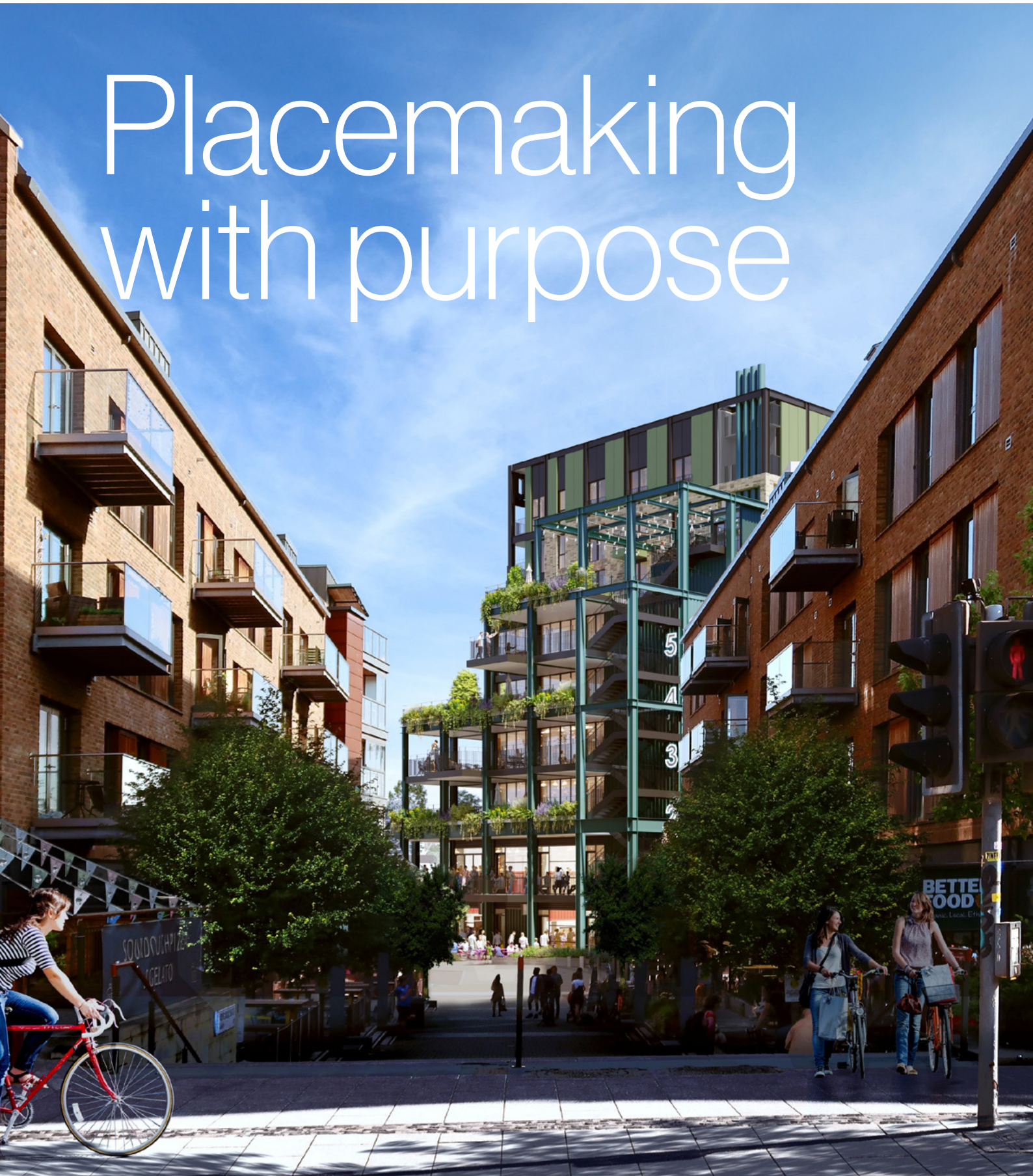


Placemaking with purpose



Insights from our placemaking series

Our placemaking series explores seven interconnected themes

- 01** Reframing placemaking
- 02** A people first approach
- 03** The roots of placemaking
- 04** Delivering placemaking projects
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Placemaking demands more than good intentions or well-designed buildings.

As places become more complex – socially, environmentally and economically – the focus has shifted from defining placemaking to understanding how to do it well, and how to ensure it continues to work over time.

We see placemaking as a long-term, people-centred and collaborative process. It brings together insight, context, delivery, resilience and stewardship to create places that are meaningful, adaptable and rooted in the lives of those who use them every day. It is not a single intervention or moment in time, but an evolving relationship between people and place.

To explore this in depth, we developed a seven-part thought leadership series that draws upon our expertise across architecture, masterplanning, landscape design, interior design, building consultancy and geomatic consultancy teams. Each article examines placemaking through a different lens – from early vision-setting through to long-term legacy.

This report brings those perspectives together. It summarises the key insights from each theme, illustrating how they connect in practice and linking through to the full articles for deeper exploration.

Together they reflect a holistic approach. One that balances ambition with deliverability, identity with adaptability and immediate needs with long-term stewardship.



Reframing placemaking: Foundations for places that work in practice

Placemaking begins with a simple premise - people. Across our practice, we see every project as an opportunity to understand how people live, move and connect with their environment.

Places are not static backdrops but living systems shaped by local histories, social patterns, and sensory experiences that give meaning to daily life.

Exploring place through people

Well-designed places are easy to move through, comfortable to live in and connected to their surroundings, but getting this right requires careful thought. How streets connect, spaces open up, and homes, shops and parks relate all shape how a place feels.

Engaging with the people who already live, work and spend time in a place is central to this understanding. Local insight reveals values, behaviours and overlooked constraints that traditional analysis alone cannot provide.

Seeing places as interconnected systems

Places do not operate in isolation, they bring together homes, services, green spaces, infrastructure and public realm to support daily life and long-term resilience. When these elements are planned in isolation places often fall short of what people need.

A well balanced place typically includes:



A mix of housing types and tenures



Social infrastructure such as schools, healthcare and community spaces



Walkable neighbourhoods and clear street networks



Green spaces and public realm that support wellbeing and biodiversity



Sustainable transport and reliable digital connectivity



Safe, intuitive and secure public spaces



Langarth Garden Village, Cornwall

Project example

At Langarth Garden Village in Cornwall, we used this systems-based thinking to shape a masterplan for a new sustainable community of more than 3,800 homes.

Working closely with Cornwall Council, stakeholders and local residents, we developed a vision grounded in context and community insight. The framework responds to natural topography, walking patterns and landscape character, with distinct neighbourhoods designed around accessibility, sunlight and green infrastructure.

Extensive engagement played a vital role. Workshops, drop ins and co design sessions helped refine the layout, design code and phasing strategy. These insights ensured the proposals remained rooted in place and reflected how people live now and how they hope to live in the future.

Reflecting on the process, Les Allen, Langarth & Hayle Client Programme Director Cornwall Council, said:



“ From the initial competition and interviews through to the planning approval the AHR team has demonstrated a clear understanding of the vision that Cornwall Council had and conveyed it in an exciting and innovative manner.

You made the design competition interesting and fun and the interviews engaging and relaxed.”



People first: Identity, inclusion and belonging as drivers of place

When placemaking is viewed through the experiences of those who use a place every day, its priorities become clear. Places are most meaningful when they are shaped with people, not just for them.

Engaging communities as active participants

People who live and work in a place often understand it in ways that professionals cannot. Their experiences reveal the informal walking routes that children use on the way to school, the social spaces people gravitate to, or the challenges faced by older residents during different seasons. When we treat engagement as an active partnership rather than a single consultation exercise, we uncover this rich detail.

Iterative, conversational engagement aligns closely with **the Design Council's Design Value Framework**, which recognises the social and democratic importance of involving people meaningfully. Listening in this way helps us design places that reflect local priorities and build long-term relevance.

It also broadens collaboration. Schools, healthcare providers, voluntary groups, sports clubs and small businesses each offer a different perspective on how a place functions and what it needs to thrive. Bringing these voices together creates more connected and resilient communities.



Chester Northgate Project example

+100

**stakeholder groups
shared their perspectives**

from Historic England and Chester Civic Society to market traders and Disabled Access Forum members.

c.30

stalls hosted
within Chester Market

c.150

jobs
supported

+5m

visitors welcomed
since opening

Insight from the stakeholder groups shaped a major city centre regeneration project into a mixed use destination that feels rooted in local identity and daily life.



Designing with identity

Designing with identity means looking for the clues that already exist, whether in local materials, historic street patterns, dialect, craft or community traditions. It may influence how a building meets the street, how a landscape frames a view, or how public art signals a shared narrative.

When identity is thoughtfully reflected in design, people often feel a stronger sense of connection. It helps places feel familiar yet renewed and encourages a shared sense of belonging.

Belonging is not created by design alone. It grows from the atmosphere of a place, the comfort it offers and the way it makes people feel. Research such as the **National Trust's Places that Make Us** highlights three qualities that define meaningful places:

- A sense of belonging
- Feeling physically and emotionally safe
- An internal pull that draws you back

Inclusive design helps support these qualities. It considers visibility, lighting, safety, clarity of movement and intuitive layouts. It goes beyond minimum accessibility requirements to create spaces where people feel respected, supported and at ease.

Comfort also matters. Acoustic quality, clear wayfinding, sensory-friendly materials and appropriate thermal conditions help shape places that people want to spend time in. Together, these factors create environments that feel welcoming to all, and that people can truly call their own.



Rooted in place: Designing through the local lens

Every site comes with layers of landscape, history and lived experience. Context-led design begins by understanding these qualities and using them as creative drivers rather than constraints.

Context as a creative driver

When we design with context in mind, places feel more authentic. It is a way of grounding ambition so that new development feels not imposed but grown from what is already there.

Heritage and local character

Instead of treating heritage as something to work around, we see it as an asset. Designing with local character does not mean recreating the past, but learning from it. Material choices, tones and textures all play a role in anchoring a place, helping people recognise themselves in their surroundings and feel connected to the story it tells.

Turning constraints into opportunities

Some of the most characterful places come from challenging sites. Sloping ground, tight footprints, heritage protections or environmental sensitivities can often unlock more imaginative thinking. Early technical insight helps us understand these constraints and turn them into opportunities that lead to richer, more distinctive outcomes.



At Leek's Trestle Market and Butter Market, we embraced the history of two Grade II listed buildings while preparing them for the future.

By restoring and modernising the structures, we improved accessibility and energy performance without losing the character that makes them special.

The result is a revitalised civic destination that reconnects people with the town's heritage and strengthens its sense of place.

Reflecting on this new chapter, Councillor Matt Swindlehurst, Cabinet member for leisure and tourism at Staffordshire Moorlands District Council commented:

“The new food and drink units are such an important part of this regeneration so it's fantastic to be joined by these local businesses as we start a new era for the markets.”



Leek and Trestle Markets, Staffordshire

Project example



Delivering placemaking projects: From strategy to reality

Strong early planning helps translate ambition into deliverable, adaptable frameworks.

It clarifies land capacity, infrastructure needs, policy alignment and long-term viability while leaving room for places to evolve. It offers a balance of structure and flexibility, helping teams navigate change without losing sight of the bigger picture.

Unlocking land, value and funding

Many placemaking projects involve complex land ownership, layered funding routes and multi-phase delivery. Coordinating public and private investment, sequencing development carefully and choosing appropriate delivery models helps protect design quality over time. Sequencing plots sensibly and aligning infrastructure upgrades can unlock sites that might otherwise stall. This is especially true in regeneration contexts where value is created gradually and shared across partners.

Choosing delivery models that protect design quality

Delivery models shape how decisions are made, how responsibilities are shared and how consistent the design approach remains over time. Models such as joint ventures, development partnerships or design-led procurement routes can help protect design quality, particularly in multi-decade programmes involving several partners.

A strong delivery structure creates accountability, fosters collaboration and keeps placemaking principles at the centre, even as individual parcels or phases come forward.

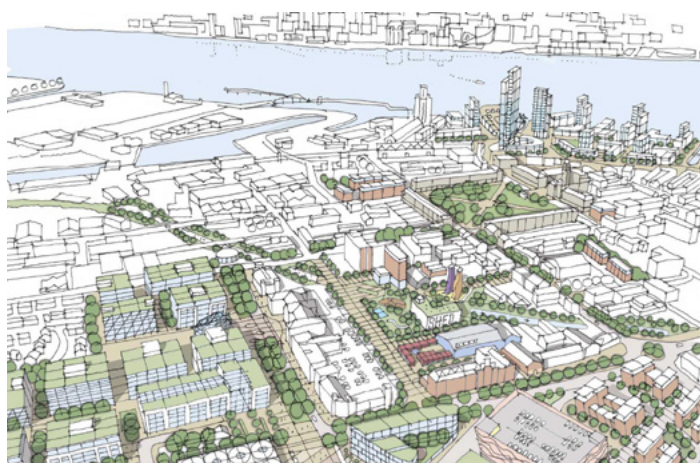
Early activation and phased delivery

One of the most effective ways to build momentum is through early activation. Pilot projects, pop-up uses and meanwhile interventions can test ideas, bring people onto site and build confidence in the vision. They also create early wins that help maintain community interest across long delivery timeframes.

Phasing strategies do more than sequence construction. They help ensure every stage contributes positively to the emerging place, supporting walkability, activity and public realm from the outset.

Designing for usability and long-term care

A place succeeds when people can use and enjoy it easily over time. Considering accessibility and spatial clarity early on helps create environments that age well and remain manageable in cost and upkeep.



Shaping our work in Birkenhead Project example

Where a flexible 15-year framework guided phased delivery across the town centre and commercial district.

The approach enables partners to respond to changing market conditions while maintaining a clear vision for walkability, active ground floors, new workplaces and a revitalised public realm.



Resilient placemaking: Designing future-ready places



Resilience is about more than reducing risk. It is about creating places that can adapt, evolve and remain relevant.

Designing adaptable spaces

Buildings and neighbourhoods that can evolve over time reduce the need for carbon intensive redevelopment. Flexible floorplates, modular systems and passive design strategies allow spaces to shift as needs change, supporting both environmental and social resilience.

RIBA's 2030 Climate Challenge reinforces this by placing performance at the heart of early design decisions, helping ensure buildings operate efficiently from day one and throughout their lifespan.

Harnessing landscape for climate resilience

Nature often offers the smartest solutions. Green infrastructure, sustainable drainage, tree planting and shaded routes all help manage climate-related pressures while creating enjoyable, comfortable public spaces. These systems work quietly yet effectively: slowing surface water, reducing heat, protecting biodiversity and offering people a healthier environment in which to live and work.

Reducing whole-life carbon

Resilient places are designed with carbon in mind at every stage. Fabric-first approaches, renewable technologies, material re-use and retrofit strategies all contribute to long-term sustainability. Early carbon modelling supports informed decisions and enables teams to set realistic yet ambitious pathways to net zero.



Siemens Mobility's Train Manufacturing Facility Project example

This project in Goole takes a landscape-led approach, bringing together sustainable drainage, biodiversity corridors and climate-responsive planting. These interventions transformed an industrial environment into a greener, more adaptable and more welcoming setting.

Designing healthy places: Wellbeing, inclusion and everyday life

Healthy places support physical, mental and social wellbeing.

They are walkable, safe, inclusive and connected to nature, with good daylight, ventilation and acoustic comfort. When these elements come together, they not only support wellbeing but can also help reduce the health inequalities many communities face.

Research such as the **Marmot Review 10 Years On** highlights how environmental conditions influence health outcomes. Designing with health in mind from the outset helps reduce inequalities and ensures places work for everyone.

Designing for inclusion and usability

Inclusive design begins with understanding how different people experience places every day. Women and gender-diverse people may navigate spaces with specific safety considerations; older residents may look for seating, shade or shorter walking distances; neurodiverse people may feel more at ease in predictable layouts with softer sensory cues.

We know that nature also brings balance to a place. Green and blue spaces reduce stress, create opportunities for movement and reflection and strengthen biodiversity. Whether community gardens, planted streets or larger spaces such as SANGs (suitable alternative nature greenspaces), access to nature helps people feel grounded and connected to the wider environment.



Underpinning our work at Victoria Square in Braintree Project example

A mixed use town-centre regeneration scheme centred around a new health and wellbeing hub. Bringing GP services, preventative care and community support together. The project shows how prioritising health can become a visible, integral part of placemaking that strengthens both people and place.

The legacy of place: Measuring long-term impact

Abbey Area Community Hub in Camden

Project example

We brought together community facilities, clinical services and green spaces within an adaptable environment that continues to evolve as local needs change. It demonstrates how stewardship, service integration and flexible design work together to support long-term wellbeing and a sense of place.



The true value of placemaking emerges over time. The most successful places are those designed to adapt and stay relevant as life around them moves on.

Designing adaptable neighbourhoods

As demographics shift and services evolve, flexible buildings and public spaces allow communities to grow, reorganise and respond to new needs. Designing with adaptability in mind gives places the ability to adjust without losing their identity or disrupting daily life. It is a way of future proofing the investment made at the very beginning.

Stewardship as a foundation for lasting value

Stewardship is vital in ensuring that places continue to thrive. It brings together design, management and community involvement to support ongoing care. When stewardship is strong, people feel pride in where they live or work. Public spaces feel safer, greener and more welcoming. Facilities stay relevant and connected to community needs. This ongoing relationship between people and place sustains cohesion and belonging.



Adaptability and care shape our work at the Old Medical School in Leeds

Project example

A much-loved heritage building is being transformed into a new health innovation hub. Using digital surveying, 3D data capture and scan to BIM modelling, our geomatic and building consultancy teams have uncovered the finer details of the building's structure and condition.

This deeper understanding is guiding sensitive design decisions, allowing the building to adapt and thrive once again. Here, data and design work hand in hand to keep places relevant, resilient and full of purpose for generations to come.



Placemaking
with purpose

Looking
ahead

Placemaking is not a single act or building, but a continuing journey shaped by people, place and shared ambition.

When we bring together insight, context, resilience, health and stewardship, we can create places that grow with their communities and remain authentic over time.

If you are planning a new community, regeneration project or long-term estate strategy, **we would be delighted to continue the conversation.**



Keep up to date with our latest insights and news

www.ahr.co.uk

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