LOCAL DISTINCTIVENESS IN PLANNING AND DESIGN

Jeff Bishop: November 2022

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SUMMARY

The term 'local distinctiveness' probably first emerged in the 1980s and is now in common currency to describe the way in which things as diverse as landscapes, types of apple, buildings, regional cheeses and so forth help to create a sense that a specific place (an area, a town, a public space or even just a thatched bus stop) is somewhere special and not just anywhere.

The term has perhaps been taken up most strongly in the areas of planning and design over the years since the mid 1980s and now seems to be firmly embedded in planning, landscape design, urban design, architecture and the arts, including (if with some cautions) national policy.

This very personal paper by a firm supporter and practitioner of local distinctiveness starts with a look at the roots of local distinctiveness, including some approaches which are almost identical but use different terms, before asking whether local distinctiveness has any value in our contemporary, globalised world (it does!).

The paper then goes on to outline where, how and when local distinctiveness has (sometimes has not) found a place in planning and design theory and practice, from national level down to approaches to a specific site.

There is a section about more recent events (not always positive) but that is then picked up in the penultimate section which suggests how local distinctiveness might find (or re-find) its rightful place in planning, design and development.

The final section goes full circle back to the broader and more ephemeral aspects of local distinctiveness that are essential to consider and take forward alongside work in planning and design.

INTRODUCTION

I have been using the term 'local distinctiveness' since around 1990, and am now seeing it coming at me from all directions and not necessarily meaning it in quite the way I think of it. (Almost as a matter of principle, of course, there cannot be one single correct definition!)

I therefore decided to spend some personal time taking stock of the term, its sources, its uses and misuses and where it might go (or maybe shouldn't) from here on, especially in relation to planning, design and development.

As of now this is mainly written text with just a few illustrations. This is not, of course, the best way to discuss something so visual. Time and travel permitting, I might try to work it up into something far more – and more appropriately – visual, especially to illustrate all the key points in the Local Distinctiveness Matrix introduced on page 8.

Most importantly, I am an unapologetic advocate of the central importance of local distinctiveness to our society in all its possible meanings, and not just planning and design.

As I hope will come clear, given what appears to now be national agreement about the need to raise design standards, promoting more local distinctiveness is, in my view, probably _the_ key way forward.

Though mention is made of links to my work with Place Studio, the views expressed are strictly personal.

THE ROOTS OF LOCAL DISTINCTIVENESS

'Design in the Countryside'

It seems to be the case that the term Local Distinctiveness was first used by Sue Clifford and Angela King of the charity Common Ground in 1983[i]:

"Local implies neighbourhood or parish; Distinctiveness is about particularity in the buildings and land shapes, the brooks and birds, trees and cheeses, places of worship and pieces of literature. It is about history and nature jostling with each other, layers and fragments, old and new. The ephemeral and invisible are important too: customs, dialects, celebrations, names, recipes, spoken history, myths, legends and symbols."

At that time, and in Common Ground's work over the next 10 years or so, their focus was very heavily on what they called the "*ephemeral and invisible*", hence their projects on, for example, new milestones designed by local artists, parish maps done by communities, local arts and music events and regional or even sub-regional species of apple*. This work was also very much focused on rural areas, places and communities. (* Apparently, there used to be over 6,000 varieties in the UK.)

Common Ground's overarching aim – perhaps better termed their manifesto - was as follows:

"We want to inspire people and communities to protect and promote whatever is distinctive about a place. But this is no fusty attempt to freeze the present and resist change; the identity of a place needs change, reinvigoration by the new, stimulated as much by looking back into the past as it is thinking and plotting its future. We all know too many high streets which look the same, housing estates which could be anywhere, fields which have lost both history and birdsong or festivals which have no authenticity. Local Distinctiveness is concerned with celebrating the unique characteristics of a place and with demanding the best of the new, so that quality and authenticity adds richness to our surroundings making them convivial to us and to nature."

The quotes above include mentions of aspects of local distinctiveness that are relevant to planning and design, for example "*buildings and landscapes*" and '*housing estates which could be anywhere*". Also present, if less clearly, are references to aspects of history and heritage that have a link to planning and design.

Perhaps because they had no architects, landscape architects or planners on their team (as if this mattered), Common Ground never fully developed the links with planning and design, although Sue Clifford in particular made sure she was in the room with architects and others, and gave many talks to planners (sometimes with me) arguing for local distinctiveness.

The shift into the world of planning and design practice really only happened through the work undertaken from around 1992 by BDOR Ltd for the (then) Countryside Commission in their '**Design in the Countryside**' initiative. The impetus from this initiative came from some research funded by the Commission that highlighted the fact that the poor quality of rural design was a priority concern for people living in rural areas.

'In place of distinctiveness we have ubiquity – row upon row of near-identical brick-built family units ….. it is the victory of uniformity over distinctiveness; the victory of suburbia over all.' From 'Local Attraction', CPRE[ii].

When BDOR (myself and Ian Davison at the time) were appointed to address the concerns and suggest ways of improving design quality, Commission staff (planners not architects) imagined that the outcome might be some sort of national (but surely just rural?) design guide.

We were uncomfortable about this idea, in part because any such national guidance

Other Roots

Before proceeding into key aspects of what might create local distinctiveness in design, it is important to stress that, although that term had not (as far as is known) entered the design and planning world until the mid 1990s, what it seeks to achieve had been a part, if a rather fringe part, of planning and design for some time in the face of the rise of modernism and internationalism.

would be so generalised as to be almost useless in any specific situation, but mainly because of some work I had undertaken just before on local distinctiveness in its non-design sense. Local distinctiveness therefore stood out for us as a theme to focus on. Given my background in community engagement, and putting this together with local distinctiveness, we turned the national design guide idea on its head.

The result was Village Design Statements (VDSs) and, shortly after, Town Design Statements (TDSs), to be produced mainly by local communities to describe and celebrate the local distinctiveness of their place and provide guidance on how new designs might best respond to that[iii]. This brought local distinctiveness firmly into the worlds of planning and design.

'Local distinctiveness is what makes one place different from another. It's the composite of a place's assets; the landmarks and sights, the landscape, wildlife, built heritage, traditions, food, festivals, myths and language[iv].' Brighton and Lewis Downs.

'Local distinctiveness is what makes one place different from another. It's the essential details, large and small, which combine to create a "sense of place".' South Pennines Local Distinctiveness Handbook[v].

Many will know Ian Nairn's[vi] classic prediction that soon – he was writing in 1955 - "*the end of Southampton will look like the beginning of Carlisle; the parts in between will look like the end of Carlisle or the beginning of Southampton*". (And he was right!) Nairn's rant was of course against the spread of suburbia and suburban values rather than explicitly about local distinctiveness.

This is also true of another advocate of distinctive character, Gordon Cullen (who illustrated Nairn's Outrage article). His book 'Concise Townscape'[vii] is also important in this context. There was, however, a key point about the work of Nairn and Cullen in that both authors imagined that the only valid alternative to suburbia was the city or at least highly urban design and planning. This then flowed into the emerging and steady growth of the whole notion of urban design and, more recently, place-making.

> *Talking about New York, Stanley Tucci says that 'as the profile of the neighbourhood became less diverse in every way, the independent businesses that supported the inhabitants and gave the area its particular flavour went the way of so much of America and became homogenised.' Stanley Tucci in 'Taste[viii]'.*

Going back further than Nairn and Cullen, the other person celebrating distinctive character, this time in rural areas, was Thomas Sharp, notably in his book 'The Anatomy of the Village' from 1946[ix]. And Sharp's work was brought closer to our time by Brian Roberts in 1987 with his book 'The Making of the English Village'[x]. His book is, however, mainly about the historic forces that shaped our villages, not the more recent forces and their resulting changes. To close the circle back to rural design, Roberts' book title was a deliberate reference back to William Hoskins' seminal book 'The Making of the English

Landscape'[xi]. By apparent contrast with Nairn and Cullen, Hoskins was avowedly anti modern and resented things such as the "*England of the arterial by-pass*". And finally in this section, mention should be made of a very recent and widely read book, 'England's Villages' by Ben Robinson[xii] which, though mainly historical, brings things right up to date with three final chapters on villages today (with reference to national planning policy) and even villages in the future.

A key point here to challenge commonly expressed rural v. urban assumptions, and to link to Roberts' analysis, is that very many of the neighbourhoods in our larger town and cities existed as distinct places – villages and even small towns - well before city growth overwhelmed and incorporated them. Their built patterns and even the patterns of the fields around them, which so often dictated the location of later urban development, are still there, hidden behind the surface and central to what even city dwellers still highlight as their neighbourhood's local distinctiveness, even in the largest cities. (Some may recall Abercrombie's famous plan of London and its many 'villages'.)

> *Gertrude Stein's famous comment 'There's no there there' has been used in many different contexts but it was originally about her anger at the homogenising of Oakland, California.*

IS THERE ANY VALUE IN LOCAL DISTINCTIVENESS TODAY?

There are three important questions to be asked at this point. Does local distinctiveness have any relevance in today's globalised, social media-focused, physical mobility-based society? Does it perhaps have a dark side? Can patently new features, especially new buildings, create their own, new distinctiveness, separate from that of the past?

Relevance Today?

Despite predictions about the influence of factors such as the internet and social media – creating "*community without propinquity*" as in Mel Webber's classic phrase[xiii] – there is now a huge amount of popular literature about emotional and psychological associations with the environment, mainly but not entirely the natural, even just rural, environment. For example, see Dee et al's 'Ground Work'[xiv] or Ben Robinson's book noted above, as well as his TV series.

There is also a growing area of academic literature highlighting the continued importance to many people of what is termed place attachment. For example, see Manzo and Devine-Wright's 'Place Attachment'[xv] or Patsy Healey's recent book 'Caring for Place'[xvi]. It certainly seems that people continue to wish to value, retain and enhance the locally distinctive qualities of the places where they live, even if some places do not obviously qualify as attractive or even 'beautiful'[xvii].

A Scottish urban designer, Willie Miller, explains this residual concern about local distinctiveness as follows[xviii]:

"There is increasing concern that the homogenising effect of the property development industry, retail trends, the underfunding of local councils and a mature tourism industry is affecting the individuality of places. Consequently, towns and cities as well as villages and rural areas are perceived as increasingly similar and visiting them may no longer provide a unique experience."

Interestingly, Miller's last point above is about the possible economic impact of the loss of local distinctiveness on tourism.

> *'It has long been recognised that the tangible and intangible characteristics that make a location distinctive and memorable, contribute significantly to destination image. Recently though, practitioners are starting to carefully consider 'sense of place'.' Jarrett, Phelan, Wain and Dale*[xix].

A further, quite reasonable question could be asked about whether local distinctiveness has any relevance today in relation to concerns about sustainable development and climate change.

In some ways the more practical aspects of local distinctiveness could in fact be seen to be even *more* relevant today because of aspects of design from before the industrial revolution. Concerns in that earlier period were about access to nearby building materials, easy road and path networks, attention to wind exposure, the avoidance of sites liable to flooding, construction to address damp problems, providing insulation and so forth.

In other words, many settlements and buildings from that earlier time were unknowingly sustainable (or aiming to be) even in a quite modern sense. They offer us lessons for the future, especially in relation to building for a warming planet and design to help people have healthy lives mentally as well as physically.

This might be in terms of reducing travel distances for materials (the average brick travels over 100 miles to its construction site)

and likely increased flooding (as sea levels rise and heavy storms become more frequent), although getting sun into buildings may now need to be substituted with the need to keep it out as heatwaves increase!

Is there a 'dark side'?

As will be seen later, it is not uncommon to find Village or Town Design Statements which are patently backward-looking and nostalgic, demonstrating some sort of wish to take us back to 'the good old days' of cruck-frame houses, thatch, cottages and many other factors (but not the stocks and ducking stools of course!).

This creates a parallel with counter culture arguments amongst a few radical ecologists about the otherwise now firmly established notion that all new tree and shrub planting must be of so-called native species[xx]. They question whether there is even, or should be, any such thing as native species, some even arguing that this exposes an underlying and, for them worrying form of exceptionalism or nationalism.

Could the same argument be made about local distinctiveness in design; that it is not really a positive movement looking towards a new future of design but a way for people to resist global, national and even fairly local changes with which they are not comfortable; a retreat into a familiar if rose-tinted past?

This takes us back to the obvious focus in much of what has been covered so far on rural aspects of local distinctiveness. Yet, given that much of what makes places distinctive is about historical links back over time, this can be – as suggested above - just as true of large towns and cities.

When people are asked to recall a distinctive village or town they have passed through – say Alrewas (Staffordshire) – they are likely to mention the more historic buildings (lots of timber-framed ones in Alrewas), yet the vast majority of that village is made up of standard estates from the 1950s to today. The same is true of most larger towns and cities, and there it is not just the distinctiveness of the city centre that people recall. As explained, they are just as likely to recall features of an older neighbourhood now subsumed within their city.

And all the evidence suggests that people living in neighbourhoods within towns and cities are just as likely, maybe even more so, to be protective of their place as those living in the probably non-distinctive estates of Alrewas. In fact, as this is being written, Civic Voice, the national body representing local Civic Societies in villages, towns *and* cities, has declared a 'National Civic Day' and they call it a day to say 'I am proud of where I live', *wherever* that is.

Going back briefly to the concept of local distinctiveness beyond (just) the physical environment and to Clifford and King's "*ephemeral and invisible*" aspects, there are now a few guides to finding and celebrating this sort of distinctiveness of places. For example, see the 'Local Distinctiveness Toolkit'[xxi] produced for Llanelli and Cwm Gwendraeth which talks about "e*xperts and storytellers*", the cultural importance of rugby, local pottery and birdwatching sites etc. Or a brief note on 'Celebrating Local Distinctiveness'[xxii] from Action or Communities in Cumbria, which mentions, things such as food, farming, festivals and fruit.

So, when used constructively, especially to build in genuinely sustainable and climate-sensitive ways, local distinctiveness can transcend history and begin to construct a distinctiveness for today and tomorrow.

New distinctiveness?

'Designing high quality buildings requires good skills, especially because proposals need to respond to their setting to be in keeping with the local distinctiveness of their area.' Nottingham City Council Design Quality Framework[xxiii].

The phrase above talks about designs that "*respond to their setting*". But does this mean – must it mean – that new buildings and areas should always show some clear continuity from what was there before or what surrounds a development site; that they must almost look like what was built previously?

This might seem to be a very 20th and 21st century set of concerns, no doubt a result of the concerns raised above about the pace and complexity of change in our contemporary world.

But that was never the case in earlier years. If it had been, we would never have seen the introduction of classical design features as in what is known as Georgian architecture for example. Marlborough in Wiltshire is a perfect example of this. It is often said to have one of the finest Georgian high streets in the UK but many of the buildings are no more than Georgian facades plonked on the front of medieval, even timber-framed buildings (just like the aluminium shop fronts of the 1960s).

Couldn't patently new designs that do not "*respond to their setting*" in a simplistic way also have a role to play? This was very much the approach put forward in Nan Fairbrother's seminal book from 1974 'New

Lives, New Landscapes'[xxiv]. She argued that motorways, new industries, even power stations, were creating a new landscape for which new designs in all senses were more appropriate than more of what had been built before.

Maybe, however, it is not a matter of either/or but about who decides – the local community who just want the cosy comfort of something that 'fits in' or the architect desperate to try out the latest design ideas regardless of where the site may be?

This dilemma (and some prejudices about urban v. rural) was well captured by Kevin Lynch in his last major, career summarising, but largely overlooked, book 'A Theory of Good City Form'[xxv]. In his rather tongue-in-cheek chapter entitled 'A Place Utopia', Lynch suggests …..

"Imagine an urban countryside, a highly varied but humanised landscape. It is neither urban nor rural in the old sense, since houses, workplaces and places of assembly are set among trees, farms and streams. Within that extensive countryside there is a network of small intensive urban centres.

Each small territory may have its own style of living, its own types of buildings and landscape, even it its own pattern of utilities and transport. Small local territories are distinct in their way of life but they are set together. Everyone is aware of the diversity around her."

In summary then, local distinctiveness remains very relevant today, if needing to be considered at a level beyond just external appearance.

LOCAL DISTINCTIVENESS AND PLANNING

Community Design Statements

In developing the idea of Village and Town Design Statements, we in BDOR realised that they would require some form of almost theoretical background in order to ensure that they could be given the necessary weight within the planning system and be able to resist legal challenge. This was particularly true because, at the time, some successful challenges had been made to locally drafted landscape character assessments and, as a result, what was then English Nature developed a national, standard, consistent and hence potentially challenge-proof methodology for such assessments (see later).

For village and town level work, which focused mainly on the built areas of any parish and its landscape setting (not wider landscape, but again see later), I therefore developed a framework titled the '**Local Distinctiveness Matrix**'. (The initial version of the Matrix from 1994 is attached at the end of this paper. It is currently being updated, quite rightly, to take better account of broader landscape concerns, sustainable design and construction and climate change.) Drawing on numerous sources, this was structured around three key 'dimensions':

- **Landscape**: both as a determinant of village or town location and forming that place's broader setting.
- **Settlement**: the basic pattern of a place and – to borrow some terms – its urban design and place-making features.
- **Buildings**: the form, materials etc. of individual buildings.

> *'There exists a strong link between the historic landscape and settlement and this relationship has had a clear impact on shaping the character of all the settlements throughout the Borough.' Waverley Borough Council[xxvi].*

This overall structure very deliberately moved on from so much descriptive and analytical work at the time that simply looked at buildings (as some Conservation Area Statements still do), and within each of these main dimensions there were six sub-headings:

- **Physical Influences**
- **Spaces and Enclosure**
- **Forms and Patterns**
- **Characteristics**
- **Circulation**
- **Change**

I also added another very important one at the time – **Values**, which moved beyond the more physical and visual aspects back to those more "*ephemeral*" aspects emphasised by Clifford and King when they first used the term local distinctiveness.

The guidance related to the production of Village and Town Design Statements is based very much on the above matrix, applying it to help communities to undertake their own character assessment of their village or town, or even wider whole parish. With a rigorous character assessment in place, the principle behind VDSs and TDSs was that detailed guidance should not be required. The challenge to any designer and eventual applicant for planning permission was simple: demonstrate in your designs an understanding of the local character and explain how your design has responded to it.

And any response would not need to copy; it could introduce innovation if developed from that understanding of local character. That takes us back to Clifford and King's assertion that "*the identity of a place needs change, reinvigoration by the new*" which itself relates to Thomas Sharp's view in 'The Anatomy of the Village' that "*any suggestion that new village building should imitate that old kind of building …. would be doomed to failure from the beginning*" (and

hence to comments above on a possible 'dark side').

A classic demonstration of this came in one the very first VDSs, for Cottenham in Cambridgeshire. The community's 'Building Guidelines' started with the following:

"It is important to ensure positive opportunities for high quality contemporary architecture. Imaginative and original design can extend and renew the distinctive character and traditions of Cottenham's built environment."

The revised version in 2007[xxvii] states that:

"Each generation has contributed to the evolution of Cottenham's buildings, and this evolution should continue. Traditions of local building can be the stimulus to new architecture of originality and imagination".

Since their launch in around 1994, over 2,500 VDSs and TDSs have been produced by communities across England* - the first time in the world that local people have been able to produce statutory planning documents. (* Similar Statements were, and can still be, produced as Supplementary Planning Guidance in Wales.) Some were done solely by communities with no professional help, unless available within their community, which was often the case.

Some communities had professional help, largely, for the first 5/6 years, paid for through what was then the Rural Action grant aid scheme that I helped to set up, deliberately to help communities with their Design Statements and other local initiatives.

Until 2004, most authorities adopted VDSs as Supplementary Planning Guidance (SPG) but this was less common after the 2004 Planning Act, which introduced the supposedly more rigorous format of Supplementary Planning Documents (SPD). Some authorities never supported VDSs and TDSs as SPG or SPD.

An evaluation (now lost) from around 2000 suggested that, overall, both VDSs and TDSs had been successful in at least ensuring more attention to locally distinctive design. The evaluation also suggested that those produced with professional support had more and more significant impact, largely because those done without professional input were little more than attempts to make all new designs simply copy those in nothing more than the historic cores of villages and towns. The evaluation also suggested that those which stuck more closely, if in different ways, to covering the various aspects in the Local Distinctiveness Matrix were more likely to carry weight.

Character Assessments, Design Guides and Charters

There are two other major strands to work on design to complement the above on mainly rural places. One – character assessment - links back to people such as Sharp, Nairn and Cullen in terms of more urban settings as well as to broader scale work and more rural work on landscape. The other strand, which began to take the balance of assessment and guidance in a rather different direction, was Design Guides. (A fairly recent addition to the repertoire – Placemaking Charters is touched on briefly.) There is also another way in to local distinctiveness in planning in terms of heritage – Locally Listed Heritage Assets. All of these are described below.

Character Assessment

The core of any Village or Town Design Statement has been, from the outset, the initial assessment of the character of that place - even sometimes that village or town in its wider landscape setting – describing its local distinctiveness. But character assessment did not start with VDSs and TDSs. The principle of surveying, describing, analysing and presenting the character of

areas has a long tradition – as with Sharp (see above) from 1946.

Without dredging back into a detailed history from 1946, requirements for assessment of some form in planning policy first surfaced in policy terms with Planning Policy Guidance 1 (PPG1)[xxviii] in 1997, shortly after the outcomes of the Design in the Countryside Initiative. This stated that:

"Policies should be based on a proper assessment of the character of the surrounding built and natural environment, and should take account of the defining characteristics of each local area".

'Geology, landscape, wildlife and the historic environment all contribute to local distinctiveness and a sense of place. Quality of place is recognised as an essential ingredient for a thriving economy and maintaining sustainable and vibrant communities. Celebrating what is special and unique about a locality plays an important role in bolstering local pride and contributes to community cohesion'. Tees Valley Nature Partnership[xxix].

Nationally supported assessment methodologies for landscape probably started around 1987 and, with some updating, have been in place for some time such that all local authorities with extensive areas of landscape are required to produce authority-wide assessments using the established methodology[xxx]. All such guidance includes references to distinctiveness or even specifically *local* distinctiveness.

This approach was also picked up in relation to heritage concerns in 1994 with the publication of 'PPG 15 Planning and the Historic Environment (England)'[xxxi]. This states that:

"The physical survivals of our past are to be valued and protected for their own sake, as a central part of our cultural heritage and our sense of national identity… Their presence adds to the quality of our lives, by

enhancing the familiar and cherished local scene and sustaining the sense of local distinctiveness which is so important an aspect of the character and appearance of our towns, villages and countryside."

This robust statement has been elaborated several times since 1994, notably in 2021 with a lengthy note – almost a policy statement[xxxii] – on the Historic England website about 'Historic Character and Good Design'.

Though not actually using the term local distinctiveness, some key extracts as below are very directly relevant, not just in terms of characterisation but also about the absolute need to engage local people in any assessment work undertaken in their own area:

- *"The historic character of a place is far more than its spatial patterning of material elements. It is also a cultural expression, of human responses through time to that area and its changing contexts and opportunities."*
- *"An understanding of the range of values people attach to places is, therefore, key to evaluating historic character for the planning process."*
- *"Far from any suggestion that features and areas, beyond heritage assets, lack heritage significance, characterisation brings the historic grain and context of the whole place to inform the management of its change."*
- *"The character of place is as much about people's perceptions of areas as it is about buildings or sites."*

Historic England have also produced their own guidance on undertaking historic area assessments – 'Understanding Place'[xxxiii] – and they supported Oxford City Council and the Oxford Preservation Trust in producing guidance specifically for that city[xxxiv].

What is extremely worrying, however, is that, while nationally accepted methodologies exist for landscape and heritage, **almost nothing nationally accepted appears to exist for built environment assessment**

(though Historic England might argue that theirs fills this gap). Googling 'character assessment' brings up a long list of links to landscape assessment and authority-specific guidance or assessments (e.g. for Bristol[xxxv]). Oddly, the only national guidance – which mentions local distinctiveness - comes not from the RIBA but from the Landscape Institute, titled 'Townscape Assessment'[xxxvi]!

During a recent 'Code School' run by Urban Design London (though targeted nationally), and for which I was one of 50 speakers, I noted a large number of broadly consistent methodologies, but all slightly different in detail, being used for character assessment.

The nearest we have to anything approaching a coherently argued, evidence-based and fairly widely used approach to character assessment comes from Richard Guise and James Webb in their book 'Characterising Neighbourhoods'[xxxvii], although this too is very focused on built settlements so is less valuable on the influence of landscape on distinctiveness.

Even more worrying, despite its obviously attractive title, is 'Distinctively Local'[xxxviii], produced by four architectural practices as guidance on new housing design in particular. Two aspects of this are worrying. First, it constantly emphasises the need to design in context but barely one of the 140 or so photographs in the report shows anything other than the authors' designs; no context is shown at all to enable a reader to

judge their success in relating the new to the existing. Secondly, there is barely a single word to suggest that the local distinctiveness of any place has anything at all to do with the people who live there, and therefore that they have nothing to contribute. At its worst, this approach replaces developers' anywhere design with architects' anywhere designs!

Linking from the above, which is about individual projects, the idea of undertaking character assessments to inform designs was formally reinforced in a government Circular of 2006, which required the submission of a 'Design and Access Statement' (DAS) with any planning application. The Design Council guidance[xxxix] on preparing a DAS stated that:

"The most important message to get across is that the application is based on a good understanding of local character."

It then goes on to say:

" ….designs which are inappropriate in their context should not be accepted. It is therefore important that an applicant demonstrates that their proposed development has emerged from a full assessment of a site's circumstances and characteristics. It will be clear from the drawings provided with many applications that the scheme is heavily influenced by the existing built character of the local area."

Design Guides

Many people imagine that design guidance, if not termed a 'Design Guide', started with the Essex Design Guide in 1973, but there had been examples before that, notably 'Design in Town and Village'[xl] published in 1953 by the Ministry of Local Government and Housing. This had three parts: 'The English Village' (written by Thomas Sharp), 'The Design of Residential Areas' and (despite the booklet's title) 'Design in City Centres'.

Nevertheless, it was only with the publication of the Essex Design Guide that such documents really took off to the point that virtually all planning authorities produced some form of guide soon after 1973, and many still have them in place (usually updated) today.

The 1997 version[xli] of the Essex Guide does not use the term distinctiveness but, in a foreword to the 2018 edition, Richard

Simmons (then CEO of CABE) echoed many points already made in stating that:

"It's about local people setting out the terms on which investors will be allowed to add to their most precious assets: their sense of place, identity and community. The Essex Design Guide is the guarantee that Essex will remain Essex. That it will be somewhere, not a nowhere place."

Though not mentioning local distinctiveness, all versions of the guide make mention of the context of any site. The 1997 version mentions a crucial addition to the original version in that "*A site appraisal* (i.e. character assessment) *is now required for all development sites larger than 1 hectare*" and that development on some sites "*will have to fit in with a context of pre-existing development*". Notes are provided on the scope of a "*site appraisal*" and there is also an example of a "*Built-Form Context Appraisal*".

The striking thing about the Essex Design Guide, from its original version to today's (and not true of many other similar guides), is the amount of highly prescriptive detail that is included, for example on an "*above eye level secondary window*", on the avoidance of "*over-dominant dormers*" or that "*open porches and hoods are preferable and are easier to assimilate than enclosed porches*".

As someone brought up on the London and Essex borders, I consider such a detailed agenda to be a worrying simplification of the many historic patterns of building layouts through to details that exist across Essex. More particularly, if that agenda has any relevance at all it is to north Essex, certainly not south Essex, and Essex Design Guide style estates sit very oddly in places in the south of the county. The result is in effect almost yet another form of homogenisation, swapping the 'anywhere' housing of the volume builder for an 'anywhere in Essex' approach. Even if the latter seems better than the former, it still denies genuinely local distinctiveness.

A more typical example of a Design Guide would be that produced by Stratford-on-Avon District[xlii]. In this case local distinctiveness is mentioned from the start and throughout. It places an emphasis on the need to understand and respond to the local character of each specific area or place in the District while stressing the importance of innovation in design. It refers to the District's Landscape Character Assessment, which also picks up on settlement character and it connects each of the 150 or so villages to the five main character areas of the District. It has sections on Settlements, Movement and Highways. It does not go into as much detail as the Essex Guide and does not require such careful use of any details. (It is probably not just chance that the District was one of the first to support and promote Village Design Statements!)

There are also a few local authority reports and guides which highlight local distinctiveness mainly in a planning context. Three interesting examples are as follows.

The 'Reigate and Banstead Local Distinctiveness Design Guide[xliii]' (which is SPG) is in some ways a standard design guide but its core focus is on the need for character assessment and, as with the approach to VDSs/TDSs, there is little actual guidance. The stated aim is to "*use the Guide so that the Borough's distinctiveness is reflected in their proposals*", so it is very much about new buildings. Interestingly, the document outlines the basic character of the district in relation to landscape, settlements and buildings, thus following the basic of the Local Distinctiveness Matrix, and it then includes some case studies of sites and areas.

In 2010 Herefordshire Council produced a 'Policy Direction Paper: Local Distinctiveness'[xliv] as part of their work on the Core Strategy. Interestingly, and unlike the Reigate Guide, this paper does not address buildings directly; instead it focuses on distinctiveness in terms of landscape, green infrastructure, biodiversity and heritage,

though the latter includes buildings to a limited extent.

For the proposed new Halsnead Garden Village in Knowsley, the authority produced a 'Design and Local Distinctiveness Guide'[xlv] in effect as a strategic masterplan. The site is all of the former Halsnead Park Estate of which little survives on the ground, although the Guide states that:

"*Key historic remnants remaining on site are to be retained and enhanced throughout the development. Reference must be made to the historic land uses, vernacular and*

materials of the local area in the detailing of the designs".

In other words this is more about creating a new, if locally referenced, level of local distinctiveness in the development than simply about repeating or adding to what is there now. It states that "*The use of good design to make places 'memorable' can also aid orientation and navigation around the development*".

Finally, the design agenda has moved on since 1975 and, in particular, issues around climate change[xlvi] and healthy living[xlvii] also now have to be considered.

Placemaking Charters

The latest addition to the repertoire of forms of guidance (or encouragement) for higher quality design is Placemaking Charters, though there are as yet only a few of these (I am aware of four). As in the West of England Combined Authority (WECA) charter[xlviii], the aim is to "*set out a shared vision for delivering towns, cities and rural communities that put health, happiness and quality of life at their heart*". The point of a charter, as for WECA again, is that it should be "*based on engagement with a broad range of built environment stakeholders*" and that all of these and many others should formally sign up to it.

The core of any charter is a summary of key principles. Those in the WECA charter (very

similar to the others) are 'Future Ready, 'Connected', 'Biodiverse', 'Characterful' and 'Healthy and Inclusive'. Within the Characterful principle, further text mentions "*distinctive, high quality, enjoyable places*", "*value what's there*", "*reinforce local character at the broad range of scales; from landscape setting to building detail*" and "*respond creatively and sensitively to the different qualities of places*" – all highly relevant if not using the actual term local distinctiveness.

Rather remarkably, none of the other three charters I have seen mentions *local* distinctiveness; one mentions the importance of distinctiveness generally.

Guidance on Locally Listed Heritage Assets

Although there is no formal evidence for this, anecdotal evidence suggests a rising level of concern from people that the main listing process managed by Historic England has for too long focused solely on those more significant buildings or sites of national interest, leaving others valued by local people with no protection at all. This has led to Historic England introducing a lower level of listing with some limited legal protection within the planning system[xlix].

It is now possible for a local authority to produce what are commonly called 'Local Lists' of these other, community-valued buildings, sites or features. These might be a horse trough, an old gate, a memorial seat or even something as topical as (which I/we have used) a Dalek-shaped litter bin (no explanation given here!).

In most cases, unless they are undertaking an area study for some other purpose, authorities rely – quite rightly - on local

people putting forward things that might go onto a Local List. This is, unfortunately, dependent on the willingness (and resources) of an authority to make the opportunity available to local people and encourage them to submit suggestions. Some, for example Bristol City Council, do that extremely well, others not at all.

This is unquestionably about local distinctiveness because, although such features may seem quite minor, a loss of a single item, and certainly the loss of several or even all, can seriously damage the character of an area.

Adding something to a Local List is, however, a carefully managed process for which Historic England provide detailed guidance[l]. This requires an evaluation of each proposed asset in terms of various criteria, for

example amenity value or archaeological interest. Only if those evaluations show real value does an asset get added to the Local List, at which point it becomes a 'material consideration' in planning; not great protection but at least any asset must be considered in relation to any planning application.

> *'Aren't we lucky? Every few miles, the English landscape changes. This country must be one of the most visually diverse in the world. Rolling hills and valleys, rocky outcrops and moorland, woodland and plains, they all translate into exciting vernacular buildings constructed with varied materials.' Heritage Open Days[li].*

Using Assessments etc.

Having good assessments and guides in place either as Supplementary Planning Documents or as part of Neighbourhood Plans is, in general, something positive, but their value then depends almost entirely on how they are used in the development management process.

The start to this is, of course, whatever applicants include in their Design and Access Statements (DAS). Having seen many of these, they are too often very limited in terms of explaining local character and how exactly the proposed design relates to it. In fact, many applicants make no attempt at all to do this. Just occasionally, I have seen a DAS that references a local Design Statement but, even then, it can remain unclear how the resulting design draws from it about local character and then how such issues are addressed in the officer's determination report.

This creates a vicious circle - 'why should we (applicants) bother if they (determining officers) either don't or can't'? The situation in development management is not positive

in terms of design. In one recent situation, when working on the updating of a district-wide guide, we asked the authority to share some copies of that guide with people at a workshop. They could not find any – surely an indicator that the guide is not used at all by development managers!

This can at least be understood with all the many pressures on development management teams at the moment. It does not, however, bode well for any addition to officer loads through a need to understand design generally, to be able to understand Design Statements (or whatever) and to draw from them in the determination of applications – which could well also mean extra, and currently fairly rare, site visits.

The positive use of any assessments etc. also links to another important part of the planning system. There seems very little point in officers, but particularly communities, only becoming aware of how an applicant has used an existing assessment, or one of their own, when an application has already been submitted. That is far too late to be in any way useful.

The only really useful way in which assessments and guidance can be used is in the very early stages of someone preparing an application. That requires what is termed pre-application community involvement. This was mentioned in the Localism Act of 2011 but, despite constant pressure from all 'sides', that was never followed up with the secondary legislation making such involvement a formal requirement. (It is in Wales but very poorly managed.)

Good developers and consultants do a lot of good pre-application community involvement but they remain a tiny minority; the majority either do it as a ritual ('putting the con into consultation' as someone once said), or they do not do it at all. Until that next stage of legislation comes in, assessments and guidance cannot fulfil their real potential.

Finally in this section, it may have been noted that there has been no mention of elected representatives and their role, be they local authority councillors or parish/town councillors. They ought of course to be the champions of design in their areas on behalf of their communities

Key Points

One key point stands out, in fact shouts out: **It remains the case that any new planning application is still more likely to include an 'anywhere' design than a locally distinctive one and get approved without query!** And this is despite all the panoply of guides, statements, protocols and so forth over almost 50 years!

'Stick a scene that vaguely looks like a pre-1950s English village on a product (anything from bread to a packet of biscuits to a newly built home) and it will sell comfort, ease, tradition, stability, authenticity, quality.' Ben Robinson in 'England's Villages'[lii].

but this only rarely seems to be the case. I personally know of some authority councillors who are completely unaware of their authority's design policies, even when that authority has a design guide, and also unaware or any Design Statements or similar that might exist. I have also encountered examples of parish/town councillors failing to comment on design when local people feel it is a key issue, of councillors failing to refer to and use a Design Statement for their own area where it exists and even of others being completely unaware that their parish or town even has a Design Statement!

Around 90% of applications are now determined under delegated powers, leaving any comments solely to the development management officer, with the problems as outlined above. Those considered by committee are usually the very large or contentious ones which probably means that small but potentially highly significant ones - as local people see them - never go to committee.

As suggested, however, one exception to this, if still mainly anecdotal, comes from the use of community level design statements. And then only when the statement gives a very thorough description of distinctive local character, when that statement has some form of policy status and when the development manager assessing an application knows about the statement and feels confident in using it to refuse an application solely on design grounds.

There is then one other rather different but important and worrying point to be drawn from this section. The balance between assessment and guidance in design guides has shifted recently to place more emphasis on guidance than on assessment.

LOCAL DISTINCTIVENESS 'RECENTLY'

In this context, 'recently' refers to post 2011 when the Localism Act came into force, and post 2018 when the Building Better, Building Beautiful Commission was set up, which then led to the 'National Model Design Code' (NMDC) in 2021.

Design in Neighbourhood Plans

The Localism Act of 2011[iii] introduced a new form of statutory plan – the Neighbourhood Plan. This was intended to build on proven practice from Village and Town Design Statements, which could have some status within the planning system, and Parish and Town Plans which, despite their title, had no status in the system. The former were restricted to design issues only (though a Statement could be used to help inform development locations), while the latter usually covered a very wide range of issues, often well beyond those covered through town planning. (There are important issues behind this about community experiences with Parish and Town Plans but those need not be pursued here.)

Neighbourhood Plans were also intended, by giving local communities some level of power over what development happened where, to reduce established anti-development views and deliver more development, especially housing.

As was found in the original research that led to the Design in the Countryside initiative, rural people's concerns about new building were about both the amount and location of development and its design quality (although the latter was again about 'anywhere design' so could apply equally in urban settings). Given that Neighbourhood Plans provide the opportunity for people to address both issues, two outcomes from the first years of such plans are slightly surprising.

First, that only a relatively small number of communities (which have been mainly rural) have taken up the opportunity to allocate sites in their plans, still leaving that to (and presumably then blaming) their local planning authorities. Secondly, and of more relevance here, most but not all communities have addressed something about design in their plans but, in most cases, only minimally. Some plans include design policies just for Conservation Areas. Some typical minimalist policies include:

- "*The design of new buildings and conversion of agricultural buildings should be appropriate to the setting of all adjacent buildings, particularly where they are historic.*"
- "*Proposed new development in the Plan area should respect the existing layout, character and historic design features of the village* (and) *relevant to the site concerned.*"
- "*New residential developments must be of high quality design and respond to and integrate with the local landscape and built environment.*"

A more thorough policy makes a specific mention of local distinctiveness:

"*… design should enhance and reinforce the local distinctiveness and character of the area in which it is situated, particularly within the two Conservation Areas.*"

It also addresses the issue of contemporary design:

"*…. contemporary and innovative materials and design will be supported where positive improvement can be robustly demonstrated without detracting from the historic context.*"

The core concern with such minimalist policies, even those that mention local distinctiveness, is that they just seek 'design that fits' but fail to provide any supporting character assessment to define what any design or local distinctiveness actually means - i.e. what exactly a new design

might best fit with - leaving this open to all possible interpretations.

On occasion, where a community already has a Design Statement in place, the link is made as follows:

"*All new developments should reflect the distinctive character of ……. and explicitly address the guidance set out in the …… Village Design Statement (Appendix 1)."*

In the absence of any VDS or TDS, my colleagues and I in Place Studio almost always ensure that communities produce a thorough Design Statement (sometimes a Design Code - see later) rooted very firmly in the principles of the Matrix in terms of local distinctiveness. To maximise the planning status of such Statements, we also present them not as an Appendix as above but as a

full Part 2 of the Neighbourhood Plan itself. (Rather worryingly, when one recent plan was made, the authority only put a link to the Part 1 main Plan on their website, not the Part 2 Design Statement. This was speedily corrected!)

The status of policies on design in Neighbourhood Plans and the need for integrated forms of Design Statement was strengthened in 2020 in the 'Planning for the Future' White Paper[liv] through further links to what became the NMDC to strengthening the general status of Neighbourhood Plans and, indirectly, through many mentions of the essential importance of good community engagement. However, that White Paper has now been superseded and nothing yet potentially in its place addresses design in any meaningful sense.

The Building Better, Building Beautiful Commission

In November 2018, the government set up the Building Better, Building Beautiful Commission (BBBBC) to address emerging national concern, from professions, elected representatives, communities and (some of) the development industry, about what was judged to be the poor design quality of most new buildings and settlements. The Commission's report 'Living with Beauty'[lv] was published in 2020. The report (to which I contributed) makes a few mentions of local distinctiveness, though almost exclusively linked to history, for example:

"*Respect for heritage is intimately linked to local distinctiveness …. local materials and building traditions give each region of Britain an architectural character … they make it somewhere rather than anywhere.*"

Among the eight 'priorities' to deliver higher quality and ideally beautiful development, the authors mention the role of communities and the need to address education and skills and "*promote a wider understanding of placemaking*". In terms of communities, the report states that:

"*Before planning applications of strategic scale are made, the existing community should, if possible, play a part in choosing the overall design or masterplan.*"

Given that poorly designed projects for small sites can often be far more damaging than those for strategic sites, it is not clear why engagement is just seen as appropriate to strategic sites.

In commenting on the use of Design Guides, the report then suggests that:

"*Public confidence in the planning process would surely be enhanced by the knowledge that, whatever is built, must conform to those features of the local urban fabric that have proved durable and lovable to the people who live with them.*"

In relation to how community as opposed to professional views about places and buildings are valued (and they are different), the report states that:

"The evidence that the Commission received suggested that the education of planners, architects and other professionals often fails to give a sufficient grounding in empirical connections between built form and well-being, in public visual preferences, and in the art of integrating new buildings into the historic fabric of a settlement."

Yet the report is also rather mixed in its conclusions when it comes to asserting the role of local people – what is termed 'civil society' – and local distinctiveness in design. In a chart that suggests responsibilities for moving forward, civil society is stated to have a role to "*localise the National Model Design Code*" (see below) but not to "*ask for beauty*". Public engagement that is "*wide, deep and early*" is encouraged as a

role for communities but not (despite the quote earlier) to "*promote a common understanding of place*". Finally, and quite remarkably, it does not seem to be the role for civil society to "*rediscover civic pride in architecture*"!

This inconsistency continues through the BBBC report such that, despite constant mentions of community engagement, no mention is made of pre-application community involvement (see page 15 above), the most obvious stage at which to assert the value of local character assessment and set the standard for better design, and the key point when designers can make use of any assessment or guidance.

Design Codes

The mention of the National Model Design Code (NMDC)[lvi] above is extremely important because, as hinted in the BBBBC report, this was being developed by the government in 2020. When published, it introduced far more consistent and thorough standards of design through the use of codes, which must be produced by each local authority and which must then be followed by applicants. (The word 'must' is actually used regularly in the NMDC and supporting material.)

Many commentators have highlighted a wide range of problems with the NMDC but the most significant in terms of local distinctiveness is the process whereby each authority should (or is that 'must'?) divide its overall area into a series of "*Area types*" such as "*Urban Neighbourhood*", "*Outer Suburb*" or "*Village*", and one code would be produced for each.

Apart from the huge uncertainties about the precise meaning of such terms and how to agree them on a map, this implies that towns (or urban neighbourhoods or villages) that are unquestionably very different would all be subject to that single code.

Herefordshire's NMDC pilot work concluded that even the few villages they studied were so different that a single code could not possibly be appropriate. In fact, Herefordshire's work, and all of ours in Place Studio, shows that not only can two adjacent places be different in general but also that each will have some very different – and locally distinctive - character areas within them. The blunt application of area types is at risk of fundamentally damaging genuine local distinctiveness.

'It is the collaboration and partnerships that should be fostered, not turning the system into a 'top down' dictation of standards'. Buckinghamshire Council. The council warns that if national design guidance is to be produced, local character and preferences would be overwritten by top-down guidance. This would have the 'opposite effect of the government's intention, creating standard places with no appreciation of local context'.

At the time of writing - Summer 2022 – my own concerns above about the NMDC, and many other concerns, have been confirmed by a national monitoring process.[lvii] It may be as a result of this that there are rumours

that the NMDC is to be 'scrapped' and replaced with some sort of focus on 'local character' (as the rumourmonger states) – shifting the emphasis (happily for me) back from top-down mandate to local understanding.

To balance this, however, there is some early evidence that the government's strongly asserted commitment to better design (not as yet with any new codes in place) is having some positive effects. There has apparently been a notable increase in the number of appeals against refusal of permission on design grounds going against the appellants. The latest figures suggest decisions going 13:7 in favour of those authorities using design as grounds for refusal. (This is picked up in 'Appealing Design', a report from the Place Alliance[lviii].)
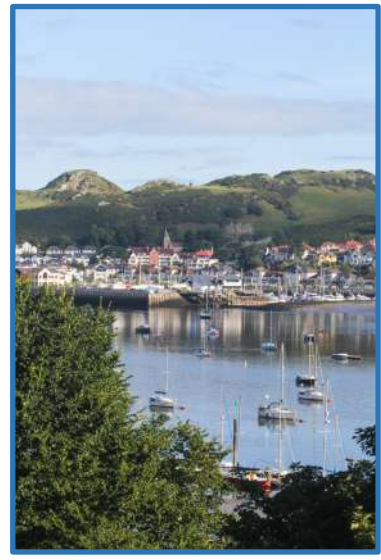
WHERE NEXT FOR LOCAL DISTINCTIVENESS IN PLANNING AND DESIGN?

It should be clear from everything above that local distinctiveness as a concept, even if other terms are used for it, is thoroughly embedded in core planning, heritage and design thinking. That is not to say that there are no challenges facing the practical delivery of locally distinctive places, buildings and smaller features. There are three main ones.

Higher Level Challenges

If the rumours about the demise of the National Model Design Code prove to be wrong and it remains the standard to be used everywhere, it is very difficult to see how any locally distinctive designs can emerge. 'Anywhere NMDC' designs will replace 'anywhere developers designs' (which might be a minor improvement!) and perhaps even, as suggested above, 'anywhere architects' designs'. Will there then be any genuinely 'locally distinctive designs'? Probably not.

There again, even if the NMDC is not scrapped, I believe there is a strong chance of enough of a groundswell against it in its blunt, 'must do' format that more variety can still emerge at local level. And it must be admitted that there are still some important points that should be drawn from the list of aspects and criteria in the NMDC, for example linked to climate change resilience.

So far, my comments about the NMDC have been about its content but the monitoring report noted above also comments on the dramatic shortage of the essential resources and skills to put its ideas into place, and the same concerns would apply, if in different ways, to advancing the cause of local distinctiveness if the NMDC is indeed scrapped or significantly amended.

Local authorities are struggling with ever-diminishing resources but any work at all on local character assessment and related design guidance is certainly not up in any top list of spending priorities (nor should it be).

And imagine the challenge in terms of resources of trying to develop the sort of detailed local character assessment that would form the core of most Design Statements. Wiltshire for example has over 250 parishes, Bristol has perhaps 85 natural neighbourhoods. No local authority could ever hope to have the resources to work - as they would have to - with such numbers of local communities to do local character assessment and related design guidance across this sort of canvas.

Nor are there enough skills going round in terms of character assessment as a whole. This requires input on landscape, architecture, urban design and heritage; skills, all now in very short supply in local government and, of course, many with such skills are now in the private sector.

So now it's back to resources because private consultants would have to be paid to do the work. And it is also not just about design or related skills because, if the aim is to tap into the all-important local knowledge, other community level engagement, capacity building and consensus building skills are necessary when working with lay people and complex communities.

Is there an answer waiting in the wings – Neighbourhood Plans? Yes and no. There are currently 46 made Neighbourhood Plans in Wiltshire; that is just over 15% coverage. More are on their way. There are 4 in Bristol; that is perhaps 4%. No more are on their way. The national coverage is around 20% after 10 years. So, even if all those communities with made plans undertook reviews to add in Design Statements (very few have done that so far), and all those on their way did the same, the result would still be a huge gap, especially in our cities. Using

the NMDC to push communities to do Design Statements where they have a made Plan will help but it is not clear how many groups of people who have been through the wringer of doing a Neighbourhood Plan might want to take that step again.

Yet those who do take that step can at least get some resources* – potentially up to £8,000 - to do a Design Statement that could be added to their Neighbourhood Plan or a review. (* As of now; there is no certainty of continuing funding.) For the vast majority who may just want to do a Design Statement without the lengthy rigmarole involved with all the other aspects of a Neighbourhood Plan, there is no funding at all to help them, especially now that some level of professional help is even more important if rather minimal guidance needs to become stronger in terms of coding. (As above, the Rural Action Grant Aid scheme that helped with funding is now long gone.)

Given that I/we know that there are almost certainly many communities who might be keen to produce a Design Statement*, the obvious way forward would be for Locality, who manage the grants for Neighbourhood Plans, to set up a new stream of funding just for Statements – though they too are worried about their current funding as it is. If this was to take off, however, we are back to the challenge of whether there are enough widely skilled people to respond to requests. (* Assuming all authorities supported Statements as SPD.)

Local and Site Level Challenges

Over recent years, my colleagues and I in Place Studio have encountered challenges when dealing with specific places and specific sites.

A classic example in terms of places is when there is simply not any distinctive, clear or locally valued character to a neighbourhood or part of a town or village.

Not naming names, we have experienced this in an area that was almost undeveloped for centuries until heavy industries started in the 19th century, resulting in highly fragmentary, scattered, poor quality settlements of mainly workers' cottages only later consolidated into towns and villages to which 'anywhere' post 1945 estates have now been added. In this area, there is a very strong sense of local distinctiveness in terms the landscape setting and local culture (as per Common Ground's definition) – brass bands, festivals, poetry, art etc. – but not the built environment. Some features can be highlighted in new development – a local stone or brick, historic names, particular trees etc. - but little more.

This is where something patently new may be the only possible solution. If done to high national design standards this can create something distinctive* but it may well be totally isolated and never taken forward as a design approach on other developments, so never creating any area-wide distinctiveness. (* This may be the case with the examples illustrated in 'Distinctively Local', as mentioned above, if only the authors had shown this!)

There can, however, also be cases where there is enough new development to create a new and distinctive character for an area as a whole, notably in new 'villages', urban extensions or on large regeneration sites. In fact it may well be more appropriate that they create a distinctive new character rather than doing what nobody would ever have thought of doing in times past and 'fit in' to their context. Whatever one thinks of it overall, Poundbury has managed this.

A classic example in terms of sites is where – as in Alrewas mentioned above – the majority of development, especially that now forming the settlement edge where new projects are most likely, is of rather anonymous late 20th century developments. In one case we know of, the approach agreed with the developer involved three

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design features to try to pick up on the valued local distinctiveness. First, ensuring that the few new houses alongside the main road should have their fronts facing, in fact close up to, that road – as in the distinctive core of the village - and in preference to garden fences facing the road, as is too common. Secondly, the design character of the roadside houses should reflect but not copy the scale and materials of the historic core. Thirdly, as the site forms an entrance to

the settlement, the very first house to be seen on arrival should be angled to face towards the road, creating a clear entrance to the settlement. The remainder of the site, in fact the majority of it, could then be relatively standard in layout and design.

It is not a case of either/or, repeating older character *or* bringing in something new.

Societal Challenges

Almost inevitably, when asked to think about distinctive features and places, people think of older, historic ones. We know that people love visiting intricate Cornish fishing villages and Cotswold towns. But does that mean they would wish to live there? Would they like the often small, complicated, often terraced houses with little or no garden and most commonly with no parking space? The answer is often (but not always) no. They would not.

It may be a peculiarly British phenomenon along the lines of 'an Englishman's home is his castle', and it may be a result of the relentless and clever marketing by the mainstream housebuilding industry, but people do want (or say they want) good sized rooms, they do want gardens and they do want parking spaces right by their homes. But do they want this just for themselves?

Here it gets more complicated because what many people also want when they buy a new house is to be able to sell it easily when the time comes to do so. For many in recent volume builders' estates, that time is now around every few years, mainly because of job-related moves in early career stages. That imperative to sell easily results in an inevitable decline into lowest common denominator designs because, putting it bluntly, anything unusual, more interesting …. more distinctive or (dare I say it) architect-designed is judged (rightly or wrongly) to be more difficult to sell.

The industry understands this and plays to it very subtly such that new designs for housing estates are not about the area, about the estate as a whole or about distinctive character but about what is called 'kerb appeal' – the way each separate new house, on its own, looks to someone visiting the estate thinking of buying there (and, of course, driving around in a car to do so). And if there are X more houses just like the one they first notice and like, so much the better.

Barratt Homes welcomed the government's emphasis in the National Model Design Code on popular design but qualified this by stating that house builders and developers are 'generally best placed to determine the most appropriate design approach and product for a site and taking account of constraints, opportunities and customer aspirations'.

The ideal for many is therefore to be able to live in a modern, semi-detached or detached house with a garden and on-plot parking; one that looks much like others in the estate and much like others all around the country (so is easy to sell), while also living in a neighbourhood, town or village with a distinctive core of usually far older and distinctive buildings.

So, to go back to Alrewas, a recently arrived resident of a 1990s estate and house responding to a request from a relative in Australia to 'send us a photo of where you live now', would most likely not send a photo

of their semi-detached but a nice photo of old timber-framed cottages in the core of the village!

Taking this further, when showing examples of clearly contemporary designs to 'lay people' even very recently, including some that clearly responded to local character, they were almost always judged to be ugly or boring and very often because they were assumed to be council housing. Why is that given that large scale council housing ceased almost 50 years ago?

Back when large scale council housing was still happening alongside speculative private developments, the former was almost all architect-designed, the latter assertively not so. In my research for Milton Keynes Development Corporation[lix], we showed town residents some images of houses with monopitch roofs. The response was clear: 'there are those funny roofs … so that must be architect-designed … so it must be council housing ….so I don't like it'!

Image in design cannot in any way be considered just a matter of aesthetic judgement, and certainly not judgements shared by all. Design cannot be separated from social meanings[lx] even, it seems, after almost 50 years of assumptions that 'everybody' will agree on what is good design. But it's not just 50 years; it's thousands of years! In a recent book from the British Museum – 'The World of Stonehenge'[lxi] – the authors comment that "*the design of many of these monuments created the potential for social distinction at an individual level …. and may have been exclusionary*".

And the net result of this negative association of architect involvement with a now socially disliked form of housing simply played into the hands of the volume housebuilders who were then able to emphasise again the 'kerb appeal' notion of selling individual houses, not places.

The challenge is therefore to find ways to develop local design distinctiveness that still satisfies that aspiration for what many would term 'modern standards' yet also in a way that does not create something 'odd' that people judge might not sell easily. No problem there then!

Key Conditions for Tomorrow's Local Distinctiveness

According to Terry Pratchett[lxii], " …. *if you do not know where you come from, then you don't know where you are, and if you don't know where you are, you don't know where you're going. And if you don't know where you're going, you're probably going wrong.*" My own personal version of this is: **You cannot know *who* you are unless you know *where* you are**.

And knowing where you are, something crucially linked to personal, familial and community identity in our ever more complex world, is totally dependent on each area or place being different and distinctive in its local context. Homogeneity of place leads to homogeneity of people, so I will continue to assert the need for local distinctiveness in design. In which case, given that, as above, 'the system' also seems to support that, at least in principle, how can we make it more the norm and less the exception? The list could be endless so what follows are five key points only.

1. Shared Values

The point above about 'architect-designed equals council housing' is desperately worrying because it suggests that developing shared values between professionals and lay people will be very difficult to achieve; not helped when the 'Living with Beauty' report states, staggeringly (as above), that it is *not* the role of civil society to "*rediscover civic pride in architecture*"!

As it happens, progress is being made from two sources rather looked down on by some professionals. One source being TV's Grand Designs programmes which are slowly bringing some genuine respectability to the term architect-designed (if to houses often way beyond any ordinary person's budget). The other source being IKEA and, more generally, Scandinavian design. Just recently, a new housing development between Bristol and Bath has even promoted its design in terms of that Danish term 'hygge'!

Very importantly, it is common in Scandinavia for 'design' in its broadest sense to be taught in schools; indeed it is still quite common to find architects working with schoolchildren on design issues. We in the UK tried to pick up on this in the 1970s and 1980s, notably with a national programme entitled 'Art and the Built Environment'[lxiii], but there has been no continuity from that to today, even though starting in schools is the absolute bedrock of creating a design-literate society.

We badly need to restart this type of work in schools *and* communities* because, until there really is enough common ground in values between professionals and public, little or no real progress can be made. (* As we know from our own work, engaging people properly in character assessment work – see later – is a powerful way to help this.)

2. Key Stakeholder Commitment

It would appear from a whole medley of central government and ministerial pronouncements and papers that there is high level support for raising design standards, Caution is necessary at this point, however, about government statements generally but also about the mixed messages about local distinctiveness in the National Model Design Code and statements about the sole government focus being on delivering housing numbers.

Some of the professions are clearly on board about local distinctiveness; notably planners, urban designers (if maybe not all) and landscape architects. Architects may be another matter as the 'Distinctively Local' paper suggests, along with a (rather ignorant) blanket dismissal of anything to do with design guidance and codes from the editor of the Architects' Journal. Surveyors rather sit in the non-committal middle; if local distinctiveness does not get in the way of business …. fine, but they probably do not see it as their role to be proactively supportive.

The difficulty is with highways engineers and their current standards; critical because they will not 'adopt' schemes that do not meet their standards and their standards are generally out of synch with what local distinctiveness means in many contexts. Note that the national 'Manual for Streets'[lxiv] is still not fully in synch with the National Model Design Code.

While this paper was never intended to be mainly about housing design, that is where one most often sees the worst of 'anywhere' design, and that is the responsibility of house builders, from the one man band doing a few houses each year to the Barratts and Persimmons of this world.

Smaller, more local companies, dependent on maintaining a fairly local reputation, are often better at responding to local character (and people!) but the volume housebuilders patently do not (for reasons explained in the Societal Challenges section), with their standard house types and well-worn site layout formats. But they *can* be persuaded to change as long as it is clear that they will not get permissions unless they do and, very importantly, that the same standards will be applied to all.

3. Policy, Guidance and Support

There is probably as much as one could hope for about raising design standards in the latest National Planning Policy Framework[lxv] (NPPF), if not about local distinctiveness specifically. The next level of national support comes from the National Design Guide[lxvi], although this is not embedded in law. Again, while not being specific about local distinctiveness or saying enough (from my perspective) about the importance of local character, its list of key points is positive and useful.

I have already raised fundamental queries about the National Model Design Code. and, if implemented as currently drafted, that would effectively be the death knell for local distinctiveness. As a 'glass half-full' person, I cannot believe that the NMDC will in fact finally emerge as currently drafted and, in particular, I believe it will be moderated with far more about local character. A further version of the NPPF will no doubt soon emerge, also a new planning White Paper, though it is uncertain how much and what the latter may have to say about design.

Though not likely to become formal national policy, strong encouragement for every Design and Access Statement to include an assessment of local character would be valuable and, ideally, any Statement should also include a short note on validation of the character assessment from the local community.

This then relates directly to the issue of pre-application community involvement as covered earlier. It seems almost unbelievable that a government interested in raising design standards and (we think!) valuing local distinctiveness, can still not be legally requiring applicants to engage at the earliest possible stage with the local community. That is the absolutely key stage at which genuine progress can be made, not once an application is submitted. That gap should be filled as a matter of real urgency and it should apply (proportionately) to all potential developments, not just large ones.

If the above is about national policy, then all that is covered there should be reinforced, reemphasised, and perhaps even strengthened with local information at local planning authority level. That can be through the Local Plan and various supporting documents such as (appropriate) authority-wide design guidance, as well as through ensuring that all community level design statements, and assessments and guidance in Neighbourhood Plans, are given full policy support.

And if, as we have seen recently, senior government ministers are waving the flag for better design, the same should be true of local authority councillors – they should all be seeking better quality. Might it even be good for each authority to have a formally nominated 'Quality Design Champion' councillor?

And finally in terms of policy, given the earlier comment about some Parish and Town Councils not even using their own Design Statements in commenting on applications, all such Councils should have, at the very least, their own clear 'policy' statements on raising design standards.

In terms of support at national level for Neighbourhood Plans, there are two key issues. First, the need to continue the funding support for them, ideally with further emphasis on the importance and value of including character assessment material and plan policies about design. Secondly, the need to provide some sort of funding to communities who wish to do work on character assessment and design guidance but who do not wish to do (nor might it be appropriate to do) a full Neighbourhood Plan.

4. Locally-based Character Assessment and Guidance

In some ways this should have been first in this list because it is the foundation for any genuine progress, though progress is unlikely without the points made above.

There is no likelihood of all communities (parishes, towns, urban neighbourhoods) undertaking character assessment and design guidance work, so those who do not will continue to be dependent on higher level policy and, if put in place, the requirement to include thorough local character assessment in all Design and Access Statements. However, I believe that many more communities can and should be encouraged (and ideally supported with some funding) to do work on local distinctiveness.

To shift action to a higher level probably then requires some level of consistency in the methodology for such work – something already noted above as being worryingly absent in terms of built area character assessment. Any such methodology would, however, need to be flexible to the staggering variety of local situations; something completely missed (or ignored) in the patently urban-oriented list of 64 criteria in the NMDC.

Finding exciting, accessible and engaging ways to encourage understandably cautious communities to start doing character assessment still needs further work. But, as we know very well, once people start and gain confidence through using, for example, simple and enjoyable toolkits, the caution soon disappears and they can almost always do good quality work. The difference today, however, is that more work will need to be done about the design guidance that builds from initial assessment, and that is more challenging for local people.

In general then (and as experience has shown), successful local statements and guidance need at least some level of appropriately skilled professional support. That needs to either come from a local authority or from consultants, and in most cases the latter requires funding. As outlined earlier, that is available to communities developing Neighbourhood Plans but not to those only wishing to do design assessment/guidance work. That is a gap that badly needs filling. And, even with such funding, there still needs to be *some* local authority input on content and process (e.g. formal consultation for SPD).

5. Decision-making on Applications

From my own experience, planners are poorly trained on design and (if at all) on engaging with communities. These are huge gaps to fill, especially as the few planners with an interest in design tend to end up working on policy not in development management (DM).

As suggested above, there is some topical evidence that design is being used more commonly as a sole reason for refusal of applications and that alone, if it continues, will make DM officers more confident about giving weight to design as an issue. But that confidence will only materialise if they have the baseline of strong authority policies, design guidance and especially community-

based character assessments to which to refer, as well as the thorough local character assessments done in Design and Access Statements, if that materialises.

If that could happen, there will still be a need for some design training because application assessment on design is well beyond a 'tick-box' task and it is well known that fewer and fewer authorities have in-house access to design skills (architecture, landscape, urban design). But, again, by requiring pre-application community involvement, DM managers would have a further base of information on which to draw when drafting their determination letters.

AND NOW ..... BACK TO THE BEGINNING!

At the very start of this paper I pointed out that Common Ground's focus in 1983 for local distinctiveness was very heavily on what they called the "*ephemeral and invisible*", hence their projects on, for example, new milestones designed by local artists, parish maps done by communities, local arts and music events and regional or even sub-regional species of apple. To which one could add dialects, breeds of animal, festivals, poetry, customs and so forth.

I also noted that Common Ground never really developed the links with planning and design. Not strictly true. Their classic, visual A to Z of local distinctiveness[lxvii] made at least some mention of key local landmark buildings (e.g. a market hall) and features (e.g. a war memorial) that overlap onto the planning and design territory. Place and road naming can also be important, as with Bucky Doo Square in Bridport and Cut and Fry Road in the Forest of Dean (explanations not known!)

Some small features are also important. In Cumbria where local stone is difficult to build with, houses are often white rendered on the outside with the small amount of easily worked stone being used for window and door surrounds, highlighted with a darker colour. Cowls on chimneys are also locally distinctive because standard ones are no good in the strong winds, so the distinctive local (and long-proven) version is nothing more than two local slates fixed together in a triangle.

People also struggle with what is not quite right with newly built Cotswold style houses. Though rather subliminal, they don't notice that all the roof tiles are the same shape and size whereas, on older buildings, the tiles* are all different: "*smallest at the rooftops, largest over eaves*". (*And they all have different names – 'long day', 'short day', 'buttimer' etc.)

To some extent this can be picked up through local listing of heritage assets but, though it absolutely should be done and done with serious local community input, this carries little weight.

But let's return to the "*ephemeral and invisible*" because there are key ways in which such aspects can and should be related to what planning and design addresses and can – or can it? - manage into the future in relation to local distinctiveness.

Regeneration is too often thought of as a physical process, led by physical change. But the most effective examples recently have been those where cultural, social and economic change has happened alongside, even led, the physical change.

Just recently, I heard Wayne Hemingway talking about revitalising Blackburn town centre by focusing on creating space in empty shops for mainly young 'makers' (of clothes or pottery, doing bike repairs etc. – and the 'young' point is crucial). That all happened and it was only as a result of those innovations that the physical regeneration then followed.

Think of Ludlow or Abergavenny where the 'brand' of quality food has created a new and nationally recognised sense of distinctiveness. And Bristol has an example too with the use of what are termed 'meanwhile uses' and 'pop-up' services running alongside the major waterfront development of Wapping Wharf.

As a result, that area was buzzing with activity and became widely known well beyond Bristol even when the development was only half complete. In Frome, the expansion of the regular market into a regionally known event has helped to put the town on the map. At a very different and far more local level, although Yorkley Slad is a fragmented hamlet deep in the Forest of Dean, any new development

should include at least some brick or stone walls because it is very important in that community to "*put a pig upon a wall to watch the band go by*" (again, no explanation given!).

Picking up on such local social and cultural patterns can be a key way to link into local distinctiveness, as can adding new or relocated ones. It is absolutely not just a matter of 'copying' or 'fitting in'; Wapping Wharf is unquestionably contemporary in its physical design but it does the distinctive character job.

The problem in taking this forward, however, is about the limits to everything covered so far. I have focused on planning and design but planning processes cannot (in general at least) address design except in terms of very basic physical matters.

While good projects both small and large, led by local authorities or even the better developers (as with Wapping Wharf), can include meanwhile uses, reuse old street names, include art that picks up on local traditions etc., little of that type of thing can be laid down on any applicant as a condition or requirement.

Of course, as stressed above, having a character assessment in place and using good and early community involvement can at least 'encourage' applicants to produce better, more local distinctive schemes (how can an applicant possibly get to know about local features etc. unless the local community tell them?), but that would be purely voluntary and then rely on a knowledgeable DM officer to understand and value what is proposed.

Slowly, very slowly, as good practice on character assessment and community involvement shift to becoming the norm rather than the exception (fingers crossed), applicants and developers with any real common sense are beginning to realise that taking local distinctiveness on board can actually help them to get planning permission, get more appreciated design, get more value from development and build a reputation that puts them ahead of their old-fashioned colleagues. And planners and councillors can benefit too, as well as – most importantly – their local communities.

LOCAL DISTINCTIVENESS MATRIX

examples used are illustrative only

	Physical Influences	*Spaces and Enclosure*	*Forms and Patterns*	*Characteristics*	*Circulation*	*Change*	*Values*
Landscape Assessment	Geology, overall form, hydrology, slope, climate, natural and semi-natural vegetation, ecology	Openness, distance or enclosure, vista and views, horizons, skylines, sub-divisions, changeover seasons	Managed vegetation, effects of trees, hedges, boundaries, agriculture, buildings, distinctive areas, legibility, impact on the landform, proportion of cover, features.	Tone, colour, light and shade, variations over time, seasonal change, texture, contrast, variety, consistency, management, strategic landmarks	Orientation, general pattern of roads, rail, paths and watercourses, visual effects of moving through, views open and closed, density of traffic, permeability	Deforestation, plantation, intensified agriculture, minerals extraction, trunk roads, reservoirs, landfill, strategic planning	Meanings, attitudes, perceptions symbols at: national, regional, loc and persona levels
Settlement Pattern	Settlement location re: landform, water table and supply, shelter / exposure, aspect habitats	Scale, topography, enclosure, openness, boundaries, sequences, consistency, connections, public and private space	Pattern of field and farm development, legibility, tree and boundary patterns	Tone, colour, light and shade, variations over time, seasonal change, texture, contrast, variety, consistency, management, local landmarks	Pattern of roads and paths through and across the settlement, signage, lighting verges, condition surveillance, safety, density of traffic	New villages, agglomeration, infilling, suburbanisation, bypasses, infrastructure, public utilities. local and neighbourhood plans	in terms of: environmen historic, soci and cultural factors
Building Design	Materials, micro-climate response, ground conditions, habitats	Public and private spaces, division, enclosure, constriction	Volumes and massing, consistency and variation, orientation, number of storeys, height, boundaries	Tone, colour, light and shade, shelter, security, boundary details, roofs, walls openings, eaves verges, ridges, planting, condition, distinctive features	Circulation in and around buildings, through, between and across spaces, access to buildings, condition, surveillance, safety, public and private access	Redundancy and reuse, design guidance, 'extensions' coach lamps and gnomes, signage, standardisation, development control	

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