Thomas Weaver', pp. 68-77.

9. Signs and lighting. That these also contribute to the success of the built environment, and should be put up with care.
10. Community. That a successful community is a place where residents feel involved, and contribute to the planning and running of their environment.³⁹

However, it was mentioned by Simon Conibear that it has not been possible to follow these principles precisely in every case. Attempting to balance the ideals of urbanism with cost pressures, building regulations, local government requirements, marketing considerations, and critically, differing architectural preferences had been anything but easy. At every phase, UK Government Treasury officials who had oversight over funding, would require that certain commercial results had been achieved before funding for the next phase was released. However, despite all these conflicting requirements, an authentic urban village has been created and, to a surprising degree it complies with the original Krier vision.

‘Sustainability’ is a concept which has lost a great deal of meaning through overuse. Krier argued that the term ‘sustainable’ indicates what is ecological-it has little to do with concepts of progress, modernism, ideology, creativity, industry, or economy. Sustainability addresses ultimate purposes and the means used when we build cities and exploit natural resources. Modernist architecture and Suburbanism are to him the reification of a type of blind will, celebrating modernism’s ‘rational’ nature and its presumed technological genius.⁴⁰

Sustainability as a principle was key to the thinking behind the Poundbury masterplan. In common usage, the word ‘sustainability’ has come to mean many things. At Poundbury it seems to underwrite an approach to planning and building, to keeping as much as possible in the local area. It means, wherever possible, finding local suppliers of building materials, and building services. All builders are privately owned firms, and trade services are found locally. All building materials and the energy used in construction should, ideally, come from local, renewable sources. As far as possible, design concepts have been local. It also means enlightened planning to

³⁹ Prince Charles, *A Vision for Britain* (London: Doubleday, 2019), p. 53; and Ashley Wheaton (ed.), *Building a Legacy* (London: The Prince’s Foundation, 2019), p. 9-10.

⁴⁰ Krier, ‘Classicus and Vernaculus’, pp. 25-30.

enable easy local walkable shopping. All household shopping is located in each quadrant so that it can be completed on foot with no need of a car. A small local shopping complex for every 750 residences is the aim. The benefits are: reduced car use, increased exercise value in walking, and the purchase of smaller lots of groceries more often, thus supporting the local small businesses. The result is an average fifteen-minute walk, say three times a week; this, rather than a single weekly car trip with minimal exercise benefit, high car dependency, and considerable carbon cost. Poundbury allotments are available in several locations so that residents can be more self-sufficient in growing the food on their tables.⁴¹

A part of the sustainability ethos was outlined by Tony Aldous in the foundational text, *Urban Villages*.⁴² The quality of sustainability can be seen in this way: ideally the residents develop or bring a commitment to caring for their new community, this leads to a degree of self-policing; the usefulness and value of buildings survives changes of function and fashion: they are flexible enough to adapt to new uses rather than stand empty. Places are not engineered for a single use age or social group. They give a cross-section of people the chance to live there.⁴³

Sustainability may also mean that the new resident could become independent by starting their own small business. This can be done by taking advantage of Poundbury's well designed shop and office spaces. There is emphasis on artisan services such as electric bicycles, florists, home furnishings. Virtually all houses sold are lived in by new residents who support local businesses; there are no absentee owners holding empty houses for speculative purposes.

Wide open green spaces are provided alongside the relatively dense housing, so that it is easy to walk pets and get healthy exercise without needing a car, or needing to visit a gym. Sustainability could also mean designing homes for today's living conditions including high speed broadband for best communications, enabling work from home, again reducing the need for car use.

'Sustainable' at Poundbury means obtaining energy from renewable sources. Biogas from anaerobic digestate provides winter heating for all Dorchester homes. The source material is maize, it is all renewable without needing recourse to any fossil fuel. Simon Conibear says it is working well;

⁴¹ Martin, *Prince Charles and Architectural Debate*, p. 55.

⁴² Tony Aldous, *Urban Villages* (London: The Urban Villages Group, 1992), p. 17.

⁴³ Aldous, *Urban Villages*, p. 18.

more raw material is now coming from locally grown maize and similar crops. As well, at the Anaerobic Digestion plant, commercial food waste is turned into green energy. It is claimed that heating for 4000 homes is provided, more than enough for all of Dorchester, including Poundbury.⁴⁴ As well as heating, the process produces bagged fertiliser. This seems to be an innovation worth pursuing, subject to the opportunity cost of good agricultural land given over to maize production. In Poundbury 26,000 tonnes of maize silage is consumed every year to provide heating for around 2000 homes. The open question of the real opportunity cost of food products not produced remains to be answered. As well, there may be a connected risk of increased local flooding due to the excessive soil compaction which is characteristic of maize-silage production.⁴⁵

Surprisingly there are no visible solar panels on Poundbury roofs. The 2019 Poundbury Code bans solar panels if they are visible from the street, however it allows them if they are hidden from street view, subject to individual review by the Regulator. As well, it permits certain types of solar tiles subject to review.⁴⁶ Car charging points are stipulated on all new housing developments. As well, they recycle the packaging, whether it's plastic, tin, glass or cardboard.

Anne Gray of the Dorset Council Economic Unit reported that Poundbury has had a positive impact on the Dorset area, adding approximately £98 million per annum to local revenue and supporting around 1,600 full time jobs. The new commercial facilities have also attracted a considerable number of businesses from elsewhere in Dorset. By the end of the project, Poundbury will be adding almost £105 million per annum to revenues in the Dorset area; and will be supporting 1,760 new jobs. Once the development is complete, around 2025, the development phase will have

⁴⁴ Miles King, 'More Maize Madness: Far from being a climate change panacea, Biogas helps intensify its consequences', *A New Nature Blog*, published 22 January, 2016, at <https://anewnatureblog.com/2016/01/22/far-from-being-a-climate-change-panacea-producing-biogas-helps-intensify-its-consequences/>. Accessed 24/03/21.

⁴⁵ King, 'More Maize Madness'.

⁴⁶ Natalie Pace, 'Poundbury. Powered by Vision, Farmers and Unicorns', *Thrive*, published January 2019, at <https://thriveglobal.com/stories/poundbury-powered-by-vision-farmers-and-unicorns/>. Accessed 25/3/21.

added on average about £236 million to the local economy and provided almost 5,000 person-years of employment.⁴⁷

One reliable indicator of community social health can be drawn from crime statistics. According to the report published by UK Crime Statistics and other similar sources, Poundbury has a slightly higher than national average incidence of anti-social behaviour: that is a broad category including littering, graffiti, noise, and minor property damage.⁴⁸ In all other categories (robbery, car theft, violence, mugging) it is considerably lower. This suggests that the integrated social housing policy at Poundbury is not entirely successful. The mixing of council housing with owned housing has been tried often, usually in an effort to eliminate the distressing ghetto effects and urban violence seen in many UK cities. It confirms that Poundbury is a part of the real world, it is not an insulated, enclosed, middle-class bubble. It may also be symptomatic of a newly composed rural community where residents have different levels of income, and have not yet established effective ways of getting on together.

Visiting Poundbury: February 2019

A visit to Poundbury is an essential part of an assessment: my visit took place in February 2019. It takes over three hours from Waterloo station to Dorchester, then Queen Mother's Square at the centre of Poundbury is a ten-minute taxi ride. As I was representing INTBAU Australia, at Poundbury farmhouse I was met by the Development Manager Simon Conibear. He was in a position to walk with me during my visit, answering my questions.

There seems to be a marked change of ambience on entering Poundbury from west Dorchester. There are striking differences when one crosses over the boundary line. The residential streets of Dorchester have no aesthetic appeal, they are standard cheaply built houses. The visitor is moving from a conventional suburban layout to a high-density urban plan, set in a country town. The streets in the new development have irregular width and tend to be angled or curved, they are apparently random, unplanned. The houses are built close together, although the avenues are wide.

⁴⁷ Anne Gray, 'Poundbury Economic Impact Statement', *Policy and Research Dorset County Council*, published June 2018, at https://poundbury.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/08/Poundbury_Impact_June_2018_update.pdf. Accessed 25/3/21.

⁴⁸ UK Crime Statistics, 'Dorset, South West England, England, DT1 3AZ', at <https://crime-statistics.co.uk/postcode/dt1%203az>. Accessed 4/4/21.



Figure 2: Aerial view of Poundbury. Image taken on site by author, February, 2019.

What is missing? No parking meters, no satellite dishes or aerials on houses, no traffic lights, no visible advertising, no overhead power lines, no visible solar panels on roofs, and many small shops are located amongst housing. There are very few mature trees, so there is no green canopy to soften the newly finished streets. Parking appears to be readily available on every street, and the light vehicular traffic appears to be moving quite slowly.

Apart from the Damer's First School complex, there are no modern looking buildings: they have all been constructed in traditional, historic styles ranging from early Georgian through to the Arts and Crafts Movement. The architectural forms used in the early stages at Poundbury were, for the most part, found close by in Fordington, a suburb of Dorchester, and in outlying villages near the town. In the UK, all provincial towns seem to have a similar High Street displaying the shop fronts of well-known national chains. In Poundbury, there is no corresponding high street and the national chains are not visible in anything the same way as in, say, nearby Dorchester.

Queen Mother Square is most impressive, and the scale and placement of the buildings seems about right. The 'square' is not rectangular, but is an irregular polygon. It provides a social hub for Poundbury and the increasing number of tourists who come from all over the world, many from

architectural and town planning institutions. The Duchess of Cornwall Inn designed by Quinlan Terry is expertly detailed, based on his restaurant block at Richmond Riverside. Strathmore House is impressive, well detailed, and intelligently scaled for the square. The Royal Pavilion is the dominant building in the square and provides the baroque tower element so important in the skyline, and prominent in the original Krier drawings.⁴⁹

The Royal Pavilion has a colonnade of fluted Greek Doric columns of exceptional quality. The impressive base to the tower is clad in reconstituted stone with a limestone finish. It has intersecting barrel vault arcading finished with emphatic internal coffering. The ashlar stonework walling is chamfered with very fine joints. The tower structure has exact cornice work where such refinements as guttae and mutules have not been overlooked. Close by, at King's Point House there is an excellent Doric frieze with *bucrania* (bull's skulls) cast between the triglyphs.⁵⁰ This is correct and scholarly, indicating a serious commitment to classical detail, way over the normal requirements of a commercial property development. As well, in the Waitrose frontage there is an interesting example of mannerist play; pilaster forms disappear and reappear from behind ashlar stonework.

Around two kilometres to the south-west, Buttermarket is a long irregular space between housing blocks with a café (Name) at its high point and shops on the western side. There is free parking in the centre, and shops and apartments on either side. This space slopes gently, with views towards the Iron Age hillfort Maiden Castle, surrounded on both sides by immense green fields. 'Carolina' balconies are seen in many places particularly at Buttermarket and Laddock Terrace, with slender cast metal columns; this is an American idea introduced by architect Ben Pentreath. They are most attractive and economical while fitting in well with the traditional scheme.

⁴⁹ Martin, *Prince Charles and the Architectural Debate*, pp. 47-55.

⁵⁰ For a clear description of the Greek Doric order with glossary notes see Robert Adam, *Classical Architecture* (London: Viking, 1990), pp. 72-75.



Figure 3: Buttermarket shops with centre parking. Note Carolina balconies. Image taken on site by author, February, 2019.

Architect Ben Pentreath's neo-Regency villas are located in Woodlands Crescent near the original Poundbury Farmhouse (1878) and are some of the best, most civilised houses, quiet and restrained. This is helped by one of the only stands of mature trees in the development. In general trees have been planted right through the development, but they are immature so don't yet offer any much-needed green canopy. Woodlands Crescent is another complete place; it comes together as being authentic and also aesthetically satisfying because certain elements are there and are composed well. The proportions of the houses and their window and door treatment are most pleasing.



Figure 4: Typical terrace housing in Edwardian period style, south-east quadrant. Image taken on site by author, February, 2019.

Reproduced facades inspired by Edwardian and Victorian warehouses are used in an imaginative way as frontages for blocks of apartments in all quadrants. Expertly laid polychromatic brickwork adds considerably to the impression of authenticity. This and the use of other imaginative ideas means that Poundbury is at no stage simply repetitive, empty, *faux* neo-Georgian. The same applies to the use of Victorian terrace houses and vernacular coursed rubble clad cottages, all newly built. A mix of housing types is presented, it is never predictable, always interesting. At St John's Way there is an impressive row of white Arts and Crafts style villas looking across the Great Field towards the Damer's First School complex.

Vernacular cottages are seen in all sectors of the development, probably based on Fordington examples. They have coursed rubble walling, slate roofs and excellently judged solid-looking rustic proportions. The vernacular component of most country towns is well represented; it tends to be, at the earliest, Victorian or late Georgian.⁵¹ Many traditional styles are in use, over twenty architects have contributed; thus, in parts it resembles a built outdoor museum of architectural styles. Historian Richard John has

⁵¹ R.W. Brunskill, *Illustrated Handbook of Vernacular Architecture* (London: Faber & Faber, 1970), p. 37.

described the earlier sections at Poundbury as “having a too-rich palette of materials, slate, tile, brick, stone, flint and render. The result is, even the master planner would admit, is rather over-egged.”⁵²

This is interesting, engaging, and broad-in-scope, but any possibility of overall style coherence through the development has been lost. Parts of the development are way too classically emphatic, neo-Georgian windows appear to be too large, and columns too visually bulky. Simon Conibear said they were done in the earlier stages when architects felt more defensive against what was, at that time, vocal modernist criticism. Antagonism from architects has calmed down greatly and these days Poundbury seems to be largely accepted on its own terms.⁵³ It is *sui generis*, a type of sufficient originality to make direct comparisons extremely difficult.

Style references at Poundbury include Art Deco, Baroque, Carolina Colonial, Edwardian, Chateau, Neo-Georgian, Gothick, Palladian, Greek Doric, Mackintosh, Mannerist, Post Modern, Regency, Roman Doric Vernacular Dorset, Victorian, Charleston Colonial and Edwardian-Victorian Industrial. While this variety is of great interest, it is an open question whether this adds or detracts from a feeling of community, where coherence should underpin the setting.

The architecture planned for the north-east sector seems comparatively quiet, well thought out, with excellent detail; it looks balanced, pleasing, and appropriate. Unlike most housing estates where the volume builder’s offers of so-called heritage architecture does not include properly researched detailing and proportions, Poundbury seems to offer informed design. As concluded by Architectural Historian Professor Daniel Maudlin, houses on most council estates in Britain are easy and cheap to construct, and are designed first and foremost to comply with local government planning regulations.

The phenomenon of the "neo-traditional house" has defined commercial suburban domestic architecture in England through the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. The high-volume house builders (national firms such as Wimpey, Persimmon, Barratt and Red-Row) describe

⁵² Richard John, *Robert Adam: The Search for a Modern Classicism* (Mulgrave: Images Publishing, 2010), p. 192.

⁵³ Simon Conibear, interview with author, January, 2019 at Poundbury Farmhouse.

their products as "traditional" or "heritage" homes. From the early 1990s to 2008, the number of domestic houses increased steadily.⁵⁴

These, in the main, present an uninformed version with naive neo-Georgian references, typically a two-story building with a Doric portico, applied quoins and window surrounds in precast concrete with a paint finish.⁵⁵ According to Simon Conibear 90% of home buyers are English; the typical buyer is around 60, recently retired, married, in many cases with another house in say, Spain. Probably ex-London with the proceeds of a house sale to fund the proposed Poundbury purchase, and with a lot left over. I asked Simon what these people did during the day; he said they must join Poundbury clubs, groups and associations. The Poundbury local magazines describe the many interest groups available; they appear to be quite ready to welcome new members.

However, when you are there moving around there is a real sense that the streets feel empty, unoccupied. To the often-heard observation that there don't seem to be many people walking around, I would reply that compared to crowded central London the lack of people would always be striking, especially where the period frontage at Poundbury is normally seen in an inner urban location with greater population.⁵⁶

There are many small owner-operated shop enterprises in residential areas. Simon Conibear made much of the locally based artisan retailers, very few high street chains are seen, and the rents are very affordable. The supermarket 'Little Waitrose' has a small footprint (800 sqm) to make it less of a threat to individual enterprises located in quadrants. Architect and planner Hugh Petter talked about the single mother who started a curtain business and now has 8 people working for her. Simon talked about a similar story with a florist and an ex-banker who is running an electric bicycle business; at least 60% of small business owners are women. Some 1500 new jobs have been created so far.

⁵⁴ Daniel Maudlin, 'Constructing Identity and Tradition: Englishness, Politics and the Neo-Traditional House', *Journal of Architectural Education*, vol. 63, no. 1 (October 2009), pp. 51-63.

⁵⁵ Maudlin, 'Constructing Identity and Tradition', p. 51.

⁵⁶ Simon Conibear, interview with author, January, 2019 at Poundbury Farmhouse; and Hugh Petter, interview with author, 15 March, 2019, at Winchester.



Figure 5: Shops located throughout residential areas. Image taken on site by author, February, 2019.

The New Urban Village theorists believe that it is possible to achieve a psychologically acceptable setting by using design rules. This should create an urban fabric with the same combination of individuality and general consistency that we find in traditional cities and towns. Consistency is important to provide stability and reassurance, individuality can create zones of particular interest to counter blandness and uniformity. However, adding individuality to a planned development requires flair, imagination, and unique skills. According to Simon Conibear, Léon Krier set the ratios at 80/20 per cent. That is, 80 per cent should be consistent, 20 per cent unusual and, in some cases, quirky or surprising. A good example of this is the use of very swollen, but correctly detailed Greek Doric columns in the undercroft to Brownsword_Hall on Pummery Square.

Art historian Richard John has compared Poundbury to a smaller and later Adam Urbanism development, Field Farm, Shepton Mallet, Somerset where the relatively plain early Georgian terrace designs work well. They prove an important point: that traditional design is successful if the houses can be offered at competitive prices. This masterplan provided for 550 houses and apartments, on a seventeen-hectare site jointly owned by a local farming family and the Duchy of Cornwall. Other buildings and landscape elements include the original farmhouse with associated parkland, a new

school, local shop, a village green and an old chapel, acting as a community building. The design was developed according to traditional principles and has the character of a distinct village. It is felt that an excellent template has been created for speculative builders: it is aesthetically pleasing, it has taken 15 years to develop, and it has been a profitable development.⁵⁷

According to eminent philosopher Sir Roger Scruton our need for belonging is part of what and who we are, it is the true foundation of aesthetic judgment. It is connected to the concept of self-knowledge. The decision to purchase a house may be seen as an excellent example of the exercise of self-knowledge.⁵⁸ Thus the need to belong to a group strikes to the heart of the Poundbury rationale. If we lose sight of this need, we risk building an environment in which function triumphs over form and all other values. Style is less important than of the need to find an authentic, not forced, community feeling. Scruton believes that architectural style wars, as seen in the late 20th century, are steadily abating. To Scruton, the important issue is no longer style, but about a growing recognition of the deep truth that as we build, we attempt to satisfy the need for self-affirmation, and this leads to belonging.⁵⁹

In Poundbury, private and affordable housing are interspersed and indistinguishable from each other. Current guidelines require 35% of housing in Poundbury to be affordable and The Duchy continues to explore innovative ways in which the local housing need can be met. Title to properties can be arranged as 'shared equity' between a lending authority (specifically the Guinness Trust) and a resident. This means that when the property (or leasehold) is sold the proceeds, including any capital gain, are shared between the two parties. One of the more innovative ideas suggested by The Prince of Wales in *A Vision of Britain* (1989), was to build private and social housing alongside one another rather than continuing to build huge housing estates which develop the ghetto effect. According to The Guinness Partnership – which provides much of the affordable housing – Poundbury is its most successful site with residents reporting a high level of satisfaction. The partnership has used principles learnt in Poundbury across the UK. In

⁵⁷ John, *Robert Adam*, p. 192.

⁵⁸ Roger Scruton, *The Aesthetics of Architecture* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013), p. 244.

⁵⁹ Roger Scruton, 'Here's what I want from modern architecture, explains housing tsar Roger Scruton', *The Spectator*, published 23 February, 2019, at <https://www.spectator.com.au/2019/02/heres-what-i-want-from-modern-architecture-explains-housing-tsar-roger-scruton/>. Accessed 04/04/21.

2015 the partnership completed its 250th home in Poundbury. Their aim was to provide housing of this quality to people's lives and open up a lot of opportunities that would otherwise not be available.

For example, the Duchy has been pioneering a Discount to Open Market Scheme. It allows first time buyers to purchase properties with a 25-30% discount. The buyer retains 100% ownership of the property but must sell the home on to the next owners with the same discount. The difference between this and other Government schemes is that the homes will remain discounted in perpetuity. To be eligible for the scheme applicants must be on West Dorset District Council's Housing List and have a combined income below £60,000.

Krier sums up the achievement at Poundbury: "Traditional urban design and architecture allow us to articulate and order contrasting social activities into finite, meaningful, ecological organisms. Poundbury today is much more than a glorified council estate."⁶⁰ Having conceived Poundbury as a carefully planned recreation of a traditional organically developed village, the planners followed their carefully articulated principles. Examination of the Krier interviews makes quite clear the continual need for compromise and accommodation during the evolution of the development. Each change provided a learning experience so that the eventual outcome is now refined, better and within reach of more people.⁶¹

By 2025, the development will be complete. Poundbury will have around 2000 new households, and over new 200 businesses with a resident population of around 6000. The Dorset region as a whole will be enjoying substantially increased revenues due to the initiatives enacted at Poundbury and the arrival of four thousand new residents. On the architectural side there have been adjustments: the architectural design in the north-east sector and in later Duchy master-planned communities (for instance, Nansledan, Cornwall) shows early signs of being less experimental, more coherent.

The key question must be: how important was the decision to use traditional architectural forms? While sustainable community formation was the objective, this must have been far easier in a setting with which the residents felt comfortable and were prepared to support the concept to the extent of investing in a property. Traditional forms, with their nostalgic and aspirational appeal, when combined with appropriate pricing seems to have

⁶⁰ Léon Krier, 'Modernity and its Discontents', *Journal of Architecture and Urbanism*, vol. 37, no. 4 (2013), pp. 227-230.

⁶¹ Krier, 'Modernity and its Discontents', p. 229.

been a winning formula. At Poundbury, and now at ⁶²many other locations in Britain, Europe and America, the traditional theme has gained a high degree of acceptance. It is now a credible proposition that a townscape of Neo-traditional architecture could provide the most optimised setting for successful community formation, and, at the same time, it would meet reasonable profit objectives.

To most people in the west, a traditional setting provides a measure of reassurance and a reminder of historical links and personal memories. These are easily forgotten in such a fast moving, fractured, unstable political and cultural era. Thus, the need for places like Poundbury, and for more investigations into the best way to make a viable, safe and harmonious community.

Architect Hugh Petter of Adam Architects in Winchester has current masterplans for Newquay-Nansledan in Cornwall, and also a planned housing project near Blenheim Palace in Oxfordshire. In these developments there is a sense of coherence and there is a settled architectural language limited to around four 'quiet styles' all drawn from local settings using local materials. It is clear that the experiment at Poundbury has produced valuable learnings. At Nansledan, which is more than twice the size of Poundbury, there will be a supermarket to serve four quadrants, there are churches planned, and there will be a designated High Street. Street and location names are, in the main, in the Cornish dialect. Nansledan will be Cornish; Poundbury has no particular regional affiliation, and in rural England this is noticeable.

The issue remains: how important was the decision to use traditional architectural forms, barring Modernism? While sustainable community formation was the objective, this must have been far easier in a setting with which the residents felt comfortable. Traditional facades with their nostalgic appeal, when combined with appropriate pricing, seems to have been a winning formula. At Poundbury, and now at many other locations in Britain, Europe and America, the traditional approach has gained acceptance. As explained so clearly by architectural critic and enthusiastic Modernist Ada Louise Huxtable:

Most people in the west are not architects, and a traditional setting provides a measure of reassurance and a reminder of historical links to personal memories, easily forgotten in such a fast moving,

⁶² Ada Louise Huxtable, *Unreal America* (New York: The New Press, 1999).

fractured, unstable political era. The idea of illusion so denigrated by architects is exactly what many people need.⁶³

Thus the need for places like Poundbury, and for more experiments into the best way to make a viable, safe and harmonious community.

Conclusion

Architectural and aesthetic theory are always interesting and complex. However, it is clear, to the author at least, that the experiment at Poundbury has been, on the whole, a success, and the learnings which could only come from a successful built and offered-for-sale experiment like Poundbury are being put into practice at places like Newquay and Nansledan. Providing it is done in an informed way and is governed by appropriate codes; with house pricing set close to market rates, then it is a valid approach to providing sustainable accommodation with high retained value for owners. A key benefit is the possibility of creating and supporting a harmonious and cohesive community.

⁶³ Huxtable, *Unreal America*, p. 31.