A Design Forum learning piece

Plans for Auchincruive, a new village in South Ayrshire, seek to build on the existing assets of a former agricultural college to create a new place with a strong sense of identity. Working together through a complex and difficult process, planning authority, client and architects developed a concise design code that establishes a clear vision whilst allowing flexibility for future change and growth.
Location: Auchincruive, South Ayrshire
Project type: Masterplan and design code / development brief for primarily residential development with some mixed use elements.
Client: AWG Property Ltd in partnership with the Scottish Agricultural College
Lead designer: CDA (Comprehensive Design Architects)
Size: 246ha, up to 495 housing units
Background

Proposals for a new village at Auchincruive in South Ayrshire were developed to enable the relocation of the Scottish Agricultural College when the agricultural estate and its buildings became unsuitable for present-day teaching requirements. The site for new housing is particularly sensitive owing to the significance of listed buildings, designed landscape and the wider rural context in the countryside southeast of Ayr.

The project involved the creation of a design code to bring together the joint vision of the landowner and planning authority. The code was required as a planning condition of a Planning in Principle consent and was negotiated between South Ayrshire Council and AWG Property Ltd acting for and in partnership with the Agricultural College, with A&DS as facilitator. The code is intended to form an agreement between the client / site owner, the design teams and planning authority on what is to be developed to help maintain a common vision for Auchincruive as it is being built, whilst also providing third-party developers with clear expectations for submission of detailed proposals, leading to a more straightforward planning process.

The code was approved at planning committee and lauded by local councillors as a potential exemplar. Developers implementing the consent are required to base their detailed proposals on the code to give greater certainty for all parties.
Existing assets of the location for the new village centre include:

- A historic building with existing commercial and residential use
- An adjacent village green with playing fields / tennis courts
- A route to existing employment and commercial uses passing through
- Access to already popular country walks
- Views towards an 18th century tea house on the hill above

Added assets of the new masterplan include:

- A clearly defined ‘Main Street’
- A village shop unit
- A bus stop on a loop through the village core, which avoids turning places / buses meeting and is easy to incorporate in first phases of development
- Clear connection to cycle and walking routes
- Potential for a pub/café in Gibbs yard facing the green
- A proposed community hall near Gibbs yard
Developing the masterplan for Auchincruive: Building on existing assets

In developing the code the client and design team revisited the previously consented masterplan to develop their proposals in more detail. The revised masterplan uses the historic fabric as a foundation for supporting the formation of the new village core, and as a basis for developing character and identity of place.

A key focus of the new village centre is Gibbs Yard, a listed courtyard steading building, which is to be redeveloped with a mix of employment and residential uses. The building sits at the entrance to the new ‘Main Street’ which acts as the main bus route through the village. The length of the street is proportionate to the size and density of the village to achieve the feel of an ‘urban’ core, with near continuous facades and no front gardens. This style echoes the character of established South Ayrshire villages and is an important step towards creating a familiar sense of place.

Both the client team and South Ayrshire planning authority agree that creating a single focus for the centre of the development around Gibbs Yard at the gateway onto the new main street had positive effects on the broad structure of the rest of the masterplan. The village square and village shop were previously remote from the village green, whereas they are now situated close to one another, alongside existing businesses which increases the potential viability of the shop and concentrates activity to one area.

The existing topography and views of the historic buildings influenced the revised layout. The masterplan follows the site contours, working with gradients to set out the blocks so it becomes permeable and development made achievable. Some streets were aligned to open up views towards for example Oswald’s Temple and Wilson Hall and down towards the village centre when approaching Auchincruive. Development heights of buildings within individual parcels of development is restricted to maintain views where possible.

“Making Gibbs Yard the focus of the high street, and reorganising the high street, to be structured from that important building. That was the key move that we wanted to make. ... And all the support, or the collaboration at the workshops, really led to that.”

– Comprehensive Design Architects
“the big change was the previous masterplan had shown the C37 as the main street. The scale of it didn’t really work for the village. So changing that, so it was on the access with Gibbs Yard, was really the key thing ...”

– Comprehensive Design Architects
Experiencing Auchincruive

Several aspects that will be key to the experience of coming to and being in Auchincruive evolved through the development of the masterplan and the design code. As the bus loop comes in to the village from the north west and turns around the corner to reveal Gibbs Yard it brings visitors straight to the centre of Auchincruive, announcing a clear sense of arrival. The near continuous elevations along the Main Street clearly define this as the village centre.

Designing Streets has been extremely influential in informing an approach to street and roads design. The masterplan is well connected internally via a proposed permeable network of streets, that are attractive as pedestrian and cycle routes with clear connections to the wider area and countryside.

Those arriving on these routes from the south will glimpse housing at the edge of the development through soft edge planting. These are orientated to face outwards onto the surrounding countryside to take advantage of the views over the adjacent landscape and provide a more welcoming frontage to the development, rather than rear facing gardens and fencing. Through the work on the design code, an understanding of the landscape as evolving rather than formally designed helped inform how the landscape setting could shape and be incorporated into the new village as it develops up over time. Existing landscaping features are used to build identity and character.

“One of the most striking images out of all the design documentation was a drawing of what was called Auch Inn – it had tables drawn outside, a couple of canopies, I could see that actually working – it’s a community that could walk to that place ... it’s a place to which people would want to come to walk.”

– Austin Cooke, South Ayrshire Council Planning Authority
**Character Areas**

The purpose of having Character Areas is to ensure developer's designs relate to that specific part of the settlement and its unique features. Creating a distinctive character for each of the areas will be important and is therefore based on the specific character of that part of the village in terms of its topography, landscape structure and proximity to and relationship with listed buildings.

Mandatory points about each character area are given and shall be adhered to.

Whilst complying with the requirements for each character area is vital and shall be adhered to, the zones between character areas are also important as overall the village shall read as a cohesive whole. Awareness of adjacent character areas and the designs proposed for them is therefore vital.

Extract from Auchincruive Estate, Ayrshire Development Brief and Design Code, E1136/DC/1113 (November 2013)
Structuring the design code

The Auchincruive design code divides the masterplan into a set of ‘character areas’, informed by lessons taken from a study of comparable Ayrshire villages. The character areas are useful in forming an intermediate level of guidance between strategic overview and detailed design and provide an easy to understand structure intended to “ensure developer’s designs relate to that specific part of the settlement and its unique features” (see opposite page).

The strength of the Auchincruive masterplan lies in incorporating the existing assets of the site into a coherent new village. The division into development parcels could work against this and potentially have a negative impact on the look and feel of the village. CDA points out that it is important to consider how the character areas relate to one another to make sure the neighbourhoods do not become disjointed.

Various masterplan strategies (e.g. a movement strategy) were listed as conditions of approval by South Ayrshire Council and required as part of the detailed development of the masterplan. This helped CDA define a clear structure and form ‘chapters’ within the code for Auchincruive. In addition CDA researched other exemplar developments and design codes as a basis for developing the document.

In setting out the guidance a balance had to be made between making sure the document had enough information so that it could be followed without being too prescriptive and potentially putting developers off buying a site. Ensuring the right mix of mandatory and non-mandatory elements was also essential in setting out sufficient guidance to help South Ayrshire Council to determine forthcoming applications to approve matters specified in conditions (AMC).

The level of detail that went into the document was largely determined by the sensitivities and uniqueness of the site, and the number of landscape features and listed buildings, such as Gibbs Yard, which had to be to taken account of.

“We split the design code into site wide coding, which was the bigger strategies, and then, down into character areas, there were four of them. That allowed us to zoom in on how each area worked, and how it was going to look.”

– Comprehensive Design Architects
“We looked at various design codes as models... some going into the detail of window fenestration, how your chimney and your front door should look and we thought that was inappropriate. What we were trying to do was to come up with general guidelines that would allow housing developers to come in.”

– Nigel Pacey, AWG Property Ltd
Design code ‘TOP TIPS’

Based on their experience of Auchincruive our interviewees have given the following as ‘top tips’ for design codes:

- Keep it (as) short (as possible).
- Make it a visual tool – it will be easier and more immediate to engage with.
- Make it well illustrated and structured and clearly laid out, preferably in colour landscape format as opposed to text heavy portrait documents.
- Start with the vision (what is it you’re trying to achieve), then set the context (location, important landscaping, adjacent villages etc.), then evolution of the masterplan, completed masterplan and followed up by technical information (roads etc.).
- At a more detailed level, the use of Character Areas can be helpful in adding a further level of detail to the Code and ensuring developers’ designs relate to specific parts of the settlement and local conditions.
- Use sketches to convey the character and sense of the place, it will make the vision easier to grasp for all involved – 3D eye level/street views and vignettes to show principles of the nature of the place that you are trying to establish, the experience of moving through, key corners, buildings and vistas.
- Write only what you need to, don’t be too prescriptive. Don’t contradict the vision for the place with too much specification and detail!
- Use it to keep important background information with the project.
- A lot of work will go in to the design code, so make it work for you (i.e. giving you firm ground to stand on and saving you energy and resources in processing detailed applications)
- It is useful if assessment of proposals can be made on identifiable attributes (such as the qualities of successful places set out in Designing Places).

“The Code should give developers a steer for an approach to design and finishes ... that’s one of the main benefits of it, if you do what it says you will go through the planning process more quickly.”

– Austin Cooke, South Ayrshire Council Planning Authority
Unit heights should vary between 1.5 and 2.5 storeys in height. It is not permitted for all houses within a block to be uniform height.

Chimneys will be used to define changes in level and to delineate between house types.

Where there are gaps between properties, high walls will be used to maintain a continuous frontage.

Roofs on all properties along the main street shall be tiled with slate.

Contemporary interpretations of dormer windows to be used on half storeys.

Roof pitches to be between 35 and 45 degrees.

Although the PPP conditions only require one retail unit, all properties in corner locations along the Main Street shall be flexibly designed to be suitable for retail / business use.

All residential units should vary in width from a minimum of 6m to a maximum of 12m.

The traditional Ayrshire village study found that houses within village core areas (and particularly along main streets) often sit directly against the pavement edge, with very little or no boundary space left in front. This treatment is impractical for most modern houses due to issues with defensible space and privacy.

The following boundary design principles are mandatory and shall be followed within the village core area:

**BOUNDARY TREATMENTS**

**MAIN STREET**

- Houses along the main street at Auchincruive shall have a small 2 - 3m paved front garden area which will be bounded by a 400mm height stone stub wall.
- Elsewhere within the character area, front garden areas shall be between 3 and 6m in depth and be either paved or turfed. The 400mm high stub walls will be continued throughout the area, and 1m high hedges planted behind the wall will be permitted.
How buildings meet public space: Key Frontages and boundaries

Identifying a hierarchy of boundaries between buildings and public space with the development is important for how the place will be experienced and in breaking down the complexity of the masterplan. All parties found that identifying ‘key frontages’ and significant boundaries between buildings and public space was helpful in establishing the identity and experience of the new village, and these have been specified in the design code.

In the first phase of development there are two different developers coming together who are working simultaneously to deliver the whole of the Main Street, rather than a phase ‘A’ following phase ‘B’ approach. Both developers have the same architect working for them which AWG feel is positive in helping to coordinate the process well. Whilst seeking to challenge some aspects of the code which may not work commercially for them, developers are taking on board main aspects of the layout such as road layout and block pattern, primary and secondary frontages which have been identified, requirements for a tighter Main Street without front gardens and a variety of types of properties to avoid a ribbon of identical housing along the street. Parking is the biggest challenge to avoiding the car dominating the street.

The masterplan defines appropriate landscaping elements proportionate to the size of Auchincruive and the historic landscape setting and surrounding countryside in which it sits, including a Village Green and tennis courts located in the core of the village at the entrance to the Main Street which is being taken on board by developers.

The Scottish Agricultural College is working in partnership with AWG and is retaining facilities on the site as existing sources of employment for the area, helpful in maintaining links and in forming an economic foundation for development. AWG are remaining as part of the overall development team working with consulting engineers to deliver and integrate required infrastructure that falls outwith the development phase boundaries, and restoration works on some of the listed buildings on the site. CDA will continue to have some involvement in respect of refining working drawings for some of the historic areas, eg. the design of the village square and village green, to become part of the masterplan requirements.

“We’ve tried to set up the basic principles of the square within Gibbs Yard, and the fact that the High Street will have good quality public realm. We’ve tried to give all the possibilities for (the implementation of the public realm) with the masterplan.”

– Comprehensive Design Architects
“if you ignore the existing assets, then you’re not going to create the best possible masterplans...whether it’s building, landscape features or something else, that’s one thing that’s fundamental – you have to use those existing assets as best you can. And use them where you can to structure it. (But you don’t have a Gibbs Yard in every area)”

– Comprehensive Design Architects
Summary

In practice the planning authority has found that third-party applicants generally are following the code more than challenging it. For architects and client, the experience of Auchincruive has opened up other areas of work and informed their approach to similar types of projects. Key points identified by parties as potential areas for learning from their experience of the proposals for Auchincruive include:

- The benefit of a design code in forming agreements between applicant/developer and planning authorities on what is to be developed and in maintaining a common vision for a place as it is being built.

- Design codes can help to provide third-party developers with clear expectations for submission of detailed proposals, leading to a more straightforward planning process.

- The design code as a useful tool for communicating intended development with elected members and the local community.

- The importance of existing buildings, landscape features and site topography in forming a strong asset and foundation for developing the character and identity of a place, informing key views and street patterns, and areas of important focus – eg. public spaces and gateways to development.

- Defining character areas, key frontages and phasing boundaries can help to provide an easy to understand structure for development, and help to ensure developers’ designs relate to specific parts of a settlement, and any unique features on the site.

- Development edges can be handled in a positive way, to provide a welcoming frontage to a place and to exploit potential views out into adjacent landscapes.

- Introducing a mix and variety of house types can help make developments more attractive, diverse, active and interesting.

- Use of Designing Streets can positively influence building lines and plot towards streets that work for passers-by as well as residents.

- Consideration of the landscape from an early stage is important in informing the design and character of a masterplan and identity of a place.

- Early discussions between client, design teams and planning authorities are important in ironing out any potential issues and in gaining a mutual understanding of expectations to help establish a shared vision for a place.