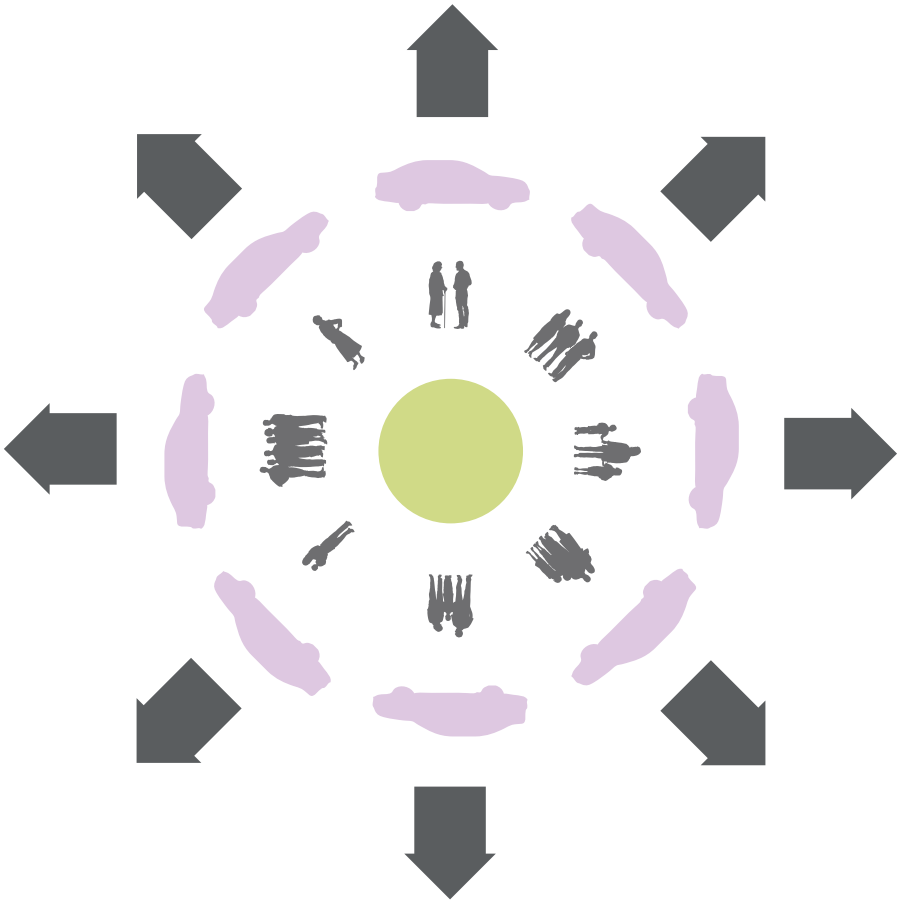
Space to Park

Executive Summary



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homeimprovements

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DESIGN FOR HOMES

Executive Summary

The last decade has seen a significant improvement in the quality of much of the new housing estates in the UK. A great deal of advocacy by organisations like CABE, design guidance, planning policy and assessment tools like Building for Life have created a new form of suburban development. Unlike the sprawling suburbs of earlier decades, this is denser, more permeable (with fewer cul-de-sacs), has a better quality public realm and higher quality housing. As we will see in this report, all these aspects of design quality are popular with housebuyers. However there remains a problem with the car.

Part of this new design ethos has been a reduction in the impact of the car. In the late 1990s planning policy switched from imposing minimum parking standards – to make sure that cars could be accommodated, to suggesting maximum standards. Planning policy guidance suggested that these maximum standards should be 'part of a package of measures to promote sustainable transport choices and the efficient use of land'. The assumption was that if you provided less parking, you could build to higher densities and people would own fewer cars and so make 'sustainable choices' to walk and use public transport. In this research we have set out to test this assumption.

In doing this we were fortunate to be given access to the results of a survey of new housing in Kent. Since 2007 Kent County Council have surveyed the occupants of new housing schemes around a year and a half after they were completed. More than 400 schemes have been surveyed and the results include details of the level of car ownership, the amount and type of parking and the level of resident satisfaction with the estate.

Surprisingly this data shows an apparent surplus of parking. The average level of car ownership across the schemes was 1.47 cars per household while the average level of parking provision was 2.12 spaces/house. Why then is it that, while 80% of people are happy, or very happy with the attractiveness and friendliness of their estate, 75% are unhappy or very unhappy about parking?

One reason is the fact that a quarter of the parking capacity is in garages many of which are not used for parking, not least because they are too small. The second reason is that the majority of parking is allocated. This means that the provision is unable to deal with different levels of household car ownership.

In order to explore these issues in more detail we selected six case study estates where parking problems seemed particularly apparent. These estates were surveyed early on a Saturday morning (the peak period during the week for parking tensions). We also undertook a door to door survey of just over 200 households and organised two mini focus groups.

The results reinforced the findings from the Kent data. All but one of the case studies had cars parked where they shouldn't be, on pavements, verges, front garden lawns and landscape areas. The exception was within a zone where parking controls were in force. This was the only place where the lack of parking options did seem to be exerting a downward pressure on car ownership, but it also had the highest levels of dissatisfaction and tension.

The survey showed very high levels of overall satisfaction with the estates and the houses. However all of the areas where people were dissatisfied related to traffic safety, road width and design and parking. 80% of people felt that there was inadequate parking on the estate and 63% felt that this had led to neighbour disputes. However only a quarter of people said that lack of parking would put them off from owning a car and virtually no one (7%) agreed with the statement that they would get rid of their car if public transport were improved.

The focus groups reinforced the sense that overall people were happy with their estate. However when asked about the worst aspect the first thing mentioned, spontaneously by all participants was parking. The discussion about parking was vociferous, emotive and the opinions expressed were unanimous. There was almost a sense of people having been tricked since the parking problems only became apparent once the scheme was completed and none of the participants could understand how the designers of the estate had got things so terribly wrong.

From this work we draw four sets of conclusions and recommendations:

- Restricting the amount of parking on new estates is an inefficient way of reducing car ownership and use. It only works if on-street parking is strictly controlled. Otherwise people get around the restrictions by parking 'informally' on the estate. This is unsightly, dangerous and a cause of tension and conflict.
- People on suburban estates regard the car as essential and aspire to one car per adult. This however is the result of a car-based mindset that sees no alternative to the car even when there are facilities within easy reach. One reason for this is that while the layout of the new estates may be walkable they are poorly connected to the surrounding areas.

- The number of allocated spaces should match the average level of car ownership – 1 space for one and two bed units, 1-2 spaces for 3 bed units and 2 spaces for four bed larger units. The number of unallocated spaces should at least be 20% in addition to the allocated spaces.
- These problems are not the result of bad design but are rather caused by the application of design guidance. In building with narrow streets and at densities above 40 units/ha we have created estates that are popular but where parking no longer works. We need to create an alternative model that combines more permeable and integrated street layouts with wider streets designed to accommodate parked cars.

While these findings challenge some of the orthodoxies of sustainable urban design, the reduction of car use remains important for wider environmental reasons. This needs to be addressed as part of the wider policy agenda rather than through the ineffective tool of parking control.

It is important to note that these findings relate to suburban schemes and the results should not be read through to urban situations where average levels of car ownership are lower and where walking and cycling are more prevalent. Our final recommendation is that a sister research project be commissioned to study urban housing schemes.