

Inside Housing  
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# Style challenge

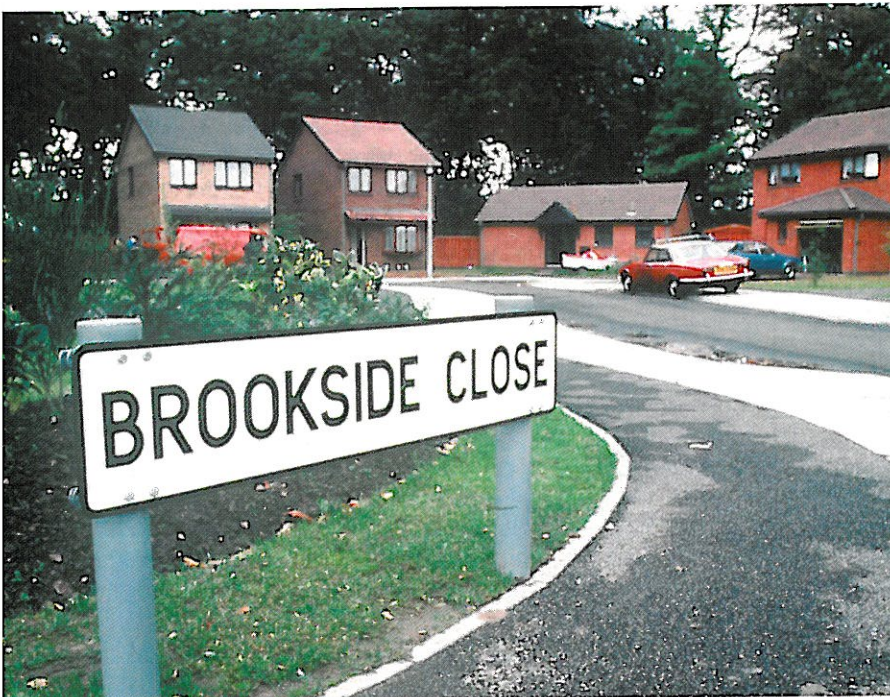
Everyone wants quality design but how can it be achieved in practice? **Jon Rouse** lends a helping hand

Housing associations have been leading the field in terms of developing innovative and high quality housing in recent years. Not only did a housing association – Molendinar Park – win the RIBA Client of the Year 2001 award but two others, Ujima and Joseph Rowntree, were also shortlisted. Others again, such as the Peabody Trust and Community Housing Association, have developed good reputations over many years as pioneers of well-designed and sustainable housing projects which have improved residents' quality of life.

Despite these pioneers, most housing associations would admit that the average product falls short of the high standards they and prospective tenants would like to see. Furthermore, the stigma lent to public housing by the problems experienced on many post-war estates, often caused at least partly by poor design, has yet to be completely removed. So what is the future for the housing association movement and how can more good quality design be encouraged?

These questions formed the basis of a seminar organised by the Commission for Architecture and the Built Environment and the Housing Corporation at the beginning of January. It drew together representatives from some of the biggest housing associations to openly debate design standards and the barriers to the delivery of good design. There was general agreement that the *Brookside* style of development, which is still prevalent in the private sector, should not form the basis of housing association aspirations. Developments which embrace sound urban design principles, which are sustainable and which have character were agreed to be the way forward.

**No go:** Developments like television's *Brookside* Close should not be an ideal



Many associations, however, feel that the system they work within hinders their ability to live up to this model. As a result of the seminar, CABA and the Housing Corporation will be working together to provide the support which associations need. The first fruits of this co-operation will be seen through CABA's enabling and design review functions, which will provide advice to housing associations on their proposals.

CABA's enabling programme, which provides technical assistance at an early stage of a scheme's development, has already carried out work on housing-led masterplans in both the public and private sector, revealing the problems many housing schemes face. Common deficiencies include the failure to create permeable and integrated layouts, the lack of well thought-out landscaping and useful public areas in many schemes and a failure to produce good quality architecture in the individual buildings.

Tackling these problems is part of an ongoing drive, supported by government, to improve the quality of urban design and architecture. Publications such as *By design* and *The urban design compendium* give a comprehensive overview of the process and product of good design. More recently a companion guide to PPG3 – *Better places to live* – focuses on the attributes that underlie well-designed, successful residential developments. A further publication will follow the recent CABA and Housing Corporation seminar.

This will form part of the Better Public Buildings initiative and will be aimed specifically at the affordable housing sector, to raise aspirations and convey the potential benefits of good design in areas such as sustainability and helping to combat crime.

What can housing associations themselves do to secure well-designed schemes? Ensuring that the association, as the client, is fully committed to securing design quality is a vital prerequisite. Establishing a good brief and setting up a process to attract good architects are also crucial steps.

The appointment of a design champion is one way to promote the importance of design within an association. Their presence could be particularly important over the course of a long-term project, when the watering down of the original aims and vision is often a possibility.

A key consideration in arriving at a successful scheme is consultation with prospective tenants – associations known for good design emphasise the importance of ascertaining tenants' aspirations. During consultation, residents will benefit from some support in thinking about the design issues.

The state of design quality in social housing, then, is variable and gives cause for optimism as well as cause for concern. The challenge for housing associations, the Housing Corporation and CABA will be to work together to share good practice so that we can raise the quality of the average and make the best even better.

**Jon Rouse is chief executive of the Commission for Architecture and the Built Environment**