# Individual Dwellings

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5 Individual Dwellings - Design Principles

Aims

5.0.1 One of the aims of this guide is to ensure that new housing development in the county reflects the essential character of Suffolk. This does not mean that all 20th Century development should copy the designs of the past but, rather, that an appreciation of traditional Suffolk architecture combined with the thoughtful application of modern building techniques and suitable materials should provide the basic inspiration for new developments.

5.0.2 The internal layout of the individual dwelling is largely the domain of the owner or developer but, for the general observer, the most important aspect will be the external appearance. Does the property look attractive and does it blend well into its surroundings?

5.0.3 The best way of achieving this will be to employ the services of a skilled professional with a good knowledge of, and sympathy towards, the County.
Styles

5.1.1 There will be occasions where the designer wishes to build unashamedly modern dwellings employing new materials, new technology and new forms and, at the other end of the spectrum, there will be those who prefer to build historically accurate reproductions. This guide does not preclude either of these approaches although where proposed development would have a significant impact upon a small settlement it may be more appropriate to follow a traditional design approach, carried out with care and with sympathy to its surroundings.

5.1.2 The vast majority of new estates, however, will fall between these two extremes and may be described as ‘mainstream traditional’ - e.g. dwellings of brick and tile, using mass-produced materials and providing comfortable and affordable homes.

5.1.3 The following pages show how the incorporation of traditional Suffolk features, together with the application of a few simple but well established architectural principles will help towards the creation of a more varied and interesting environment - the kind of surroundings people enjoy living in because they have a distinctiveness and character with which they can readily identify.
Learning from the past

5.2.1 A close look at traditional Suffolk settlements, particularly the ways in which their buildings are grouped together, reveals a remarkable series of shapes and roof formations from which to evolve new, traditionally-based shapes for today. The characteristics of what is 'Suffolk', as distinct from 'English' architecture, are seen in pre-18th Century Suffolk house design which evolved not only from the desired plan form but also from the limitations of locally available materials.

5.2.2 The width of a timber framed house was governed by the length of a spar so dwellings tended to be narrow and long rather than square. Steeply pitched roofs were necessary for thatch and stacks were raised high to lessen fire risks. Roofs projected well beyond rendered walls to protect them from rain and, for the same reason, a broad tarred or brick plinth raised the structure away from the ground.

5.2.3 In the 18th Century many such properties were refronted with beautifully proportioned Georgian facades, behind which the distinctive house form remained. The 19th Century saw rapid growth of the urban centres of the County and produced substantial areas of terraced Victorian properties. These later areas are just as much a part of our inheritance as the more picturesque Suffolk vernacular housing. With their good quality, locally produced facing brickwork, slate roofs and period detailing such areas are often under-valued and deserve respect. With investment many such areas have been turned into attractive, convenient and low cost housing areas which can still act as an inspiration for meeting today's needs.

5.2.4 Although modern construction is far removed from such an historical context, new development should reflect the best qualities of its surrounding architecture.
**Context**

5.3.1 Each individual dwelling of an estate plays an important part in achieving a satisfactory whole. If the estate is to be sympathetic to its surroundings and to have an environment in which it is a pleasure to live, then the design of each dwelling, and its relationship to its neighbouring dwellings, will need careful attention.

5.3.2 Whether the style of the development is to be modern or traditional, the designer must address the question: -

'How can each dwelling best contribute to a development which respects and enhances the unique qualities of the area and which is truly 'of Suffolk'?' For example:

- What role will the building play visually within the general scene?
- Will it be seen in isolation or will it form part of a wider composition with other buildings? - Should the architecture be passive to merge into the street scene or assertive to form a focal point?
- Are the materials and details of the dwelling in keeping with the area and with its immediate neighbours?
- Is the size of the dwelling really suitable for the size of plot or are you trying to 'get a quart into a pint pot'?
- How can the design best deal with the challenges such as overlooking, a sloping site, a corner plot, or a difficult orientation?

This list is not intended to be exhaustive but it is only by answering such questions that the problem of context can be resolved.
5.4.1 Scale should not be confused with size. It is a relative measure, and in architectural terms, the scale of a building is normally judged against other buildings, space around them or against man himself. Dwellings that relate well to the human scale will create a familiar living environment. For example, most people react comfortably to the scale of a cottage, but they will be overawed by the scale of a cathedral.

5.4.2 Many of our historic towns and villages consist of small scale properties nesting closely together along narrow streets or around small greens and thus possess a character which is familiar and comfortable. On a grander scale, many urban areas comprise three or four storeyed properties and the streets, footpaths, public parks, and formal squares are all correspondingly increased in scale. So the scale of the buildings frequently goes hand in hand with the scale of the space around, and enclosed by, the buildings.

5.4.3. A starting point for new development is that the scale of the individual dwelling should respect the scale of any neighbouring development. For example, a development of small traditional Suffolk cottages may look completely out of scale where dwarfed by an urban setting. Enlarging the cottages could bring them into scale physically with the neighbouring buildings, but they would still not “ring true” as they would no longer possess the traditional scale of a Suffolk cottage.

5.4.4. Equally, any attempt to mask an inappropriately large scale house, by applying a cottage style is likely to fail, being both out of scale physically and out of character. Where a large scale building is appropriate, for example in an urban setting, or where it is spatially well detached from its neighbours, then the detailing of the building, for example the style of doors and windows, should reflect the grander nature of the dwelling.
Typical Traditional Suffolk House Forms:

- Prominent stack
- Pitched roof
- Porches or garage doors
- Informal window arrangement
- Thin or narrow gables
- Shallow pitch roof
- Symmetrical fenestration
- Bold eaves detailing
- Squarer plan forms
- Porches

Form

5.5.1 There is little point in producing a well thought out layout if each neighbourhood created consists of nothing more than characterless little boxes.

5.5.2 Traditional Suffolk House forms evolved from the available local building materials and the limitations which these placed upon the builders - see Chapter 4 on materials. Houses were frequently only a single room in depth, or a single room in width. Often this simple narrow rectangular form was extended by lean-to additions, or by single or double storey wings to the side or rear of the main house. This resulted in a large house, of irregular plan form, but appearing as a series of linked small scale elements.

5.5.3 In the larger towns, where space at ground level was at a premium, terraces of 3 or 4 storey height, frequently with accommodation within the roof space, were common.

5.5.4 Many new buildings are of a very different form. Near square plans, frequently with integral garages, are covered with a single shallow pitched roof. The resulting shape is inevitably alien to Suffolk traditional building, even where the property is 'dressed-up' in vernacular materials and details.
Detailed Design

5.6.1 Designers are no longer constrained to a limited range of traditional Suffolk building materials and techniques and this freedom of choice has resulted in many new developments which are unsympathetic to their surroundings. However, carefully selected mass produced products, coupled to traditional detailing can help to overcome this problem.

Windows and Doors

5.6.2 Good quality detailing around door and window openings will enhance the appearance of a building. A segmental arch can introduce a traditional feature at little extra cost. Brick soldier arches, brick or tiled cills, the use of contrasting materials, a cast drip mould above an opening in a rendered wall, are all devices which can given an opening a well finished appearance. There are many others.

5.6.3 Remember too that shadowing and three dimensional relief to an elevation can be achieved by setting window and door frames well back from the external face of the wall.

5.6.4 A strong looking facade will be achieved by keeping the area of opening considerably less than the remaining area of brickwork. A general rule is that the total area of windows and doors in each facade should not exceed one third of the total wall area. Gable end walls require particular care, and may benefit from having an even lower ratio of opening to wall.
5.6.5 Keep it simple when selecting windows and doors!
Traditional windows were usually subdivided so that each pane of glass was the same size, and this resulted in windows which were pleasing to the eye. There are many ‘off the peg’ modern windows which still achieve this, but avoid the so called ‘neo-georgian’ windows which are a poor substitute for their finely detailed and proportioned originals.

5.6.6 Simple vertical boarded doors, or those with recessed moulded panels are preferable to the more fussily detailed types.

5.6.7 Try to keep a sturdy slab of walling between each opening, as windows which are placed very close together, or very close to the corner of a wall, will make a building look structurally unsound. Avoid the temptation to link windows together with panels of different material.

5.6.8 The position of windows and doors, particularly to the street elevation, needs care and a balance must always be struck between the need to achieve a satisfactory floor plan and a visually pleasing elevation. Many traditional buildings are based upon a simple grid of ‘window over window’ and this may still be the easiest way of achieving a well balanced elevation. A skilled designer, with an appreciation of the problem of visual balance will be able to achieve equally satisfying results with less regular patterns of openings.
Dormer Windows

5.6.9 Keep dormer windows small. Traditional dormers would rarely exceed 4 feet in width, with near square windows and 'wedge' or gabled roofs.

5.6.10 It is better to have two small dormers rather than one large one. Avoid painted or stained boarding to the side cheeks and apex of dormers - traditionally these would have been rendered or covered in sheet lead.

Eaves & Verges

5.6.11 The generously overhanging eaves and verges of traditional Suffolk houses owe their existence to the time when most buildings were thatched and there was a real need to protect a vulnerable walling material beneath from the weather.

5.6.12 As fashions and materials changed, so too did roofing details. Dutch gables, crow stepped gables, simple parapets following the slope of the roof and highly decorative mouldings to the bottom edge of barge-boards all added to the richness of Suffolk's architectural heritage. All of these can still have a place in modern developments.

5.6.13 The practical and visual effect of pronounced overhangs with deep shadow lines continues up to the present day and the 'meanness' of dwellings with clipped eaves and minimum verge detail should be avoided.

Roofscape

5.6.14 One of the joys of many older villages is the jumble of roofs, dormers and chimneys, appearing to have been thrown together with different materials, pitches and details but collectively forming a tapestry of colour and visual interest. By comparison many modern estates appear bland with their regimented houses and uniform roofs.
5.6.15 Designers will therefore be encouraged to introduce variety into the roofscape of developments by careful attention to the way dwellings are grouped, by the choice of roofing materials, by the use of different roof pitches, by varying eaves and verge details and by the provision of chimney stacks or other features to stand above the ridge line.

5.6.16 Sloping sites provide unique opportunities to achieve an interesting roofscape and these opportunities should always be exploited.

Plinths

5.6.17 Many Suffolk buildings have a brick or tarred plinth at the base of the walls. Frequently these project from the face of the wall and are capped with a splayed brick course. Whilst plinths were primarily intended to prevent vulnerable materials such as timber framing coming into contact with the damp earth, they are still an attractive feature which gives a well finished appearance to the base of the wall. They are particularly effective on sloping sites, where the plinth provides a level 'platform' from which the building rises.

Porches

5.6.18 The appearance of a dwelling can be enhanced or ruined by the addition of a porch. A simple gabled or lean-to roof supported on shaped brackets can look very satisfactory, particularly where the materials and detailing match that of the main dwelling.

5.6.19 Fully enclosed porches need particular care so that they do not become over obtrusive and out of scale with other elements of the facade.