

New garden towns and the Oxford to Cambridge corridor

The government has stated its wish to find locations for new garden towns, and to expand ambitions for the Oxford to Cambridge growth corridor.

The UK's original garden settlements grew from the provision of housing for a workforce. Josiah Wedgwood built better employee housing near his new factory at Etruria in the eighteenth century. Later developments like Port Sunlight and Bournville continued the tradition of creating a village community for a workforce, with better quality housing with gardens, green spaces and community facilities.

The garden towns movement began with Letchworth and Welwyn. It extended its influence over larger and more recent new towns like Milton Keynes. The idea was to preserve a more rural setting for housing and to use good architecture and design to create a better environment. The developments contrasted with the more crowded housing of the Industrial Revolution in the large industrial cities where gardens were cramped or non-existent and space more restricted for each family.

These success stories of UK architecture and planning show that it is possible to build in ways that reflect the wishes of many to live in green surroundings and to harness the best of design.

Modern developers often build properties that draw on traditional styles of house with characteristics from former eras. There are contemporary variants of Elizabethan half-timbered, of Georgian classical and terrace, and of Victorian villa and terrace.

It will be interesting to see where the government might find support for new garden towns and to see what designs the advocates will propose. Milton Keynes is in my view a success story, with a very green environment to offset the grid pattern of main roads and service roads which place the town firmly in the age of the car.

Our traditional settlements that have grown more slowly over the years benefit from a rich diversity in styles as each era added or replaced some parts of the urban landscape. They usually retain an ancient road pattern which creates jams and bottlenecks as people try to get to school, work and the shops using their cars. The new towns offer a chance of design that accommodates the instinct for personal mobility that people share.