

Re-imagining rural towns: A design-led approach

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Abstract:

One in five people in Europe live in rural towns of under 50,000 people.¹ Founded as trading, defensive and administrative centres, these towns have undergone dramatic and rapid change due to increasing personal mobility and the shifting nature of the rural economy. Examination reveals preserved historic cores surrounded by sprawling low density housing estates, industrial units and retail stores. By drawing people away from town centres, these developments erode the sense of community and public life and increase reliance on the car. In-migration of city dwellers attracted by a perceived higher quality of life has raised demand for housing, pricing out local people. The character and sense of place at the heart of the popularity of rural towns as places to live and work is under threat.

The Localism agenda² and National Planning Policy Framework offer the opportunity to re-think our approach to rural towns. This paper critiques prevalent development strategies and proposes a place-specific alternative. A vision for dynamic, well connected and compact rural towns is described through design studies carried out by the authors. The approach:

- Recognises the virtues and possibilities of inherited urban fabric;
- Re-connects town centres to their suburbs and hinterland;
- Integrates new homes into town cores;
- Creates opportunities for a flexible mix of uses.

The study argues that the growth and evolution of sustainable rural towns should be as much spatial as it is economic and political and suggests a positive role for architects in enhancing the experience of living and working in a 21st century rural town.

¹ Paul Knox & Heike Mayer, 'Small town sustainability' p23

² The Localism Act (2011) aims to devolve power from UK central government to local councils and local people, allowing communities to shape development in their area through local neighbourhood plans.

Introduction:

In England, there are over 1,000 small towns with a population between 1,000 and 20,000.³ In many cases, these rural settlements have a high historical and cultural value, but their growing desirability as places to live conceals challenges of decreasing distinctiveness and loss of vitality and culture. In this paper I will argue that the growth and evolution of sustainable rural towns should be as much spatial and related to notions of place as it is economic, social and political. This suggests a more positive role for designers in enhancing the experience of living, working and playing in a 21st century rural town. A case study in Ludlow, Shropshire, UK demonstrates an analytical mapping strategy that reveals opportunities for design to reinforce, consolidate, strengthen and enhance place and identity in rural towns. The mapping is further tested through two design projects. A resulting refined mapping process will then be described and its potential discussed.

Changing roles for rural towns

Historically, rural towns have provided services to their surroundings and acted as a centre for the rural community. Their origins as made them the focus of the rural economy and offered a connection to wider European trading networks.

During the 20th and early 21st centuries rural towns have undergone dramatic and rapid change due to increasing personal mobility and the shifting nature of the rural economy. Examination reveals fossilised historic cores surrounded by sprawling low density housing estates, industrial units and retail stores. By drawing people away from town centres, these developments erode the sense of community and public life and increase reliance on the car. In-migration of city dwellers attracted by a perceived higher quality of life has raised demand for housing, pricing out local people. Edge developments compromise the clarity of historic rural towns and create *“a schizophrenic character with a clash of personalities between suburban*

³ DETR, 'Our countryside: The Future' p74

and historic core."⁴ The sense of place at the heart of the popularity of rural towns as places to live and work is under threat.

In England, the Localism Act, which gained Royal Assent in November 2012, aims to decentralise decision making to local people in the biggest shake up of the planning system since its foundation. It presents a unique opportunity to redistribute knowledge and decision making power to the people it affects every day. Top-down is to be replaced by bottom-up, with the aim of *"reinvigorating the most local forms of government – parish, town and community councils – allowing them to take control of key local processes, assets and services tailored to the needs of local residents"*⁵. Localism offers the opportunity for local people to *'reclaim the initiative'* and for the people who know places best to influence their future. Importantly, the increasing role of community-led initiatives has consequences for how we as designers conceive the urban environment and opens the door for a wide range of community-specific approaches and responses.

An alternative approach to understanding market towns

In this paper I will discuss an alternative approach to understanding and designing in rural towns.

Firstly, an approach to recording, analysing and mapping a rural town that becomes an armature for design will be discussed. Through careful and critical mappings of place and statistics at multiple scales, areas of fragile, neglected or weak town fabric are revealed.

Secondly, a vision for dynamic, well connected and compact rural towns will be described through design studies carried out by the authors in Ludlow, Shropshire, UK. Taking a number of sites highlighted by the mapping process, spatial and formal enquiries through the processes and mechanisms of design illustrate an approach which integrates new buildings into historic town cores, reinforces and strengthens settlements and creates a dialogue between historic fabrics and new buildings.

The approach has been shaped through design-led research using the tools of the designer. Here, the process of design is seen as equal to, if not more important, than the completed artefacts. This has

⁴ Barton Wilmore, *New Market Town Roots* p3

⁵ RIBA, *'Guide to Localism Opportunities for Architects: Part One: Neighbourhood planning'* p7

parallels to Donald Schon's concepts of '*reflection-in-action*' and '*reflection-on-action*',⁶ which emphasise the critical and reflective nature of design research. Alongside personal and mentored reflection and iteration, the design work has been peer reviewed .

Mapping rural towns

In order to plan for the future of rural towns effectively, their setting, sense of place and condition need to be carefully assessed. Representations of place crafted through maps, drawings and in particular physical models uncover new opportunities across seemingly exhausted ground. The importance of mapping is described by James Corner in 'The Agency of Mapping' as "*instrumental in the construing and constructing of lived space*" [...] *a collective enabling enterprise, a project that both reveals and realises hidden potential*"⁷. To achieve this, mapping must go beyond 'tracing' what is already known to reveal the hidden forces underlying the structure of a specific place.⁸

A widely used method of understanding historic townscape is the characterisation study. English Heritage Historic Area Assessments and CADW's Characterisation studies are "*intended to assist planners, historic environment specialists, communities, developers and others in evaluating the historic environment [...] and helps to address issues that may threaten to change that character.*"⁹ Historic Area Assessments (HAA) provide an important and practical tool for the informed management of the historic environment, but while exemplary in their exploration of history and morphology, the outcome of such a study is conservation-led and in many cases does not provide guidance for designers or townspeople to help shape the future of a place. Instead, they reinforce protectionist principles that has in many cases resulted in resistance to change and atrophy.

Using Corner's language, these studies rarely go beyond 'tracings' of place; they do not *reformulate* what already exists- they only *report* it. A desire for a mapping method that goes beyond preservation and

⁶ Donald Schon, *The Reflective Practitioner: How Professionals Think in Action* (Avebury: Ashgate Publishing Limited, 1991)

⁷ James Corner, 'The Agency of Mapping: Speculation, Critique and Invention' in Dennis Cosgrove (ed) 'Mappings' p213

⁸ James Corner, 'The Agency of Mapping: Speculation, Critique and Invention' in Dennis Cosgrove (ed) 'Mappings' p214

⁹ EH, 'Understanding Place. Historic Character Assessment: Principles and Practice' p2

reveals opportunities for the designer has led to the development of a multi-layered analytical method that records and reads a place as it is found through both fieldwork and digital means. The resulting abstracted representations of reality each explore a different aspect of place. The mappings are, however, seen as interrelated: their overlay and juxtaposition reveals new insights and allows new possibilities to emerge.

The maps are divided into a number of themes:

- **Landscape:** examining underlying landform, waterways and geology. Both Lynch (*Image of the City*) and Norburg Schulz (*Genius Loci*) consider the figure ground and its relationship to the underlying topography as important to the identity of a place. Exploration of these underlying structures can help understand the reasons for location and organisation of a town. For example Ludlow's location on a river bend with a steeply cut slope creates a natural defensible position for a castle and a controllable river crossing. A relatively flat ridge provides an ideal location for a market outside the castle gate and a dominating position for a church.
- **Vegetation:** including areas of green space, vegetation and tree cover. The town is overlooked by a woodland common to the south and west. Within the town itself vegetation is limited to the castle grounds; the majority of the town has a dense urban fabric with little public green space.
- **History:** Revealing historic plan forms and gradual changes to the fabric of the place, informed by MRG Conzen's plan analysis method of analysing morphology and growth in historic towns. Conzen's analysis of Ludlow reveals four phases of development, starting with the construction of the castle and surrounding village, before development along a north-south trade route, the creation the market square, and finally the southern planned town within the town wall.
- **Morphology:** Describing the figure ground of the town, revealing solid and void, density of development and patterns within the built fabric, informed by Christian Norbrg-Schulz 'Genius Loci'. Ludlow has a characteristic dense medieval core with well defined north-south streets but less defined east-west lanes. Outside the historic core density reduces; housing additions since 19th century are clearly readable in the plan form.
- **Routes and Ways:** The roads, squares, paths and lanes around the town, including analysis of weight of use and traffic. Major north south streets are wider and more heavily trafficked than east west lanes. To the north east, a large area of car parking around the railway station and Tesco store are a major point of arrival but are undefined and lack a sense of gateway or edge.

- **Land use and Key buildings:** Existing land uses clearly identify the commercial heart of the town and surrounding residential areas. Important assets within the fabric of the town, for example the church, library, school and castle are identified, supported by a nodal analysis of routes and squares defining important public spaces and junctions.
- **Spatial character :** Alongside the analytical mapping, studies have been undertaken with a focus on the character and material of the town. These included a catalogue of construction, detail and the material; a photographic survey of spaces and ways; and explorations of public space.

Part 2: Testing the process through design studies

Two theoretical design projects, located on different scales of site with different conditions, test the limitations of the analytical mapping. The projects have been designed using a framework derived from critically contextual buildings in Switzerland and a parallel stream of architectural production identified in the 'quiet English' work of Sergison Bates, Caruso St John, Stephen Taylor and Jonathan Woolf.

Once a site is identified through the mapping process, a careful reading of the site and context 'as found' is undertaken to reveal underlying structures, ground notations, ways and grain. Site thinking is expanded beyond the boundary to knit new buildings into the fabric of the town. Burns and Kahn suggest consideration of three distinct aspects of site that support this approach: the area of control- a boundary traced through ownership and property lines; the area of influence- the external forces acting upon a site; and, the the area of affect- the areas impacted upon following design action. This suggests a reciprocal relationship between site and context but also a temporal relationship, leading to an understanding of site as *"a physically specific place and a spatially and temporally expansive surround."*¹⁰ Considering site not as fixed but as temporal offers the possibility of new uses, forms and architectural language that grows from, enhances and is an addition to the historic fabric.

Two Projects

A vacant plot embedded within the historic planned town on Raven Lane is reconsidered as infill live-work housing. Testing densification and consolidation of the historic core through urban repair, the project proposes two live-work houses, a duplex apartment and three live-work studios around a public yard.

¹⁰ Carol Burns & Andrea Kahn, Site Matters' pxii

Referencing the patterns of burgage development in the lane, three long, thin plots are reinstated with a strong street presence, defining the street boundary. Two three-bed four person houses front the street, with private rear courtyards and studio space beyond. A lane leads to a public rear yard, edged by a mews of one-bed live-work units, and connected through to a lane alongside the site. The simple forms of the buildings are derived from studies of domestic typologies, manipulated to create a hierarchy of space and privacy between living and working.

Castle Street Food Centre is a major public building on the edge of the historic core of the town. The site is a back land plot with panoramic views to the north, currently used as a car park. It presents the opportunity to redefine the northern edge of the historic town and strengthen its skyline. The proposal relocates Ludlow Food Centre, a local produce outlet located outside the town, into the historic town core. The brief focusses on a food hall, supported by additional culinary teaching spaces for Ludlow College, training canteens and small scale food production units. The proposed design knits into and extends a network of alleys, yards and squares with building forms fitting around these new public spaces. Characteristic gable and pitched roof forms found in the town are reduced, abstracted and reinterpreted as brick clad and roofed volumes. A sculpted belvedere 'food compass' frames views to areas of production and growing beyond the town, linking the urban core with its hinterland.

Findings

Through careful and critical mappings of place and statistics at multiple scales, areas of fragile, neglected or weak town fabric are revealed. The approach recognises the value and virtue of inherited urban fabric while seeking to reinforce and strengthen settlements through precise and measured spatial intervention. Sites for intervention are identified *through* the process of mapping, inverting the accepted norm of working from a delimited site and encouraging designers to start "*from the outside in*"¹¹.

However, additional studies of Ludlow were needed to be carried out as part of the design process to address weaknesses in the mapping. Two key aspects were revealed to be important but missing from the process:

¹¹ Peter Marcuse, 'Study Areas, Sites and the Geographic approach to Public Action', in Carol Burns & Andrea Kahn (ed's), *Site Matters* p251

- **Spatial Character and the measure of the town:** While a photographic survey of the character of Ludlow was carried out, the depth of analysis was not sufficient to meaningfully inform design decisions. The importance of knitting into existing networks and patterns in the town resulted in a thorough investigation of the scale and proportion of public spaces and the life that happens between buildings. Five scales of space were identified: Town square, small square, street, lane, yard and alley, each with particular characteristics. Understanding the scale of these spaces was of particular importance for the Castle Street Food Centre, designed around a series of new public spaces and connections across the town. Micro scale analysis of the materials, finishes and details of each type of public space suggests ways of reinterpreting these further within the projects.
- **Vista and Skyline:** The design of the projects was carried out through drawings and models, but of particular importance to the design process was the three dimensional view of the building in context. The impact of new development on the often strong and distinctive skylines of rural towns is an additional consideration that needs to be included in the framework. As Stephen Owen describes, the skyline is a *“clear manifestation of the way that, in the early development of the town, people responded to the shape of the land in locating and designing key buildings, and it is one of the most recognisable and compelling elements of the town’s identity.”*¹² Analysis of a settlement from important vistas can help identify what elements of a town’s morphology should be preserved but can also highlight opportunities for enhancing the skyline. This has parallels to London’s protected views, viewing corridors and panoramas. Here, digital perspective views have become the accepted norm for representing new development and judging its impact. The *“significance, scale and magnitude of effect”*¹³ of new development on the qualities and characteristics of a view are assessed through an Accurate Visual Representation (AVR), precisely locating a development and demonstrating its visibility and form.¹⁴ A similar process could be undertaken for new development in small towns. Key views to the settlement from the hinterland could be identified and the impact of new development on the skyline and figure ground assessed.

In summary

¹² Stephen Owen, ‘Classic English Hill Towns: Ways of Looking at the External Appearance of Settlements’

¹³ Mayor of Londons Office, ‘London View Management Framework: SPG’ p8

¹⁴ Mayor of Londons Office, ‘London View Management Framework: SPG’ p9

The process of design research explored here has described two facets of ongoing research. An evolving approach to recording, analysing and mapping a rural town and its testing in Ludlow suggests the viability of a mapping process that has design at its core. Two process-led design studies in Ludlow based on sites highlighted by the mapping process attempt to show how new buildings at different scales can be integrated into historic urban fabrics. The process of design revealed shortcomings in the mapping process and additional areas for expansion. The resulting refined process is now being tested in a second case study in Ruthin, North Wales, UK.

The approach does not preclude development on the periphery of towns, but rather asserts the potential of insertion into historic cores. New buildings, landscape and connections can consolidate and define fragile historic fabric, proposing possibilities for change. This suggests a move away from a zonal and land use led form of local planning that reacts to incoming projects and proposals toward an *activating* form of planning that encourages, locates and steers development toward difficult and complex historic environments.¹⁵

However, the process raises a number of questions. Whilst providing opportunities as advertised in the preface to the paper, when and who would undertake such a study, and how is it funded? How could the process influence the development of planning policy or local plans? To gain maximum benefit from an in depth mapping process, professional help is likely to be required, risking excluding communities themselves from applying the process. Under-funded Local Authorities do not have the resources or in some cases the necessary expertise to undertake or fund a wide ranging study. Does this mean an independent body, an equivalent to English Heritage, CADW or perhaps Design For London is required to facilitate or undertake this work? Or does there need to be closer collaboration between national conservation bodies, local authorities, town councils and professionals to facilitate the creation of dynamic and sustainable rural towns??

¹⁵ Els Vervloesum et al, 'Urban Renewal in Flanders (2002-2011): A particular Practice in Europe' p12