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Prince Charles Builds a New Town

By Carolyn Torma

Can we build an ideal town that people will live in? Prince Charles believes we can. Since 1988, he has been working to develop his dream in the Dorset countryside. Poundbury is a planned addition to the ancient town of Dorchester that mixes housing with retail and light industry. Pleasant and strikingly different from most suburban additions to English—or for that matter American—cities, this community serves well the residents with whom I visited. They pointed proudly to the fine craftsmanship of the buildings and boasted of how they were all wired through computers to the larger world.

After surviving years of furious debate, and some rather heated name calling, the Prince of Wales has produced an eye-catching urban village, which is his term for these new developments. Designed by Leon Krier, the plan features architecture of varied materials and styles. Streets are narrow and many double comfortably as pedestrian paths. Most parking is off-street in rear alleys. The pedestrian experiences a surprising and charming variation in street width, textures, vistas, and open spaces.

In the summer of 1998, when I visited, the first phase of the project was almost complete. As a physical design, the 400-acre Poundbury has been praised by everyone from American architect and urban planner Andres Duany to author Jim Kunstler, and from English newspapers to The New York Times.

Prince Charles’s concern for social issues underlie the project. This led to the integration of affordable housing into the overall design and to the provision of jobs nearby. He is equally committed to recruiting private industry into his urban planning schemes—two of the principal developers are Eddie Fry and the Renaissance Developments. However, he acknowledged that additional support was needed to meet social goals, so the project was built on Duchy of Cornwall land—the Prince’s own land—and the Guiness Housing Trust was enlisted to provide housing for low-income residents. Although the Prince has control over his own land, land ownership alone does not lead to the creation of a viable town, and so another important partner in the project was the West Dorset District Council.

Poundbury is a pleasing amalgam of materials, styles, and intimate scale. Landscaping within the community is kept to a minimum, but in the lush English climate, even this simple scheme provides a bit of greenery.

In the first phase of construction, 35 of the 61 houses are rental properties made available to low-income residents through the Guiness Trust. The remaining 26 houses are owned outright. Visitors find it impossible to distinguish low-income housing from other housing; the quality of materials and architectural treatment of the buildings, including row houses, is uniformly high. Other socially conscious amenities include well-insulated and energy-saving construction and easy connections to the town of Dorchester. Green space and parks, which are part of the plan, exist today only in the form of open countryside. At its peak, the town will be home to 5,000 residents.
Within easy walking distance of the village are a chocolate factory and a software company. Residents readily admitted that the community had many (albeit relatively young) retirees. Indeed, visiting with residents in a nearby village, I observed that the Dorset area appears to be a magnet for retirees and the well-to-do middle-aged.

Poundbury represents a renewed interest in well-planned new developments, referred to in the America as master planned communities. What distinguishes this new crop is the incorporation of attractive design with environmental and socially responsible principles. In Great Britain, Prince Charles has helped to focus this movement through the Urban Villages Forum, which promotes commercially viable new development that meets the principles of the forum. In the U.S., the movement is called neotraditionalism, and advocates belong to the Congress for New Urbanism. Among the most famous of the neotraditionalist communities is Seaside, Florida, designed by Andres Duany and Elizabeth Plater-Zyberk. Seaside served as part of the setting for last summer’s movie, The Truman Show.

Both the American and English movements emphasize the use of historic architectural elements in community design. Seaside and its descendants are famous for reintroducing porches, sidewalks, and pedestrian-friendly streets into the American design vocabulary. Neotraditionalism also shares with the urban villages movement a concern for attractive public spaces, high quality construction, and a robust mixture of land uses. Many planners credit neotraditionalism with providing viable alternatives to traditional zoning.

Both the English and American movements attempt to build upon a regional architectural tradition. It is how buildings are sited that makes Poundbury look very different from American new towns such as Celebration, Florida. In Prince Charles’s community, houses are flush with the sidewalk or street. There are no American-style lawns, and where gardens exist they are small and often walled. As a result, at present, Poundbury is anything but green. Instead, it looks like a dense, medieval village of stone and brick. The effect is not unpleasing, but it is somewhat harsh to American eyes used to the lush green of suburbs and resort towns. Among the town’s most successful features is the architectural mix achieved by a well thought out set of guidelines that allowed for variation and contrast. Other distinctly European features are a close adherence to a specific, historic, regional style of architecture. Poundbury was built for the Dorset countryside, not for the Yorkshire moors or southern Florida.

Neighbors of Poundbury also observed that the houses were smaller than those that many people could build on their own. While new constructions methods, such as concrete block support walls, are easily incorporated into traditional-looking houses, other attempts to fit contemporary living spaces into historic shells are less successful. To American eyes the floor plans of the houses looked a bit cramped. Yet housing in rural Great Britain is in short supply and a residential building boom was underway in many parts of the country in the summer of 1998. Poundbury has had no difficulty in attracting residents.

While I found the community very pleasing, like many model new communities, the project is still quite small and has a brand-new feel to it. Not everything that goes into making a community was yet in place. At times the hoopla also threatens to overwhelm the achievement, especially as the Prince regains some of his celebrity status.

Some critics have dismissed Poundbury has hopelessly old fashioned and dangerously romantic. Paul Goldberger writing in The New Yorker in July 1998,
pronounced all of Prince Charles’s efforts "A Royal Defeat." But this view is too short sighted and much too focused on large-scale architectural commissions designed by major architects. Goldberger is probably correct in saying that Prince Charles has had limited influence on high-profile new architectural monuments in Great Britain. At the same time, however, Goldberger underestimates the importance of the choices that ordinary people make about where to live and how. It is in this arena that Poundbury succeeds.

The Prince’s vision is humane and refreshing. Those of us concerned with urban planning can take heart that he has brought a knowledgeable planning approach to Poundbury and has demonstrated the patience and long-term commitment needed to undertake real community building.

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**Prince Charles’s Ten Design Principles**

In his book, *A Vision of Britain* (Doubleday, 1989), Prince Charles presented his manifesto on architecture and urban planning. Here are his principles that guided the development of Poundbury.

- **Place:** understanding and blending with the landscape.
- **Hierarchy:** relationship of buildings to each other and the relative significance of their different elements.
- **Scale:** relating to human proportions and the scale of the buildings in an area.
- **Harmony:** blending buildings with the local and natural environment.
- **Enclosure:** defined boundaries to development and define areas such as squares and courtyards.
- **Decoration:** careful craftsmanship enhancing every aspect of every building.
- **Art:** part of the whole environment, and rich in symbolism and meaning.
- **Signs and Lights:** well-designed street signs, advertising in its place, and careful use of artificial light.
- **Community:** a sense of pride and a feeling that everyone contributes to the planning and organization of the place.

**A Virtual Visit to Poundbury and the Urban Village Forum**

You can see and read more about Poundbury and Prince Charles’s ideas on town planning on the Internet. Here is a list of sites:

- *The Prince of Wales Ten Design Principles*
- *The New Village* by John Brouwer
- *The Urban Villages Forum*
- *The Prince of Wales Home Page*, article "Why I’m Modern but not Modernist"
- *Poundbury, Dorset*
- *Poundbury, Dorchester*

For publications, see:
