



Podcast Transcript - How can urban design create thriving communities: Lessons from real-world success stories.

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Gim Sanghera: Hello and welcome to the AHR podcast, where we engage in captivating conversations about the built environment and its influence on shaping a more positive future. I'm Gim Sanghera. I head up the lead studio for AHR and I'm passionate about creating intelligent and inclusive environments which result in sustainable communities.

Year on year the UK's population increases yet footfall in our city centres is in continuous decline and more and more high street businesses are permanently closing their doors. In today's episode we'll be discussing what do we mean by urban design? What do effective and sustainable places need to flourish and how can we build communities which thrive now and well into the future?

I'm joined today by my colleagues, David De Sousa and Karl Burford, both of whom work across the UK and between them have a wide variety of experiences and specialisms within urban design and placemaking. I'd like to welcome you both and invite you to provide a little background to each of your roles, please.

David, would you like to go first?

David De Sousa: Hi, Gim. Yeah. Thanks for the introduction. My name's David De Sousa I'm residential sector lead for AHR. I've 25 years' experience in practice working at both planning and delivery of a range of projects, which includes high density apartment blocks all the way through to masterplanning, new low rise housing, that schemes on both brownfield sites or town extensions.

Gim Sanghera: Fantastic,

David. Thank you for that. And Karle.

Karle Burford: Yeah, thanks, Gim. Hi, Dave. I've been working for, 30 odd years in the profession more years than I'd like to remember. And and I lead the Bristol office for AHR. We often get involved with, often public sectors, but some private sector regeneration schemes, creating new places, quite often do quite a lot of work in our kind of local regional towns, as well as our cities, such as in Taunton Keynesham of course Bristol City itself.

And they're often looking at new areas of existing places, but we've also looked at creating completely new places such as Langarth which is a new town just outside Truro in Cornwall, where we're creating something from scratch across just a load of fields, really so some very different challenges there.

Gim Sanghera: Brilliant. both for that intro. It's such a broad and diverse field is urban design and placemaking. So I guess my first question really is what makes good urban design and placemaking? And if you can give some examples, would you like to go first on that one, Karle?



Karle Burford: Yeah, sure. It is a very difficult, if not broad question but I always start to, it's about people. It's not about bricks and mortars and massing and heights and brand new buildings, et cetera. It's about getting people to be able to live, work, and play all in the same place. This is nothing new.

Back in Victorian times and before then and soon after then there were some very successful towns and cities throughout the UK created we must remember some of those those successes and reapply them for today. So we also need to look at how, today's world is much more diverse and how we make sure That diverse community is included in a place not as simple as it used to be to make sure everybody feel like they're welcome and they're invited. Places really need to be mixed use and proper mixed use, not just a shop on the corner. and then take the kind of uniqueness of the character of both that community and place.

And if you mix all that up, you're more than halfway there. I think the community must feel that they belong. Otherwise it just will not work. For Langarth, as I mentioned earlier the new town outside Truro, we're creating a new town, but of course it did bound existing communities and the city of Truro.

So there we engaged with all the adjacent communities. We did hundreds and hundreds of engagements on one to one and with groups and so on, seeking to understand their desires and their principles and helping or encouraging them to help us create this new place. In fact, it was a series of new places.

It was so big. So we had a full mix of houses, of course, as 4000 houses and apartments plus new schools, new employment recreation areas, heritage to incorporate and of course, nature. So it, Langarth, we're aiming for 20% BNG which is a really high target, but I think we're on track for that.

And the first phase is now starting to be built. So we really brought the communities in with that design process. So they all found part of it to begin with almost nobody really wanted it. But at the end of it, we had no objections at planning. So it was a really great success.

Jim Sanghera: Wow, that's really interesting. You've made a lot of points about then the community and their belonging and the engagement that needs to occur in that. And I think that's a really important part of the work you must do. Have you got some examples as well, David, in terms of, how that may have helped create some fantastic urban design and placemaking kind of projects that you've been involved with?

David De Sousa: I think just to rewind a little bit and go back to some of the points Karle raised about the, what makes good urban design. I think I echo exactly what Karle was mentioning, but I also think it's ability to transform a place, working with the local people and partners is something that we strive for on our residential developments.

I think nature, I think you touched upon it as well, Karle, that nature is really important in residential schemes that we work on and obviously all the schemes that we work on as a, as part of AHR. It's how we can create a beautiful place with habitats that help nature thrive. And I think what we mean by that is actually bringing more more nature.

We, we leave the site once we've finished with more nature than when we began. So it's obviously bringing that element into it. And I think then taking a forward look at lifestyles and climate change, I think looking at how good design can allow that to happen on people's doorstep.



So it's not just looking at low energy buildings and sustainable approaches of energy, but it's also looking at sustainable choices of travel. And also promoting health and being. I think it's really key. We have done that over. We try and do with this all over all our residential schemes from the starting point.

But. Some of the most successful ones are where these elements really have been the driving of the design and then allowing the buildings to then take form and shape afterwards. And the prime one being Peterhead Court, which we did in the London Borough of Ealing, which is an estate regeneration scheme.

And we very much focused on creating family homes. For the local needs. So the residents had a very much a desire to stay in the area. And we were trying to accommodate a number of family homes within a very urban apartment block development. And the way we've successfully brought the community together and to create this sort of embracing the spaces that we've created is by having a very much landscape led Courtyard space, which is used multifunction.

So it has some wildlife areas. It has some play space in there. It has some areas where people can just sit back and dwell in more solitude rather than being interactive. And then this space is then overlooked by everyone's apartments as well. And I think that's the sort of focus that we try and do in residential design.

Jim Sanghera: There's some really good examples there actually, aren't there, across all of those projects, both yourself and Karle have talked about, and actually there are some really interesting projects which aren't even residential, which are education focused and commercially focused that we've also been involved with working with the University of Huddersfield is a great example of that actually recently.

Where we've developed the masterplan for the new health innovation campus. And what underpinned actually some of the points that you've touched on there, both of you in regards to how we're dealing with climate change and the importance of nature and how that kind of adds further value to the spaces and the residents within those buildings or it's really interesting because we looked at the WELL building standard and biophilic design principles and that connection between people and nature is becoming even more prevalent and desired by occupants of buildings and residents.

And I think that really adds value to what we're doing, especially in terms of nature recovery strategy and everything that we've talked about in previous podcasts. Speaking with various kinds of stakeholders that also provide some challenges as well. Doesn't that in an effective placemaking at times. What are some of the challenges that you've, chaps have come across on some of your projects to ensure that we're creating effective placemaking?

Karle Burford: I can add something to that. And in particular, it's not an AHR project, but it's somewhere, where I live and work. It's in the centre of Bristol. About 15 years ago, there was a new shopping centre built at one end of what is central shopping core. The shopping core was, of its age of its time was reasonably successful, full of shops. Of course most of those have now gone about shopping centre created a great place at the end.

Fantastic. The other end, which used to be the prime shopping core literally overnight died and they put residential at the other end. Rightly so mixed use and so on, but without big thinking what they the shopping centre owners had not addressed is the opposite end, the old central shopping core, they put no residential in there no, no additional mixed uses and it failed.



And it's been failing for years. And only now, with some big thinking from the council and others they're starting to bring back some other uses. And residential is proposed to a little degree down that end and so on. And that will start to bring it back to life. And my initial comment about bringing people into the equation is what mixed use is all about.

It's ensuring that for a place to work, you need people to live there. You need some people to work there, have the coffee etc. But it needs to be a rich tapestry of mixes of uses. So I think that's, that is one of those challenges, is ensuring that you've got the big picture. We've all got projects where a single building is proposed, but actually often there's a knock on effect from that single building, both positive and negative at times.

And it's trying to bring in that bigger picture. And that's why, we do a lot of work with the public sector and some of our work here, Temple Meads and Temple Quarters in the centre of Bristol is all about a big picture and ensuring a real sustainable approach rather than let's just put a hotel up. That's what I'm keen on is. Holistic thinking.

Gim Sanghera: And I think these kind of examples that you're providing, I guess it's all about, I think, as you're saying, is creating that sense of place, isn't it, Karle and fostering communities and improved dwell times in these spaces. So what kind of challenges and examples, in terms of dealing with that, David, have you come across?

David De Sousa: I think from a residential point of view. Design point of view, we're always having to balance a number of conflicting objectives whether that is scale and related to viability it's accommodation it's also access and movement and how inclusive design levels is different.

Every site has its unique challenges that it's very difficult to say that this is a typical. These are all of them capture all and you will fix the problem. I think there's just, obviously you have to analyse every site. Every development has different challenges. I think, again, looking at sort of some of our brownfield sites, they come with heavily contaminated remediation requirements already but there is also resistance from the local community to who are used to having a sort of industrial use there, which is very light and low impact to then, how do you cope with an additional 600 people arriving on your doorstep, and the challenges that brings with you, not only, as Karle's touched upon, Connectivity and access to the spaces, but also just generally, how do you deal with the day to day requirements of local infrastructure, car parking, all the schemes that placemaking is everyone wants a beautiful environment, but they still want their three cars.

So how do you balance and offset those elements? So it's really trying to change people's mindset into more sustainable Ways of living, whether that being walking, cycling, using transport or even car sharing. Lots of our schemes looking at those modes to encourage people to be a bit more active

Gim Sanghera: I guess a lot of work was done, wasn't there nationally? Lots of studies were carried out around kind of 15 minute neighbourhoods to combat this necessity to always travel somewhere within a car or by the motorised vehicles to create more sustainable communities and neighbourhoods where everything was accessible. But at the same time, on the flip side of it that also received a bit of bad press as well, didn't it?

15 minute neighbourhoods certainly did up in, in kind of Leeds in this kind of Northern region that I'm based in where people felt that, that in itself wasn't inclusive enough for communities. Have you had further challenges yourself on projects around how we take an approach to masterplanning to create more accessible places, Karle?



Karle Burford: There's a few things there, which kind of tune into my mind on a couple of issues. Bristol is divided by river. Very similar to London, but smaller, obviously. There's north of the, you either live north of the river or south of the river, obviously. Very different places. And that kind of 15 minute idea works for some of those zones.

But there are some zones further out certainly in south Bristol, which do not feel connected to central Bristol, even though they might be only two or three miles away. I did some work with a school a few years back where some of the students said they'd never been to Bristol. So Even though they lived in Bristol, but didn't realise, these are primary school kids, they didn't realise they lived in Bristol, but they also felt distinctly differently from Bristol.

And there's a hell of a lot in there in terms of how disadvantaged that area was, how disconnected it was to, to the city, et cetera, and how we try and bring that in. If you go to that, that certain estate, there's a big shop there, and there's a few other big things there, but nothing else, it's apart from a lot of poverty, but on a kind of more positive note across one of the the river in Bristol, there was a bridge, it was a kind of bridge to nowhere in some ways and at Wapping Wharf a few years back the team at that time, it wasn't AHR, but the client private sector took this site and opened up a bit opposite this bridge, so you could then walk from South Bristol There's one area south of Bristol across the bridge into the city centre.

And it just opened up that whole area and suddenly they created a place out of nothing in Wapping Wharf which has now got apartments and lots of restaurants, small restaurants, a few pubs and so on and lots of shops. And it's a go to destination and we're looking at now taking that to the next level This is going keep on moving.

And now we know it all works and the client knows it all. It all works. We're going to expand it and we're going to move some of the restaurants to the side and build bigger and better and, but still retaining all the existing tenants. Creating more places to live there and so on. And it's a very exciting scheme.

Gim Sanghera: I love that example, actually, Karle where you've talked about, some, love that example about a small intervention, like a bridge that has actually acted as a catalyst to unlock regeneration in an area and connect up communities.

Karle Burford: Yeah, the bridge was there, but it didn't really go connect through this new place. So it was opening up the roots. So that connection is just paramount making things work.

Gim Sanghera: And another point actually that you made about how some of these children in the school whilst they were living in Bristol, didn't feel like they were part of Bristol. I think that kind of points towards this kind of role of equality, diversity and inclusion, doesn't it?

And social justice and placemaking and how they can, they should be better connected with better access and affordable means of transportation to get from one place to another. There must be so many examples of where you see this, David, as well, in, in different boroughs across London.

David De Sousa: Yeah, I think, I think that some of the challenges in London is probably it's probably more developed than say some of the other towns and cities we work across the UK.

We're fortunate that the sort of underground in London is generally very good for accessibility people with mobility needs and help. But taking it back to a, sort of project example and how obviously that



they form of key part of the community is how do we make sure that this, these groups are catered for.

And the example I was going to mention is the Greenwood Centre for Independent Living. Which sort of ties a thread back to what we were talking about earlier is about placemaking and getting the community involved and making sure that everyone has a voice is that we used a series of tactile maps.

So we had some residents of the Greenwood Centre who were visually impaired and found it very difficult to read material. Obviously they could do Braille, but we found it is more beneficial for them. If we could do workshops and actually using 3D physical models. So we worked with them using physical models, tactile textures, very strong contrasting colours again to help people see the different spaces we're creating.

And that workshop was quite free. We were cutting walls and moving things around live with them. So it's more of a, an engaged workshop. I think that they're the really key elements that we've covered in London and going back to the discussion on the 15 minute city and how obviously following the pandemic how towns and neighbourhoods need to be invigorated again.

I think the main message coming out of that is really that you need a variety of accommodation. And again, I think Karle's talked about it and mentioned his examples earlier that you do need a variety of accommodation. You can't just rely solely on one typology or one commercial building or one use to have zones within cities, because again, they won't survive.

You need richness. You need to have everything feeding off each other. You need some dwell spaces. You need some places to eat, meet, greet. All these excellent town centres, exemplar projects all have that in their DNA and they're all again, mini 15 minute cities that overlap each other, almost like a Venn diagram.

And then you're you've naturally created a sort of city and a map that people can flow through where at the moment there are barriers in some extents with the physical or distance and things.

Gim Sanghera: So I guess to ensure that we're creating these kind of interconnected, rich, in a variety of places and spaces that are interconnected, we have to listen, don't we, to quite a wide variety of I've stakeholders to input into all of this and sift through probably a whole range of data.

That, that sounds like a huge challenge in itself, doesn't it? Are there other means you, you talked about creating, having quite tactile hands on workshops where you were actually using models and textures and colours, which sounds really interesting actually. Are there other things and means and methods that we've been utilising and testing?

Karle Burford: Yeah. Langarth we had the council, Cornwall Council create a stakeholder panel, and, the stakeholder panel had, think about 20 people on it. Some were politicians, some were business leaders, some were religious leaders.

There was an architect or two there was local businesses represented and some transport groups, cycling groups and so on. So it was a real wide range and they basically once a month got a presentation from us. And it was very much a workshop. So this is how far the project's gone. These are our next questions.



Are they the right questions? Are there any other questions? Are we answering these questions the right way? And they helped develop the scheme and the masterplan grew over a year or so. And during that time, each of those leaders, and members went back to their groups and their communities and so on.

And in turn explained what we were doing, how we're going. So I really think that created a sense of pride. Maybe it might be a bit grand, but certainly a sense of ownership of the scheme. And as I said earlier, originally no one really wanted it. People were threatening to chain themselves to tractors, et cetera.

By the end of it, we had no objections at planning at all. So I think that does demonstrate very clearly that people came along in that journey. And it was all about talking and inclusivity, inclusion of all those different groups. Some, which were very challenging to begin with.

Gim Sanghera: That's quite a nice outcome, isn't it? Actually from having engaged with them. Where's this all leading then into the future? Then I'm really interested to know I do a lot of future gazing. What are the future challenges, emerging trends and innovations in placemaking? So much talk out there, isn't there? In terms of smart cities and how technology, AI and other advancements in technology are helping to shape and optimise and create these spaces for the future.

David De Sousa: Yeah, I think that the main the ones that really interest the residential or affect the residential design going forward is climate change. Climate change and urbanisation and how buildings and predominantly where we live need to respond to these challenges.

So obviously we're looking at more and more energy efficient dwellings and homes that we're creating across the UK. Obviously that's having knock on effects on people's fuel bills and poverty. So there's many good changes that are happening in that respect.

We've got schemes which are pushing the boundaries even further that sort of going now to Passivhaus. So I know in our Glasgow office, all the projects across Scotland are now being delivered to Passivhaus standards including schools. And residential and going all the way down to the UK as far as London, where sort of poverty is still really really high and impacting many people. So for our social landlords, we are building really fuel efficient homes. They're investing in the actual bricks and mortar at this stage to save costs for our residents going forward.

I think I touched upon it earlier as well. Is this is the 15 minute city and what's going to happen to our cities and centres? There is a return of vibrancy now back in our cities and centres and normality. I think the three day or the working three day working week is having an interesting effect on how people now socialise and interact.

It's much more focused particularly in London, we're noticing that Tuesdays, Wednesdays and Thursdays are significantly much busier than any other times of the week where people then want to extend their weekends to stay locally which is actually really interesting as well in terms of bringing people back into town centres and sustaining high street shops and commercial viabilities.

We're still finding our feet on that one. If I'm honest, I think there's still a sort of uncertainty in the London market about the commercial sector. I know there's a lot of work going on in conversions blend or having more mixed use buildings now in London where predominantly used to be 100% commercial they're now looking at 50% commercial and converting the upper floors back to resi. There are other sectors coming back in. So Build to rent is a huge sector that's now growing, I think, across all the UK which has been linked to affordability of new buyers or first time buyers not being



able to afford to have a home in city centres, but actually still wanting to live in a city centre for the cultural and diverse aspects that they bring

Future gazing, I think technology is going to play a big part in how we live. We're seeing in AI. I'd be interesting to see how that then affects homes and how we work with homes. We know that there is now the ability to use smart technology to heat our homes, take it as far as doing your shopping for you and filling your fridge up. There is a really interesting next five to ten years, be good to see what happens going forward.

Gim Sanghera: So those were some really interesting points that you made the David and regarding these emerging trends and innovations and it brings us back to a point that was made earlier about increasing footfalls in and around town centres, because what we've seen since Covid has been a decline in how retail offerings in town and city centres has had a massive impact on the way that the vibrancy, of a city centre retails downsizing and I'd encourage anybody to next time they're walking down on high street to just look up above shop front signage level and you see so much redundant space within buildings and there's some beautiful grade two listed heritage buildings within Leeds city centre. And we've started to be approached by developers and landlords to start repurposing some of those spaces and looking at how we can bring in mixed use, which kind of reflects some of the comments you were making, David.

And also converting those into not only office type space, but Residential space. So I think that all adds to the mix and the variety and increasing footfall in city centres throughout the day. So when a lot of people leave work a lot of these city centres are becoming quite quiet spaces and having residents living in these areas along the high street above the shop fronts and stuff just adds a sense of vibrancy. And I think that's really important. So I'm really keen to see how cities can continue to grow in a sustainable manner into the future. I think that could be really interesting. So yeah, lots of really good examples there.

Any thoughts to add to that, Karle?

Karle Burford: Yeah, I think I was in an interesting meeting a kind of round table a few weeks ago, and we were talking about the future of cities and towns, et cetera, a bit like we are today.

And one of the points was the demise of retail. And I was quite surprised to hear somebody say nobody knows what's happening to retail and what is going to happen to retail in the future cause I thought we all would already know that, don't we? We already know the position of Amazon in our towns and cities, the retail is flat on its face and it will never come back in that way.

So I don't know why we have to talk about any unknowns that we know there is a literal hole in our towns and cities, which needs to be replaced for something. And that's probably our biggest challenge. There's the creation of place, but to create a place we seem to have less now to deal with in terms of there's less retail and so on, which used to be the answer, I think, to get people into centre of our towns.

So that's one of the biggest, if not the biggest challenge for me. Obviously it comes with the need for inclusivity, diversity, nature, etc. But to actually fill in our cities with people, get people living back into our cities and towns and working there. In different forms than just straightforward retail, and it can't all be cafes.

What can we do? And it's that mixed use that successful mixed use and the importance of people, I think, is certainly part of that answer. But, to just talk about how we create that success, that proper



mixed use. Where people work, live and play and educated all in our towns and cities is probably one of the biggest goals.

We've all built schools outside and on the edge of towns, let's start building schools right in the centre, and then let's get people able to get to those schools and those workplaces on foot and on cycle. So let's improve our highways and above all our connectivity for that kind of sustainable travel.

Let's create these town blocks, which have activities at least on every corner but more than that, where we can, so there is something happening. It's sounds a bit old fashioned, but the kind of the butchers on the corner and the cafe on the other corner, these sort of things do work but obviously they've got to be sustainable businesses.

Don't clear all our buildings away, make sure that we've buildings of all ages and all styles and different states of repair. So it's a diverse building stock as well. And that allows us to refurbish it and so on and not knock it all down. But where we can, we increase density. And that's not just building taller, but it's building some kind of smarter and fatter and generally more dense to get more people into our towns encourage those linkages to be improved for foot, scooters in Bristol and on cycles and so on, and then bring in that nature. It's not just green roofs. It's parkland, it's birds, it's bats, it's bees. We need these things. They're enjoyable, but the world needs them. So we really need to encourage that on all schemes and, obviously there's legislation now.

But let's not try and find a way around the legislation. Let's actually do it. Because it needs to, because it'll all die otherwise, and we need to do these things and being inclusive, engaging, encouraging others to be invited to the party, to come along, to feel proud, to feel part of it, and included again.

If we don't do that, and any of these other things, it just won't work. To make a place it's complex, but it has been done before.

Gim Sanghera: Fantastic. Thank you for your contribution there, Karle. And, that brings us to the end of today's episode of the AHR Podcast.

A big thank you to David and Karle for joining us and sharing their experiences. So we've heard some really fascinating insights about redeveloping urban spaces to create relevant and sustainable places once more, how it is absolutely integral to engage with all stakeholders, to ensure that we foster a sense of ownership in a place and that there is absolutely no one size that fits all solution. So I guess what we're taking away is to be successful our placemaking needs to be bespoke to its surroundings and community. We hope our listeners have enjoyed this episode. You can find all podcast episodes on our website, or you can subscribe via your preferred podcast platform.

Thank you so much for listening and we look forward to joining us again next time.