

Michael Gove thinks beautiful buildings must look traditional. Here's why he's wrong...



Shades of Le Corbusier... a view through the trees of Lion Green Road, an enclave of 157 new homes in Coulsdon, Croydon, designed by Mary Duggan 'to maximise the enjoyment of the rolling surroundings'. Photograph: Rob Parrish



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Beauty! Michael Gove has declared on several occasions, in his capacity as secretary of state for levelling up, housing and communities. Let's have beautiful buildings. In this he's picking up on a drumbeat that has been coming from the conservative thinktank Policy Exchange for some years, and from a well-connected campaign group called **Create Streets**, which wants "beautiful and popular" new neighbourhoods to be built. Last December, Policy Exchange proposed a "**School of Place**", which, as Gove put it, would enable architects and planners "to go out and build beautiful, sustainable places in which people and communities can thrive".

A number of smug Twitter accounts, meanwhile, like to post single images of unquestionably lovely old architecture, while lamenting that contemporary architecture doesn't reach the same heights. And indeed we all like beauty. If new housing were as loved as old, neighbours might welcome it a little more. Few would wish that, say, the city of Edinburgh or a Cotswolds village would return to the natural landscape they once were, because their architecture is generally loved. Some questions, though, are begged. What actually makes a place beautiful? How can beauty be achieved by modern housebuilders, driven by the wish to erect homes as cheaply, efficiently and predictably as possible?

Gove and his allies also tend to overlook the skilful, dedicated architects who, in challenging circumstances, already create places where people like to live – which are, you might say, beautiful. These architects learn from successes in the past. They just don't do it in the overtly traditional-looking way preferred by Gove, Create Streets and Policy Exchange, the style made famous by King Charles III's model town of **Poundbury** in Dorset.

“Since trees tend to be more beautiful than buildings, it's a mark of good architecture if it helps you enjoy them

They could, for example, learn from an enclave of 157 new homes, half of them affordable, in **Lion Green Road** in the south London suburb of Coulsdon, for the borough of Croydon. It's by **Mary Duggan**, who in her former partnership of Duggan Morris designed a poised and calming structure for a **swimming pool** for a school for girls with moderate learning disabilities. Now, working in her sole name, Duggan is designing a delightful pavilion **for the Garden Museum in London** in reclaimed stone, which minimises the environmental impact of the construction, and integrates with a park designed by Dan Pearson.

A related respect for nature underlies Lion Green Road's new housing. The steeply sloping site stands on the edge of the green belt. At its foot is an ordinary suburban street, at its top a fragment of the **Surrey Iron Railway**, a relic of the Industrial Revolution that is now a scheduled ancient monument, overgrown with self-seeded trees. Beyond that is Cane Hill, an open space popular with dog walkers that begins to feel like countryside.

Rather than smother the slope with houses, Duggan planned five little towers of flats, five to seven storeys high, between and around which the landscape can flow. This arrangement allows more than 50% more homes than asked for in the project's brief – a significant bonus in the face of housing shortage – while also preserving and enhancing the openness and informality that are appealing features of this location, and as much greenery as possible.



Lion Green Road. Photograph: Lorenzo Zandri

Winding paths lead from the street to the top of the hill, and there is room for a children's playground, allotments, a sensory garden and retained mature trees. Rather than a uniform bland greensward, there are degrees of openness and seclusion, places for both the new neighbourhood created by the project and for the general public.

Each block is planned to maximise the enjoyment of the rolling surroundings. Triangular projections enable each flat to capture views and light, which give the blocks' floor plans the shape of irregular stars. The effect at ground level is intriguing and quietly dynamic. Three colours of brick – black, pink and brown – and patterns of projecting and flat brickwork heighten the contrasts. The buildings' vertical planes, set at many different angles, catch light and shadow in multiple and constantly changing ways.

There are other touches – curves on the balcony railings, well-considered places to sit outside; two-level entrances to the blocks that nicely adapt to the site’s slope – modest enough, but valuable achievements in the world of local authority housing, where budgets are always tight. Indeed, cost-cutting has made this scheme more austere than Duggan would have liked. It hasn’t helped that **Brick by Brick**, a company set up by Croydon Council to deliver this and other housing developments, **foundered** with huge debts, provoking fierce criticism of the management in the local press. It’s to the credit of the design that its qualities have survived these traumas.



A model of Lion Green Road shows the irregular star-shaped floor plans, designed to give views on all sides. Photograph: Mary Duggan Architects

This project is not Taj Mahal gorgeous, not gasp-and-catch-your-breath beautiful. Its flat roofs and square openings may not be to your own personal taste. But beauty in architecture is not just about the look of a building on a social media snapshot. It is about thoughtfulness, and qualities that become apparent over time – Lion Green Road will get better as the still-raw landscape matures. It is not about the built object alone but also what the design makes possible – in this case the experience of nature. Since trees tend to be more beautiful than buildings, it’s a mark of good architecture if it helps you enjoy them.

Duggan’s design achieves what Create Streets calls “gentle density”, but not in a way that conforms to traditionalist orthodoxies. Its layout looks a little like the grandiose city plans that Le Corbusier produced a century ago, the Ville Radieuse and the Ville Contemporaine, in which towers would march through verdant landscape, although

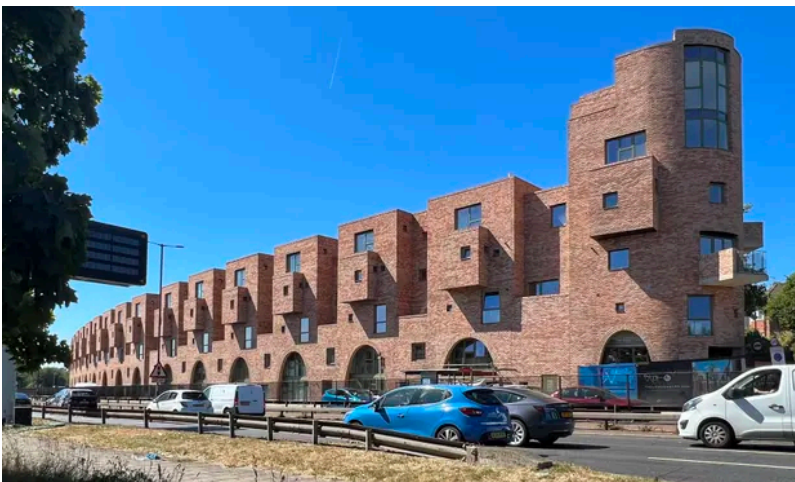
the Coulsdon version has a sensitivity and intimacy that the original lacks. For Poundbury fans, for whom new developments should at all times follow traditional patterns of streets and squares, a plan like Duggan's is a transgression. They're right that streets often work well, but in this case conformity to the rule would make everything that's good about the project impossible. It's also hard to see how some Georgian sash windows, or mouldings or cornices or pediments, would add anything to it.

Duggan is not alone. For almost two decades, architects such as Alison Brooks have been showing, with projects such as the **Accordia development** in Cambridge, how to build **beautiful and popular new neighbourhoods**. Peter Barber conjures **romantic compositions** of towers and arches out of the hard practicalities of affordable housing. **Mae** architects produce plainer, more sober buildings to high environmental standards – which I'd say is a component, if an invisible one, of beauty. Back in 2006, FAT completed a group of houses at New Islington in Manchester, whose **decorative, playful, polychromatic gables**, in contrast to the more common beige brick, offered a route sadly little taken.

Given this wealth of talent and experience, the proposed "School of Place" looks redundant and cumbersome. It would take years and decades to train up a new cadre of beautiful builders such that they would have any conceivable impact on the current housing crisis. Matters are surely more urgent than this. It would make much more sense to support and learn from the architects who already know how to make successful places.

Gove and his allies should also confront the factors that cause very many not-beautiful developments to be built. These include cost-cutting, the car-friendly road layouts still demanded by highways engineers, the preference of housebuilders for familiar, risk-averse methods that lead to uniform and thoughtless design. Here, the Poundbury fans should be able to find common cause with the likes of Duggan. After all, they all want to create beautiful and loved places, whatever their style may be.

Alternative visions of popular housing



Beechwood Mews on the North Circular Road, London. Photograph: Peter Barber Architects

Beechwood Mews

Britain has a wealth of architects who design beautiful and popular housing, albeit not in the traditionalist style backed by Michael Gove. They pay attention to the things that make a place enjoyable – the common spaces between buildings, contact with nature, scale, materials and detail. They are considered and imaginative. Peter Barber, for example, has created a series of memorable housing developments in London. His **Beechwood Mews** in Barnet creates a peaceful enclave next to the noise of the North Circular Road and a castle-like composition of arches and towers.



Marmalade Lane co-housing, Cambridge. Photograph: David Butler

Marmalade Lane

Mole Architects created shared open space, well used and cared for, for a co-housing development at **Marmalade Lane** in Cambridge. Their plans for Wolverton in Milton Keynes, designed with the Stirling prize winner Mikhail Riches, promise similar qualities at a larger scale.



Three house designs for Pound Lane. Pound Lane Custom Build

Pound Lane

Pound Lane in Basildon, Essex, a proposal by Pitman Tozer, AOC and Mae for the developer Unboxed Homes, will also offer shared open spaces, in this case formed around mature trees, and house designs that can be customised by their residents.



Keelson Yard, Whitstable. Nick Dearden/ Building Narratives

Keelson Yard

31/44 Architects reinvented the detail of Arts and Crafts architecture for **Keelson Yard**, a row of houses in Whitstable, Kent, for the developers Arrant Land. The designs take cues from older buildings around them to create new and distinctive architecture.



Alison Brooks's proposed design for Fognal Lane, Hampstead. Alison Brooks Architects

Fognal Lane, Hampstead

Alison Brooks Architects have designed a series of successful housing projects going back to their work at Accordia in Cambridge, which won the Stirling prize in 2008. Their proposed green-tiled design for a private house in Hampstead, north London (and notwithstanding the claim by the playwright David Hare that it looks like “an elephant’s backside”), opens up possibilities of colour and decoration that could be applied to larger developments. There are plenty of other talented and dedicated architects who would like nothing more than to make the greatest possible contribution to the design of homes and neighbourhoods. The best thing government could do is help them to do so.