



Grappenhall Woods Development Plan

We have recently received news of the proposed development plan for land located in Grappenhall, South Warrington, adjacent to Grappenhall Heys and abutting several areas of beautiful woodland. While the land does not form part of the green belt, it is nevertheless situated in semi rural landscape punctuated by characterful period properties, working farms, brooks and ponds, cattle and country lanes and stunning stretches of green fields. It is relatively rare for a historically industrial town to have retained such a broad area of natural beauty within its boundaries, despite much development over the years. And at this point in time, we have learned to appreciate more than ever the importance of such an asset on our doorstep.

While there is a need for more housing in Warrington, what is actually built is really important too. There has been too little attention to the aesthetics of our built environment over the decades and as a result we have town centres and suburbs that are lacking in character, beauty and without a sense of longevity. We have for decades been saturated with soulless, red brick box style estates, a style that is ubiquitous across the country and which has been developed in the main by the volume housing developers, often without architects. Such settlements comprise homes crammed together in culs de sac without pavements, a lack of local amenities and which are often entirely car dependent. Alternatively, for those who buy or rent apartments they are offered similarly uninspiring red brick boxes, or steel and plastic cladded monoliths, very often without private or communal outdoor space. Usually landscaped in concrete and tarmac, they are known as “condos in car parks”.

The prospect of development by an organisation like Urban Splash and its partners is therefore an exciting one and one which is very much welcomed. It will be great for Warrington to benefit from originality and vision, a focus on green space and sustainability and a commitment to creating a sense of place for residents in its suburbs. We are also aware that Urban Splash are keen to listen to those from the community in which they are building and so we are grateful to them for taking the time to consider some of our ideas.





PUBLIC SPACE, STREET FURNITURE AND ARCHITECTURAL SALVAGE



Urban Splash Partnerships

Urban Splash has worked with some great architects and business partners when planning new developments. One such example is their commissioning of the award winning architects Riches Hawley Mikhail to design a settlement in a beautiful area of green belt in Lancashire that was sensitive to its rural surroundings yet the homes had a modern, airy feel to them. Similarly, their work with Glen Howells Architects produced the unique Port Loop in Birmingham.

For their Warrington project Urban Splash are working with Sekisui House, one of the world's largest homebuilders, originating in Japan - who use modern methods of construction to build housing in short time frames – something which is considered key in the drive to meet housing target numbers here in the UK. Sekisui House have vast experience in modular housing and have joined with Urban Splash to help facilitate and develop Urban Splash's modular housing product. They are also socially and ecologically responsible and have a progressive attitude to regeneration; according to reports in Japan it is usual for housing to be replaced after around thirty years – the original house depreciates over time and it is common practice for it to be demolished and a new home constructed in its place. Sekisui House, along with other housebuilders are now renovating these homes rather than removing them - for sale to younger house buyers who may not otherwise have been able to afford to climb onto the housing ladder.

These two companies have partnered with the government housing delivery agency, Homes England in a joint venture worth £55m to build homes across the UK using modern methods of construction – in this case, modular homes.

As can be seen from the above example, housing developments can emerge as a result of partnerships between companies of varying disciplines and although we are used to the volume housebuilders not employing architects for their urban projects these days, it does still happen. It should be noted that housing developers such as Barratt / David Wilson and Bloor have on occasion developed really remarkable housing settlements, working in conjunction with renowned and respected architects.

All of this is important in view of the plan for homes by Urban Splash / Sekisui House in the area to be known as Grappenhall Woods.



Which brings us to the issue that a considerable number of residents in the Grappenhall Heys / Grappenhall / South Warrington area have raised as a concern.

The prospect of Urban Splash being involved in development in Warrington is incredibly exciting and a welcome change from the tired, monocultural volume developer “Barratt” style housing estate model based on pre-existing templates. Their masterplan has some great features and priorities not usually seen in most of Warrington’s new housing developments. They say this in their plan;

“All of our neighbourhoods feature green and blue space, so nature’s prioritised as standard, but at Grappenhall Woods we’re going further... We will create over 2800 sqm of new public open space, play areas and ecological habitats on site, plant 900 new trees and reuse the rainwater that usually drains away to feed green spaces and verges to create an oasis of green and blue. We want to encourage walking, cycling and more time spent outdoors in the park and in the garden. We do this because we know that being surrounded by nature reduces stress and makes us happier and healthier”

This sounds great – really innovative and refreshing from a housebuilder.

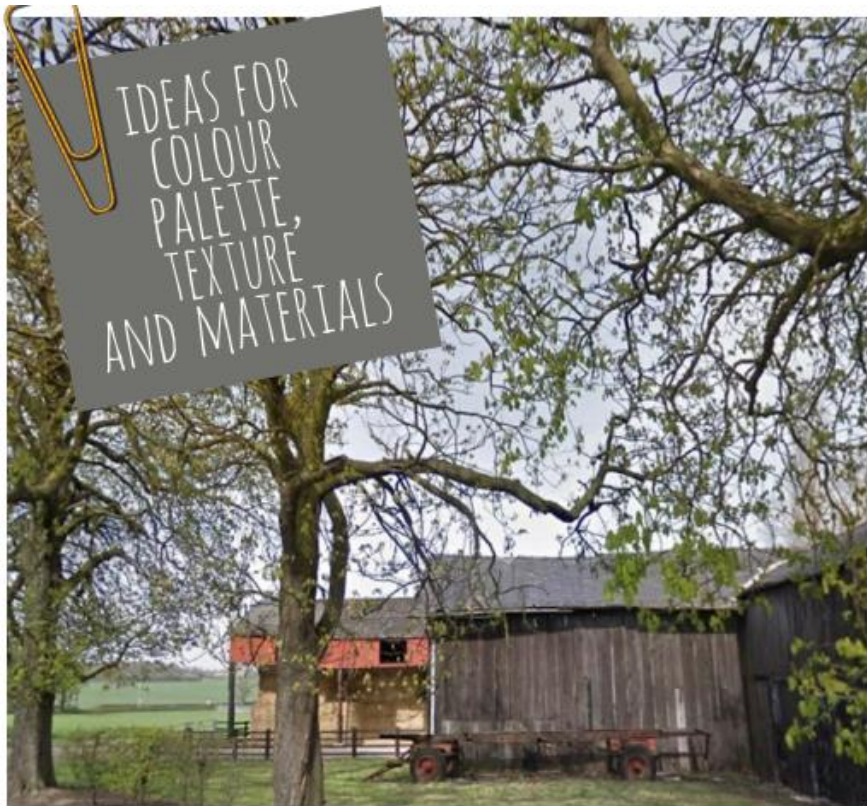
The problem is that much of the housing proposed is to many (most?) residents not at all in keeping with the rural nature and appearance of the area; it does not in fact feel in keeping with the idyll described above either. With the exception of the newer housing estates at Grappenhall Heys the area has a rural, natural feel and many of the buildings are period properties or farm properties. That is not to say that this must or should be directly reproduced - and a move away from the standard red brick box design of home is very much welcomed – but the “row houses” and “town houses” depicted in the plan - with their flat or partial roofs, discordant oversized oriel windows and uniform grey and black colour palette are so incongruous with their surroundings it would be difficult to imagine a housing design *less* in keeping with an area of rich countryside and a beautifully green, wooded landscape.

In an area with so much natural and architectural history, these homes have a transient feel to them – as though they are temporary homes. We have seen from previous incarnations of the modern and innovative post war housing developments beloved of architects that what appears shiny and original when first built can quickly become dated and dilapidated and consequently unloved.

“
Design, and perhaps more importantly, variety in design, has been key for everyone involved with Port Loop. It’s variety in buildings that helps bring character to a neighbourhood and fights the
”
uniformity commonly associated with new build developments

Shauna Brady of Glenn Howells Architects, involved with Urban Splash’s Port Loop





These images are a mix of
local architecture and new
ideas

Proposal

So in view of Urban Splash's previously highly successful partnerships, a commitment to listening to communities and what is clearly a genuine desire to create great places for people to live we would ask if the proposed housing could be reconsidered and an alternative design be suggested in its place.

This is only in response to the "row houses" and "town houses" - the housing with flat or partial roofing – some of the housing on the plan with its wooden barn feel could work really well (the long house?). But it appears that most of the homes are to be in the row house / town house style and the design does not appear to have been well received by the residents in the area. That there are so many of them, identical and in regimented lines also does not accord with the notion that, in the words of Shauna Brady,

“
...It's variety in buildings that helps bring character to a neighbourhood and fights the
uniformity commonly associated with new build developments”

What we are respectfully proposing is that Urban Splash work with an architect to produce homes (modular if necessary but preferably a mix) that reflect and enhance the character and style of the local environment, as envisaged by the Planning White Paper, "Planning for the Future" of August 2020 - and then reintroduce a revised plan for Grappenhall Woods.

Urban Splash are nothing if not broad in their scope and horizons – so rather than resting on their laurels with a housing design that appears to fit more readily into an urban landscape why not use the Grappenhall Woods project to develop a model of home that would fit well in more rural surroundings? It may well be that over time more housing will be needed on this type of landscape and having a wider portfolio of homes with a more rural sensibility is going to add to, not detract from what is already an excellent reputation.

There are many architects to mention, some of whom engage in modular home design, some who do not. One that stands out is HTA Architects. We have suggested some of their designs that would work well in the area over the page. Some of these ideas could surely be adapted for modular housing as well.





WHO SAYS THAT
NEW HAS TO
BE DULL?



HTA
architects



ALTERNATIVE
ROW HOUSE
STYLES



Ideas for communal spaces

Urban Splash say in their plan -

“The current outline planning permission covers residential development only, but we think that there could be potential for some other non- residential uses on the site to support the existing community – like a village hall, local pub or farm shop. This would not form part of our proposed application this time, but we are open to suggestions and we’d love to hear your thoughts on what sorts of community facilities could potentially benefit the area in the future.”

It would be fantastic for a developer to be involved with creating community spaces or “hubs” – especially a developer like Urban Splash. There is actually no shop at Grappenhall Heys, or indeed in Appleton or Appleton Thorn – Grappenhall Woods’ surrounding areas - and so residents are dependent on cars for reaching the nearest store. It would be great if Urban Splash could add a building that could be used as a shop. There are satellite Tesco, Sainsburys and Coop stores within driving distance and so deliveries would not be too out of the way or too problematic. This is a rapidly growing residential area and so a shop is much needed.

Other ideas would be a space for allotments and a café or community space. There are Victorian glass houses at Grappenhall Heys Walled Garden and also nearby at Arley Hall and Walton Hall and a community building reflecting their history and architecture would not only be a great public space full of natural light but it would tie what will be a modern development in the area to its past.

Similarly, use of **architectural salvage**, carefully restored and installed in communal spaces could make the area unique, anchor the space with a sense of permanence and give the development a sense of place.

Q: Can you *actually buy* a Victorian ironwork gazebo, though?

A: Why yes, [yes you can!](#)

Quirky street furniture and art would also be great – this is probably outside Urban Splash’s current remit but there is no reason why we cannot ask for their advice on this.





Grappenhall
Woods village
hub ideas





Thanks for taking the time to read this

Stephanie Fallon and the Our Green Warrington team