IN THE TOWNSCAPE

When new housing is being planned, or old housing being redeveloped, weaving it into the townscape is as important—socially, visually and functionally—as the design of the houses themselves. This article discusses Britain's recent failure to achieve this and the opportunities for doing so that still exist. It goes on to analyse, by comparing old and modern examples, the proper relationships between housing and the fabric of the town.

Those who care about townscape have tended to direct their attentions inwards—concentrating more on the city centre than its edges. Meanwhile, the planners (and it is at the planning stage that things start to go wrong) have been allowing housing to spread outwards or upwards with little idea of strengthening or adding to the visual form of towns, with no attempt to create or maintain local identity, 1, 2, and with no thought for what people really want. Some of these planners are also architects, so it is no good shifting the blame on to that race of multi-purpose Jacks-of-All-Trades. The architectural profession must take its share of the blame. The trouble is that most architects, instead of using their eyes, collect file upon file of information (A4 sheets, of course) and worry too much about the use of computers. You cannot compute aesthetics.

Housing uses up more land than anything else in our towns. It therefore makes a major contribution to their visual image. Its layout and design also affects the lives of people more than any other aspect of town design. Fortunately, there is an increasing number of well-designed housing layouts which break with the tradition of sprawl which we inherited from the 'twenties and 'thirties; but the problem is far bigger than any particular site; it involves the form of the whole town. The visual impact of high or low rise housing in the expansion of existing towns or in the development of new towns is seldom considered in relation to the function and appearance of the town or city as a whole.

Some new towns, notably Cumbernauld, 3, and the abortive Hook, 4, attempted to create a total image which should be easily legible and reflect its social organization. Unlike many large-scale attempts at housing, they tried to create a local identity without distorting the pattern of family and community life. As far as one can judge, in visual terms Hook, had it been built, would...